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Title

Rev. Mari Castellanos Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

November 29, 2012

Extant

1 hour 27 minutes interview (two files) and 1 transcript

Abstract

Latina activist and UCC minister Mari Castellanos discusses her Catholic upbringing, coming out as a lesbian, joining and leaving Dignity, AIDS ministry through MCC, liberation feminism, her marriage to Diana Gomez de Molina and subsequent Latino Latina LGBT activism.

Biographical

Maria Elena Castellanos was born on December 13, 1947, to Jorge P. Castellanos and Maria Antonia Varona in Havana. Mari's family was professional middle-class with predecessors who played prominent roles in Cuban history. Mari and her older sister Georgina attended Our Lady of Lourdes Academy, a Catholic girls' school that played a significant role in their early development. When she was not spending time with the sisters who ran the school, Mari and friends would often be at the beach enjoying the out-of-doors and the water.

Mari's extended family became active in the revolution against the autocratic Batista regime in the late 1950s. Police raids were common in the neighborhood and cousins were hidden to avoid arrest. The hope and joy from the downfall of the dictatorship and the new government led by Fidel Castro in January 1959 was short-lived, however. Middle-class families like the Castellanos found the new regime to be anti-democratic and just another form of dictatorship. So political resistance emerged once again with the support of the Catholic Church leadership. Mari became active in student protests against the Castro regime. Governmental repression grew once again—suspected resisters were arrested, priests and nuns were deported. Some of Mari's cousins were among those arrested; others left the country. Mari's parents feared for her safety and arranged for her to go to Miami to stay temporarily with an aunt and cousin there.

Mari left Cuba on September 14, 1961, on one of the “Peter Pan” flights that took Cuban children and youth to the U.S. Her sister joined her soon thereafter, but her parents were not allowed to leave Cuba. What had been expected to be a temporary arrangement became long-term exile. Mari never again saw her father with whom she had been very close. Five years passed before her mother could come to the U.S.

After two years in Miami, Mari followed her sister and brother-in-law to Boston. There Mari finished high school and enrolled in Northeastern University. At college she began her first intimate relationship with a woman. These were heady times for Mari amidst the upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement and student protests and underground lesbian community.

In 1969 Mari moved back to south Florida where she had more solid family and friend connections. There she did laboratory work in medical research in immuno-diagnostics and finished her bachelors degree at Barry University. And she began to come out to friends (and family NOT) as a lesbian.

Mari dropped into a meeting to oppose the anti-gay Save Our Children referendum led by Anita Bryant in 1977. She became one of the few Latino/as actively involved in the campaign. The 70% vote in support of the referendum which repealed an anti-discrimination ordinance was a big disappointment. During this time Mari was also enjoying the social and partying scene in Miami Beach.

After seeing a notice for a meeting of a Catholic gay group, Mari visited Dignity. Even though she was the only woman and only Latino participating in this gathering of mostly older, white men, she continued attending. A few months later Diana Gomez de Molina appeared at a Dignity gathering. Mari was smitten. Even though Diana was in the process of enlisting in the Navy, she changed plans and their relationship blossomed. Mari and Diana became very involved in Dignity. Mari served as president of the Miami chapter. They attended national Dignity conventions and played a prominent role in the convention held in Miami in 1987. Both Mari and Diana served for several years on Dignity’s Task Force on Sexual Ethics.

At the Dignity Convention in 1985 Mari listened to a keynote address by Mary E. Hunt and she was blown away. Later in the day she went to a workshop Mary was leading. That was the beginning of a life long friendship. Mari says: “Before I met Mary I couldn’t even spell ‘feminist liberation theology’. After her workshop I was a convert. I loved the stuff!”

In 1987 Grant Ford, pastor of MCC Fort Lauderdale, invited Mari to join the staff there. AIDS was on the rise at the time and Mari became immersed in ministry with persons with AIDS. She started on the path toward ordination in MCC, but decided that that was not a good fit. As she considered options for ministry, Mari enrolled in the masters of theology program at Barry University, an Adrian Dominican School, where she thrived. From there she began a doctoral program at an experimental, interfaith, multicultural seminary the South Florida Center for Theological Studies, now a part of St. Thomas University.

Mari and Diana became part of a group of women in ministry through MCC Miami. Together they organized an Audre Lorde Memorial event. They became involved in other feminist concerns locally. As the group grew larger and stronger, they decided to incorporate independently as the Holy Wisdom Interfaith Community with Mari as leader. The community produced an original play by Anna Garcia, about coming out in the Latino community, entitled “Que Pasa Miami?” which was presented to sold out audiences in South Beach two seasons in a row. They also organized the first-ever senior prom for LGBT youth in Miami Beach. This community sparked intense energy and activity that burned out within a couple of years.

In 1995 Mari and Diana discovered Coral Gables Congregational Church which became their church home. After some time, Mari began the process of ordination in the United Church of Christ through this congregation. She was ordained there on May 27th, 2001. Dr. Beverly Wildung Harrison and Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson were among the feminist theologians and UCC leaders who participated in this ordination service. She also received her Doctor in Ministry Degree that day. In 2002 Mari was offered the position of Policy Advocate on Domestic Issues for the Justice & Witness Ministries office of the UCC in Washington, D.C. where she continues to this day.

Mari and Diana were married on November 5th, 2011—their 30th anniversary—at First Congregational Church, UCC in Washington, D.C. Dr. Diann Neu was the celebrant. Her partner, Dr. Mary Hunt, made the toast.

Reverend Mari Castellanos most recently served at the United Church of Christ as Policy Advocate for Domestic Issues at the Washington Office of Justice and Witness Ministries.

This interview was conducted by Mark Bowman, the executive director of LGBT-RAN. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has played a key leadership role in establishing a number of religious ventures and programs.

Scope and Content

Reverend Mari Castellanos discusses her involvement with feminist and LGBT activism. She reflects on being one of few Latina women involved with Dignity, where she met her wife, Diana Gomez de Molina, and becoming involved with female liberation through Mary E. Hunt. Through MCC she worked in AIDS ministry, and formed a women’s group for feminist activism, which included an Audre Lorde Memorial and producing the play “Que Pasa Miami?” Castellanos was ordained through UCC in 2001, and serves as Policy Advocate for Domestic Issues at the Washington Office of Justice and Witness Ministries.

This interview was conducted by Mark Bowman, the executive director of LGBT-RAN. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has played a key leadership role in establishing a number of religious ventures and programs.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/mari-castellanos>

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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Activist (religious institutions)

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Florida

Miami

Washington, D.C.

Castellanos, Mari