

PANTOJA, ANTONIA (1921–2002)

“Every Friday when I left the mountains to return to my home...my horse would move very slowly because the children would hold on to his tail. I always left with my arms full of gardenias, pineapples, and oranges.”

Pantoja received the highest honor given an American citizen, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, but her inauspicious beginnings in poverty-stricken Puerto Rico held no indication of her future achievements. Born and raised in Puerta de Tierra, Pantoja struggled to get an education, and became a teacher. She came to New York City in 1944, worked in factories, sought to organize workers, and returned to the university where she ultimately succeeded to the level of the Ph.D. At Hunter College she helped form the Hispanic Young Adult Association which became the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs. Between 1950 and 1957, Pantoja created three self-sustaining Puerto Rican organizations. Her best known accomplishment was the creation of ASPIRA (1961) an educationally oriented group designed to create a leadership cadre for the community. ASPIRA spawned chapters in 5 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. On faculty at Columbia University, Pantoja developed the first community based courses in social work. She developed the Puerto Rican Research Center in Washington, D.C., and a graduate school for urban resources and social policy in San Diego. Numerous other projects blossomed under her leadership. For her many accomplishments, Pantoja received honors, awards, and the deepest gratitude of her community.