

OBITUARIES

Remembering Elizabeth Martinez, Chicano Social Justice Activist

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MANDALIT DEL BARCO

Chicano social justice activist and feminist writer Elizabeth Martinez died in San Francisco at 95. She was a fixture at marches and rallies and wrote books about the history of Chicanos and Chicanas.

Transcript

AILS CHANG, HOST:

Elizabeth Martinez was a leading social justice activist, a feminist writer and historian. She was 95 when she died this week in San Francisco. NPR's Mandalit del Barco reports.

MANDALIT DEL BARCO, BYLINE: She was known as Betita Martinez. Her many books included two volumes about the 500-year history of Chicanos and Chicanas. Martinez was present - present - at many key historic moments.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PROTESTERS: (Singing) Go tell it on the mountain.

DEL BARCO: In the 1960s, she joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and registered Black voters in Mississippi. In the 1970s, she spoke at the Chicano moratorium in East LA, protesting the Vietnam War's high number of Mexican American casualties. For decades, she was a fixture at rallies and occupations.

JESUS BARRAZA: For her, it was always about, you know, being on the front lines but, you know, documenting this history, making sure that the next generation knew what had happened.

DEL BARCO: Jesus Barraza, who co-founded the Bay Area artist collaborative Dignidad Rebelde, was one of many young activists and artists Martinez mentored. Martinez started out a New Yorker known as Liz Sutherland, using her mother's middle name. She worked at the U.N. and the Museum of Modern Art. She was a book editor at Simon and Schuster and editor at The Nation magazine. After moving to New Mexico in the '60s, she championed her identity as a Chicana.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ELIZABETH MARTINEZ: Well, I can blame it on my father, who came from Mexico at the tail end of the revolution. And every night over dinner, he would talk about seeing Zapata come into the capital on a - with the campesinos, and everything was wonderful. And that's what they had in my head - I want a revolution right here.

DEL BARCO: That's what she said in a video for the San Francisco Foundation, which gave her an award in 2008.

(SOUNDBITE OF PROTEST)

DEL BARCO: At the Chicano Movement revved up in 1968, Martinez co-founded a bilingual newspaper called El Grito del Norte. In that same year, she wrote a book titled "De Colores Means All of Us." Veronica Terriquez, the brand-new director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA, says Martinez made connections between Latino, Black, Asian and Indigenous communities.

VERONICA TERRIQUEZ: Struggles for women's rights, LGBTQ rights, for racial justice and immigrant rights.

DEL BARCO: Activist scholar Angela Davis paid tribute to Martinez in that 2008 award video.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ANGELA DAVIS: Her ideas have always served as a kind of model for the best kind of activism, the best kind of feminism, the best kind of anti-racism.

DEL BARCO: Nancy Hernandez, who runs a Latino resource center in San Francisco, was a student activist when she met Martinez. They worked together at the Institute for Multiracial Justice, which Martinez co-founded in 1997.

NANCY HERNANDEZ: Her lifelong legacy has been to build bridges of solidarity and, you know, have each other's backs.

DEL BARCO: Hernandez says Martinez was an inspiration for a new generation of activists, supporting Black Lives Matter and other causes.

Mandalit del Barco, NPR News, Los Angeles.

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