

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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YOLANDA GARZA

Born: 1955
City: Madison, Whitewater
County: Dane, Walworth

Yolanda Garza is a Latina community activist and former UW-Madison assistant dean of students focused on supporting Latine students, faculty, and staff.

Yolanda Garza was born on March 5, 1955, in Chicago. Growing up, she admired her mother, Helen Garza, who modeled community involvement and fought for justice for all Latine people. In eighth grade, Garza stood up to injustice by organizing a walkout at her school, Our Lady of Guadalupe, to protest a teacher Garza felt discriminated against students of color. Even though the walkout ultimately never happened because her parents found out and intervened, this was Garza’s first experience with activism. It was not, however, her last experience with discrimination. In high school, a classmate told her that she could not come over to work on a class project because “her parents didn’t want any Mexicans” in their home—comments like that motivated Garza to continue to fight stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.

After graduating from Chicago State University in 1977, Garza accepted a teaching position at the same school where she had tried to organize a walkout, Our Lady of Guadalupe. As a teacher, she worked to help all her students realize their potential. She eventually became the first Mexican American assistant principal at Our Lady of Guadalupe.

After receiving her master’s degree in adult education from Northern Illinois University, Garza moved to Wisconsin in 1983 to work at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. While there, she joined the Wisconsin Hispanic Council on Higher Education and the Latina Task Force. She left Whitewater and soon after accepted a position at UW–Madison. There, Garza helped found the Latino Academic Staff Association (now the Latino Faculty Staff Association), which created a sense of community among the growing but still small number of Latine employees on campus. From 1989 to 1996, Garza served as UW–Madison’s representative to the Madison Police and Fire Commission. As the only woman of color on the commission and someone who believed that the workforce should reflect the community it served, Garza advocated for more diversity in hiring. In 1993, Garza helped start an annual conference at UW–Madison called La Mujer Latina (Latina Women). Around the same time, she worked to increase access to resources for faculty, staff, and students at UW–Madison facing domestic and dating violence. She is also a co-founder of the UW–Madison Rape Crisis Center. While working at UW–Madison, Garza earned her doctorate in adult and higher education from Northern Illinois University.

Throughout her career, Garza received many awards, including the Our Lady of Guadalupe Distinguished Alumni Award in 1995, the UW–Madison Chancellor’s Award in 2006, and the UW–Madison Chancellor’s Award for Excellence to the University in 2008. Garza retired in 2011. After retirement, she served on the community advisory committee for Somos Latinas Digital History Collection, a project “to document the many significant and largely hidden contributions of Latinas in Wisconsin engaged in their communities.”

To learn more, visit <https://womeninwisconsin.org/profile/yolanda-garza/>