

The Life and Times of Daniel Cárdenas

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by Reymundo Rodriguez

Last month the Austin American-Statesman ran the obituaries of two men who died recently in **Austin, Texas**. One had a long and robust obituary that touted his many accomplishments, hobbies, circle of friends and how much he would be missed at the clubs and the social events of which he was so much a part. The other man's obituary was very short and said only that he was survived by his wife and children and that he too would be greatly missed.

On its face, it would appear that first man had lived a full and vibrant life, while the other man really didn't do much. But this is the cruel irony of silence, brevity and humility. For it was really the second man with the short obituary who had touched the lives millions of people . . . first as a Roman Catholic priest, then as a community activist, and finally as a farm worker program administrator for more than 50 years.

Anthony Joseph Cárdenas believed in the importance of saying "yes to the dignity of men and women." He believed early in his life in what **Cesar Chávez** said about the importance of being of service to others: "*When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines the kind of men we are.*"

Anthony answered the call of service by entering the seminary at the age of 14. Maybe he was influenced by the fact that one of his older brothers had decided to answer the call



as well and was already in the seminary preparing for the priesthood. Maybe he was influenced by the casual conversations he often had with the priests at the **Little Flower Monastery in Oklahoma City** where his father worked as a gardener and maintenance man.

After the seminary, Anthony went on to earn a bachelor's degree from St. Mary's University in **San Antonio, Texas** and professed first vows with the **Carmelite Order** after taking the name **Daniel**. He went to **Rome**, earned a Masters degree and upon his return to the United States was assigned to the very parish where he worshipped as a young boy and where he began his ministry.

Social activism was sweeping the nation in the late 1960s and **Father Daniel** sought to combine his dream of service in the church with a ministry to the poor. His incorporation of what were perceived as social agendas in the church were not welcomed in **Oklahoma City**. The work of a community activist who was now collaborating with **Father Daniel** and the Hispanic community was also not welcomed. Despite the disdain from the church, they continued to work closely on a myriad of social and community-church needs.

The tenor of the times and the voices of the poor became so loud that **Father Daniel** left the **Carmelites**. He felt he could do more than the church would allow him to do. He felt another calling

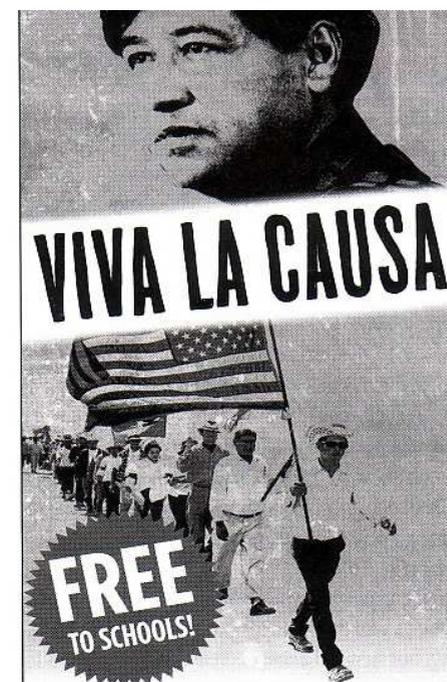
and fell in love and married **Sherry Ryan**, the community activist who had come into his life. They moved to Austin, Texas and began a new life a new chapter in their lives as they pursued their activism in the social and political upheaval of the times.

After working in a number of War on Poverty programs, Daniel began his work on behalf of farm workers by starting the **National Migrant Referral Project (NMRP)**. This organization brought community migrant health clinics and community health centers together to share the health records of migrant farm workers and their families as they traveled across the country. Within the span of a short time, this effort proved to be extremely valuable in improving health care access to a highly mobile, venerable population.

Daniel Cárdenas expanded his involvement in the health care issues of migrant and seasonal farm workers when he helped to author a special report on their mental health needs which was an integral part of the **President's Commission on Mental Health (1978)**. This report was for many years one of the most substantive and often cited references in the nation. Daniel Cárdenas again expanded his role and advocacy on behalf of farm workers when he became involved in the **Governor's Migrant Fuel Allocation Task Force**, migrant child education, early childhood education, and a four-prong agenda for addressing issues related to social services, employment, health and education.

During his career as an advocate for the poor, **Daniel Cárdenas** participated in hundreds of advisory committees, programs, marches and protests. He was, in part, a social product of the times who answered the call of the carpenter in a different way. He was a quiet man who did not need the personal accolades of others. His passion and commitment to helping others were not the fodder of newspaper articles or television interviews. Instead he took to heart the belief that "*we are all teachers, and what we teach is what we learn, and so we teach it over and over again until more people learn.*"

Que en paz descanse **Anthony Joseph Cárdenas**. Your life and your work made a difference in the lives of the people who helped to put food on the dinner tables of America when, at the very same time, they themselves did not even earn a minimum wage or have enough to feed their own families.



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