



2010 Jack Green Civil Liberties Award Alicia Sanchez

The daughter of farm workers, Alicia was born in El Paso, Texas, and her family lived in poverty as they moved throughout Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona before moving to Santa Rosa in 1969. Her father always emphasized the importance of an education, but their constant moving forced Alicia to often repeat grades. As a child in elementary school, teachers would hit her and other Latino students if they were “caught” speaking Spanish. Other students would laugh at her because of her thick accent. This caused her to be ashamed of “who she was” and made her very shy.

At Santa Rosa High School she was assigned to read a poem and give a report before her English class. Expecting to be laughed at because of her accent, she was surprised that she well received and learned that “when you speak from your heart, people will listen and understand you.” She lost her shyness that day and later ran for and was elected student body class secretary. Her ability to reach people by speaking from her heart made her an effective leader in her future struggles.

Alicia next attended the University of Colorado and after seeing a film about poverty, realized that that the struggles of the many before her “who fought to open the doors of college for her” made it possible for her to be there. She immediately went to a United Farm Workers picket line outside a liquor store boycotting Gallo wine, and “a Chicana was born – a politically conscious Latina.”

After her degree in political science, Alicia went to Hastings College of Law. When she was in law school her father died at the age of 56. She went to the Social Security Office with her mother to get benefits. They were told that her father did not have enough work credits to qualify for death benefits. She remembers her mother crying and saying, “How can that be possible? Your father worked more than 20 years in this country. Many years I worked side by side with him and the grower would say, ‘Sanchez, you get \$4 and \$1 for your Social Security.’” Apparently, the growers kept the money they took and never reported it. Alicia remembers the anger she felt, and made the decision to fight this type of injustice.

After graduation Alicia went to work for the UFW. Since Cesar Chavez felt all the people in the UFW should live like farm workers, she was paid \$15 a week + expenses, following workers as they picked the crops and representing those fired at hearings before California’s Agricultural Labor Relations Board (“ALRB”.) While there she met Newman Strawbridge, a white man from Alabama who was an investigator for the ALRB. At the time she was “anti-white”, but her discussions with Newman made her realize that class was more important than color.

She and Newman married in 1981 and they moved to Oxnard where Alicia started working for a private attorney, a job she found boring. One day she went to a meeting in the poorest part of Oxnard where the county was going to close a health clinic. The audience at the meeting was mostly African-American and the elderly who wanted the clinic to remain. The county officials stated that the majority of people wanted the old clinic closed and wanted to go across town to a newer facility. Alicia got up and demanded that the county show the evidence that people wanted it closed. When they didn’t, she helped organize people going door to door to get petitions signed and saved the clinic from closing. This was her first experience working with Blacks and she became a “rainbow person.” She continued

working in the neighborhood successfully stopping a plan to eliminate school busses from the neighborhood and conducted voter registration and get out the vote drives.

In 1986, Newman, Alicia and their son Chava moved to Santa Rosa where she worked for California Human Development Corp. Soon she realized that a lot of the Mexican workers needed a union and after talking to a number of the local unions and not finding any interest in organizing the Mexican workers, she, Newman and other activists formed a new union: Sonoma County Industrial Union (“SCIU”.) Working for months without pay, they successfully organized Point St. George Fisheries and Calliope Designs, which made Christmas dough ornaments. Known for her fiery speeches, Alicia inspired the workers and brought in community members to join picket lines. “I believe that when a boss looks out his window he should see a rainbow; a black person, a brown person and a white person.” SCIU’s contracts were the first union contracts for a predominately Latino workforce in Sonoma County. Their philosophy was to empower and have the workers learn how to make demands, negotiate and become leaders. They would pair English and Spanish only speaking workers and have them learn how to communicate with each other, learning Spanish and English in the process. This led to the founding of the Worker’s Center that went on to teach English to as many as 400 students a night.

Ultimately Point St. George’s facilities in Santa Rosa were closed due to health and safety violations and Calliope Designs moved to Mexico after NAFTA was signed.

She and Newman divorced and Alicia moved on to work with SEIU, the Hotel and Restaurant Workers and the California Nurses Association.

Aside from her work as an organizer, Alicia has been an activist working on many issues affecting the Latino community as well as an advocate for non-violence. Throughout her career she would speak to students to pass on her father’s message of the importance of education and to empower them to work for a better life for themselves and others.

She is a founding member of Pueblos Unidos and the Instituto Sanchez-Mendoza that promotes leadership development of immigrant workers through participatory education, where everyone is both a student and a teacher. She is a long time member of Mujeres Unidas, which addresses Latino issues. She is active in Women in Black, demonstrating every Friday for non-violence.

Alicia was named one of the “50 who shaped this century” by the Press Democrat, “Woman of Achievement” by the YWCA in 1988, honored by CHDC in 1989, named “Woman of the Year” by the California Legislature in 1991, received the Peacemaker of the Year Award by the Peace & Justice Center and Cesar Chavez Award by Self Esteem Living Foundation in 2001, and Voz Fuerte Award from Voces Cruzando Fronteras (“Voices Crossing Borders”) in 2007.

She is now married to Bernie Hovden, who has helped broaden her sense of justice to include the environment. They have a 14-year-old son Joshua and live in Sebastopol. Chava, a graduate student at San Francisco State University, has followed his parents’ activist footsteps. Alicia continues to speak from her heart and inspire people, young and old.