

Blandina “Bambi” Cardenas Flores



Former University of Texas-Pan American president Blandina “Bambi” Cardenas Flores found her life’s purpose at a very early age: working to provide quality education to students, no matter their ethnicity or their economic status.

Over a long career that included positions in government and education, Cardenas Flores helped pioneer efforts toward equal opportunity in the K-12 system and higher education. She eventually became the first Latina president of a University of Texas System institution.

She was born Oct. 25, 1944, in Del Rio, Texas, one of three daughters of Rudolpho G. Cardenas and Amelia “Molly” Blythe. Her father managed the meat department at a grocery store and later at an Air Force base. Her mother worked in retail.

When she was a child, the family moved into the barrio. She went to school in the San Felipe Independent School District, where the students were Mexican-American and mostly poor. Some families didn’t have enough to eat, and many kids left school early each spring to work in the fields.

“We didn’t live with that kind of poverty,” Cardenas said, “but I came to know that barrier that poor kids, and particularly poor Mexicano kids, had to live with, and I hated it. . . . I remember I must have been 5 or 6 years old when the light bulb went on, and the only thing I ever wanted to do was to change that.”



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Cardenas Flores was just 16 when she went to college, first at Texas Woman's University and then at the University of Texas at Austin, where she pursued a degree in journalism. But UT was not as welcoming as she had expected. The Daily Texan, the student newspaper, “was not very inclusive,” she said, and one teacher said the fact that she spoke Spanish interfered with her ability to write in English.

Teaching high school in Del Rio, she saw firsthand the challenges poor kids faced to get an education. “Some of the kids did not know how to read. I saw that something had to change.”

A plan to earn a master’s degree was derailed when she got a job at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory research institute in Austin. The executive director, Jose Angel Cardenas (no relation), would become her mentor and help shape her career.


Her subsequent resume is filled with increasingly high-profile roles in government and education.

When Miguel Nevarez announced he was resigning as president of UT-Pan American in Edinburg, at the very tip of Texas, Cardenas Flores knew she would be a long-shot candidate. The UT System Board of Regents was dominated by Republicans, and she had sued Ronald Reagan and won.

Much to her surprise, in August 2004, she was named president of UTPA, where she made strides in raising financial aid, retention rates, and the number of students receiving graduate degrees.

Cardenas Flores remembers working with Juliette Garcia who in 1986 was named president of Texas Southmost College. Garcia was the first Mexican-American woman to be president of a U.S. university.





They would attend the meetings where the Board of Regents would allocate money from the state's Permanent University Fund to Texas A&M and UT System universities. While UT Pan American was a UT System institution, Cardenas Flores said the formula used to allocate the money worked against her university. The focus was on programs for students in advanced programs, and UTPA focused on students in the earlier years of college.

"We got to go to the party, but we didn't get to sit at the table," Cardenas Flores said. "The money wasn't flowing to create the programs, so if you don't have the programs, then the formula doesn't give you the money to build them up."

In spite of the hurdles, Cardenas Flores said, "On every indicator, we showed tremendous progress."

That included raising graduation rates, graduating more engineers, more than tripling the number of students who won internships, and increasing the number of students in study-abroad programs.

"What we accomplished given our small amount of money is a miracle," she said. "It's a miracle of the determination of the students and incredible staff, and a lot of dedicated faculty. But we also ended up sometimes with people that we had to take because we didn't have the money to pay for the best."

Cardenas Flores resigned from the job in 2008. Bambi resides in McAllen, Texas

Cardenas Flores' work to assure minorities equal access to quality education has had an impact across the country.

