

Betty Benavidez, first Latina in Colorado House, broke trail for all

By Colleen O'Connor *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*
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During a period in which women, let alone Hispanic women, rarely held elected office, Elizabeth "Betty" Benavidez broke trail for herself and others.

Benavidez rose from the grass roots, a community activist whose house on Mariposa Street was a hub for the civil-rights movement in the mid-1960s. Her husband, Waldo, was a community organizer, and together they worked to improve the living conditions of people on the west side. In 1970, she was elected to the state House, the first Latina elected to the Colorado legislature.

"She was a true pioneer, and she did it without Princeton, Harvard or Yale," said her former daughter-in-law, Celina Benavidez.

Benavidez died on March 1 after a heart attack. She was 77.

Benavidez served in the legislature until 1974, when she ran for state Senate and was defeated by west-side up-and-comer Paul Sandoval.

"There were literally no women in politics then," said Pat Schroeder, who was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1972. "When I ran, they said it was too early for a woman to run. I was so happy to have Betty there."

When she won her first election, Benavidez, a native of west Denver, was a wife and the mother of four children who worked as a manicurist. She'd attended St. Cajetan Catholic School and dropped out of Cathedral High School. She earned her GED and then attended what was then called Metropolitan State College.

She was beautiful, gracious and outspoken.

"I believe that the concerns of central-city and minority people have not been adequately represented in the legislature," she told *The Denver Post* during her campaign.

Benavidez and her husband were friends with César Chavez, the civil-rights activist and American farmworker. In the legislature, she worked to better the lives of farmworkers. In 1971, she joined Chavez in his fast for farmworkers across the nation, which helped bring national attention to the cause.

She sponsored the first bill for bilingual education in the history of Colorado, worked to promote basic health care for all children and to develop minority studies in state colleges.

She did it all as a young wife and mother.

"Back then, people thought that to get elected as a woman, you had to be older with grown

children, or a widow, or single," Schroeder said. "The idea that you could get elected with a husband and children was radical. She broke phenomenal ground there."

Celina Benavidez was a teenager when she first met Betty. She had been taken to visit the state Capitol by Betty's son, Don Benavidez, whom she would later marry.

"I was astonished that there was a Spanish woman sitting in the legislature," Celina said, "just shocked. A woman — was it really possible?"

It was an exciting time for politics, with everything from the Vietnam War to the civil-rights movement and the women's movement. (The National Women's Political Caucus was founded by Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug in 1971, the year after Benavidez was elected.)

"She was strong," Celina said. "In meetings, she'd sit at the table as the only woman. She was gracious, but she'd take her time and give the opinion she needed to give."

She is survived by sons Steve Benavidez, Donald Benavidez and Tom Benavidez, and her daughter, Susan Castro Benavidez; 10 grandchildren; 16 great-grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

A memorial mass will be held at 10 a.m. Friday, at Holy Ghost Church, 1900 California St., Denver.