

## **VARELA, MARÍA (1940– )**

"The movement raised a lot of questions about democracy and left them unanswered. I needed to find those answers."

Product of a Mexican immigrant father and an Irish American mother, Varela was committed to social justice during and after her college years. She relocated to Selma, Alabama when she joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The first Latina to photograph the group's work, she became an organizer in 1962. In 1967 land-grant leader Reies López Tijerina invited Varela to work with the La Alianza Federal de Mercedes (Federal Land Grand Alliance) in Albuquerque. While there, she helped found La Cooperativa Agrícola, a community-based organization that promoted self help projects in agriculture, legal affairs, and health. From 1975 to 1979 Varela served as the director of the primary health clinic, La Clinica, helping to develop northern New Mexico's first rural birthing center. Varela won a National Rural Fellowship, earning an M.A. from the University of Massachusetts in community and regional planning in 1982. Based on her research, she incorporated Ganados del Valle, a nonprofit corporation, in 1984. Considered to be a national and international model of sustainable rural economic development, Ganados and related enterprises together constituted the largest private employment source in northern Rio Arriba County. Her accomplishments were recognized in 1990 when she received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Varela left Ganados in 1997 to teach, write, and expand her business, the Rural Resources Group, which assists traditional rural cultures. Varela taught at the University of New Mexico for nearly a decade. In 1997–1998 was appointed to an endowed chair at the Hulbert Center for Southwest Studies at Colorado College, where she currently teaches. She coauthored *Rural Environmental Planning for Sustainable Communities*.