

# NCLR Graciela Olivarez La Raza Award Vilma Martinez

By Matt Alderton

Vilma Martinez has used her position as one of the country's most visible Latina activists to diversify the face of American business. She has devoted her life to promoting social justice, equality, and diversity from the schoolroom to the boardroom. Through the efforts of countless women like Vilma, extraordinary strides have been made on behalf of women in Corporate America. According to Catalyst, a women's advocacy group, women held 14.7% of all *Fortune* 500 board seats in 2005, up from 9.6% in 1995. Also reflecting some growth, the Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility reports that in 2004 Hispanics held almost 2% of all board seats at *Fortune* 1,000 companies.

"Vilma Martinez has blazed a trail for many Latinas," says NCLR President and CEO Janet Murguía. "Without her, many of us wouldn't be where we are today."

Martinez confronted discrimination long before she entered the boardroom. She was born of Mexican descent in San Antonio in 1943, when much of Texas was openly segregated.

Martinez received a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Texas at Austin and a law degree from Columbia University. Upon graduating, she worked as an attorney for the NAACP on cases concerning Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, specifically as it relates to employment discrimination. In 1970, she was the Equal Employment Opportunity Counsel for the New York State Division of Human Rights and then joined the firm of Cahill, Gordon & Reindel in New York as a litigation associate.

In 1973, at the age of 29, Martinez joined the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), where she served as President and General Counsel for nine years. During her tenure, Martinez helped secure several key legal victories for the Hispanic community in U.S. courts, including a case that ended segregation of Latino students in Uvalde and El Paso schools and expanding the Civil Rights Act to include Mexican Americans.

In a testimony she gave in 1975 while representing MALDEF, Martinez said, "This result [of underrepresentation of Mexican Americans in elected and appointed positions] is no mere coincidence. It is the result of manifold discriminatory practices which have the design or effect of excluding Mexican Americans from participation in their

own government and maintaining the status quo." Her work sought to change that.

Since 1982, Martinez has been a partner at the Los Angeles firm Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP, where she specializes in federal and state court litigation, including defense of wrongful termination and employment litigation. She has served on the boards of numerous corporations, including Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corp., Anheuser-Busch Companies, Shell Oil Co., and Fluor Corp. She has also served as Chair of the University of California Board of Regents, as a Board Member for the National Association of Corporate Directors, and, from 1994 to 1996, as an appointee to President Clinton's Advisory Committee on Trade Policy & Negotiations.

"Receiving this award allows me time to think about Graciela Olivarez's enormous contributions and to reflect in her glory," Martinez says. "I am deeply moved to receive the award. She was a powerful person, and I am deeply honored that a few people believe that I deserve this award."

## About Graciela Olivarez

In honor of the women who rightly earned the title "Amazing Grace," NCLR annually presents the Graciela Olivarez La Raza Award to an individual or organization that has made significant contributions to promoting the interests of Hispanic Americans.

Graciela Olivarez quit school at the age of 15 to work. Years later, despite not having a high school diploma, she received a college scholarship and became the first woman graduate of the Notre Dame Law School, receiving a J.D. degree in 1970. She served as a charter member of the National Organization for Women and later became the highest-ranking Hispanic woman in President Jimmy Carter's cabinet.

Olivarez campaigned vigorously for Hispanics' and women's rights, and in 1972 she led the campaign to require equal representation of men and women on the National Council of La Raza's Board of Directors.

NCLR Board Chair Monica Lozano (right) presents award to Vilma Martinez (left).



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