In Memoriam: Maria Teresa Velez and Bernard 'Bunny' Fontana

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Maria Teresa Velez

Maria Teresa Velez had a focused, dedicated mission to open up historically inaccessible spaces for underrepresented students, particularly at the graduate level.

As associate dean of the University of Arizona's Graduate College, Velez envisioned that, with graduate degrees in hand, such students would be best equipped to positively impact communities—whether they be social, economic or scientific—throughout Arizona and across the nation.

To that end, Velez is credited with ushering in a revolutionary phase at the UA, resulting in some of the institution's most significant improvements in graduate student diversity. She remained committed to this work up until her death on April 13.

"Dr. Velez had a remarkable impact at the University of Arizona and in the lives of many graduate students who have gone on to accomplish amazing things because of her guidance and mentorship," said UA President Ann Weaver Hart. "She will be deeply missed and remembered very fondly at the UA. Our thoughts are with her family and friends as they grieve her loss."
The Graduate College and Velez's family will host a memorial service in her honor on April 22 from 5-7 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom of the Student Union Memorial Center. A program will begin at 5:30, with remarks from members of Velez's family and the campus community. Music will be provided by the UA Fred Fox School of Music.

Andrew Carnie, dean of the Graduate College, said Velez was an "irreplaceable fixture? at the college, and announced the establishment of the Dr. Maria Teresa Velez Diversity Leadership Scholarship. The award, funded by the Graduate College, comes with a stipend of $25,000 and will be given annually to a graduate student who exemplifies the work of Velez.

After completing a postdoctoral fellowship in psychology from the UA in 1984, Velez was hired as a psychologist for the UA's Counseling and Psychological Services division.

In 1996, she transitioned fully to the academic side, serving as associate dean for the Graduate College, with affiliated faculty appointments in the Center for Latin American Studies and the Departments of Mexican Studies and Gender and Women's Studies. She also served as a research scientist in the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences.

Velez became part of some of the earliest efforts to improve diversity among the graduate student body, training campus employees on how to offer personalized support to students, while helping to develop academic and professional programs for undergraduate and graduate students.

"I have collaborated with Maria Teresa Velez many times over the past few years. I have been so impressed with her commitment to minority issues, especially with regards to graduate recruitment," said Elliott Cheu, associate dean in the College of Science.

"She was always pressing us in the College of Science to step up our game with regards to minorities, and through her efforts the UA has made its mark on graduating an ever-increasingly diverse population," Cheu said. "When she first announced her retirement, I emailed her to let her know how much I would miss working with her. Her reply, in typical MTV fashion, read: 'Ha! I plan to stick around for three years so I will have this time to continue to torment Science.' The UA has lost a truly exceptional soul."

Although she began her three-year phased retirement in 2013, which was set for June 2016, Velez continued her work helping to increase student diversity and develop international graduate programs, having established memorandum of agreement partnerships with governments in Brazil, Chile and Mexico to sponsor students for training at the UA.

"I frequently asked her to meet with international scholars, academics and university officials visiting the University of Arizona. She did so with a grace and eloquence that forever enhanced the image of the University in their minds," said Todd Fletcher, an associate professor in the Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies.

"In my mind I will always remember the qualities of compassion, commitment, perseverance, excellence and advocacy reflected in her relentless pursuit of creating and facilitating educational opportunities for students," Fletcher said. "She will forever be remembered as a students' dean and the ultimate ambassador of the University of Arizona."

Over the last 15 years, Velez served as principal investigator on several federal and foundation grants that promote graduate diversity, including the Sloan Indigenous Graduate
Partnership, Graduate Access Fellowships, Minority Access to Research Careers and the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Consortium.

Velez also had been named program director of Border Latino & American Indian Summer Exposure to Research within University of Arizona Health Sciences, established to encourage students to pursue degrees in medicine, nursing, pharmacy, public health or biomedical science.

Attuned to the financial challenges associated with pursuing an advanced degree, Velez regularly identified emergency funds to help retain students who were struggling to remain in their programs at the end of contracts and fellowships, or when other forms of personal hardship hit.

Over the course of her UA tenure, she attracted about $40 million in external funding for the purpose of recruiting, retaining and graduating underrepresented graduate student populations, Carnie said.

The work of Velez, her teams and their collaborators helped contribute to the UA topping its Association of American University peers for having the highest percentage (nearly 20 percent) of African-American, American Indian and Hispanic students in graduate-level programs. During the fall semester, nearly 1,500 such graduate students were enrolled at the UA, representing a nearly 65 percent increase over a 10-year period.

"Dr. Velez and I worked very closely together while I served as the Graduate College dean, which was only a portion of the time that she worked tirelessly to make a difference in the lives of our graduate students," said UA Provost Andrew Comrie.

Today, the UA is also the nation's top producer of American Indian doctoral graduates and a top-10 producer of Hispanic students with doctoral degrees. The collaborative work of Velez contributed significantly to those accomplishments.

Comrie, who worked directly with Velez on such initiatives during his tenure as Graduate College dean, said Velez was a visionary.

"She helped me see the world through diverse eyes, and what was needed to make it better,? he said. "Not only did she oversee all graduate admissions for many years, but she led a full range of graduate diversity initiatives that changed many lives."

Given such work, and her decades of service, Velez directly impacted the lives of "thousands of students," Comrie said.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to: The Dr. Maria Teresa Velez Scholarship, c/o Las Adelitas, P.O. Box 27716, Tucson, AZ 85726.

Read more about Velez in the UA news article Maria Teresa Velez: Farewell to a Revolutionary [2].

Read what UA students, employees and alumni have to say in honor of Velez on the UA blog: https://uanews.arizona.edu/blog/giving-thanks-mtv-pillar-support [3].
Bernard L. "Bunny" Fontana (right) with O'odham potter and elder Laura Kerman.

Bernard L. "Bunny" Fontana, retired UA field historian, died on April 2 in Tucson at age 85.

For those working in the regional Southwest intellectual community, his death is akin to the burning of the classical library of Alexandria: An incredible font of wisdom and knowledge is gone forever.

Fontana, who was universally and affectionately known as "Bunny," was born in Oakland, California, in 1931, raised in Yuba City, and attended the University of California, Berkeley, as an undergraduate. In 1955, he began his graduate work in anthropology at the UA, finishing his doctorate in 1960. He subsequently spent his entire career at the UA, working first in Special Collections in the UA Library for two years as field historian, then hired by Emil Haury to be the Arizona State Museum's first ethnologist, and, finally, after appointment in 1978 by UA President John Schaefer and library director David Laird, as field representative in the UA Library.

He retired, after more than 30 years of service, in 1992 to assume the life of independent scholar, which he pursued with rigorous discipline. Some of his well-known publications include "Tarahumara: Where Night Is the Day of the Moon" in 1979, "Of Earth and Little Rain: The Papago Indians" in 1981 and "Entrada: The Legacy of Spain and Mexico in the United States" in 1994, as well as dozens of scholarly articles, popular essays, reviews, bibliographies and commentaries.

Fontana was the recipient of many honors, including the UA Libraries' inaugural Library Legend Award in 2015 and the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008 from the Southwest Literature Project of the Tucson-Pima County Library and the Arizona Historical Society.

He was one of the leaders of the academic movement in the 1970s that resulted in the formation of the Southwest Center at the UA, and was the guiding light of numerous organizations such as the Southwestern Mission Research Center and the Patronato San Xavier. But it was informally that Fontana really left his mark. Whenever students and scholars would converse about the greater Southwest or wonder about a source or place or forgotten detail of history, invariably someone would say, "Well, let's ask Bunny!" They did, always, and they always got their answer.

Fontana, with his wife and children, lived since 1955 at the very edge of the San Xavier District of the O'odham reservation. In fact, the rambling adobe home's front gate was exactly on the demarcation line and guests parked their cars on the reservation in front of the house to visit. A devout Catholic, Fontana and his family attended Mass at the nearest Catholic church - Mission San Xavier del Bac - thereby beginning a 60-year love affair with the church, its art and history and preservation.

Of Fontana's many books and articles, there are more than a dozen citations in Journal of the Southwest alone; his crowning achievement is "A Gift of Angels: The Art of Mission San Xavier del Bac," with photography by Edward McCain, published as part of the UA Press' Southwest Center Series in 2010. The book is magisterial and massive, weighing well over eight pounds, with 350-plus pages of large-format text complemented by hundreds of color
photographs. Both text and photographs are superb expressions of the exact detail and meaning of the church and constitute a summation of Fontana’s life and passion.

"It is a timeless achievement and, as editor of the Southwest Center Series, it was for me the publishing opportunity of a lifetime," said Joseph Wilder, director of the Southwest Center.

On April 8, a memorial service was held at San Xavier for Fontana. More than 300 people packed the church and doorways outside to hear the stories and eulogies, the prayers, Fontana’s beloved traditional Mexican music performed by the Ronstadt family, and the blessings of a community united by interest and loss.

Accolades have come from around the world, including this from Ridvan Isler, Turkish master restorer who had worked on the mission: "I loved him very much. I am sure God take care of him in good place like his prophet."

And from Bob Vint, devoted friend and architect of the mission restoration: "Bunny Fontana was a gentle intellectual giant among mere mortals, and the person most responsible for the preservation of Mission San Xavier del Bac. As a founding member of the Patronato San Xavier, he quietly orchestrated from behind the scenes the restoration of the 18th-century National Historic Landmark south of Tucson. Bunny assiduously avoided being elected president of the Patronato, serving instead for 20 years as the board secretary ? from which position he made sure that what needed to be done was indeed done.

"He knew more than anyone about the history of the mission, about its builders and the meaning of its art. Bunny also deeply understood and appreciated the people by whom and for whom the mission was built, the Tohono O?odham of Southern Arizona and Northern Sonora. His books ‘Of Earth and Little Rain’ and ‘A Gift of Angels’ capture the essence of Bunny's deepest concerns: the humanity of this border region and its highest expression of faith. Bunny was possessed of a combination of wisdom and humility, and will be remembered with fondness by all who knew and treasured him for as long as we live."

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[3] https://uanews.arizona.edu/blog/giving-thanks-mtv-pillar-support