

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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NELIA OLIVENCIA

Born: 1941

City: Madison, Whitewater

County: Dane, Jefferson, Walworth

As the Director of Latino Student Programs at UW–Whitewater for nearly two decades, Nelia Olivencia encouraged students of color to learn about and celebrate their heritage.

Nelia Olivencia was born on June 21, 1941, in the Bronx, New York, to Puerto Rican parents. Growing up was difficult because she faced discrimination at school and often felt unsafe in her neighborhood. “Early on,” she recalls, “people started calling me names and treating my brothers and sisters the same way.”* She succeeded in school despite feeling lonely and scared at times. Home was better because her parents taught their children to be proud of who they were. “Siempre debes este,” she remembers them saying, “tener orgullo, orgullo de lo que eres” (translated as, “You should always have pride, pride in who you are”).*

After high school, Olivencia attended Brooklyn College in New York and later graduated from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. During her college years, she became involved in activism and politics. This continued when she moved to California to teach at San José State College. In the late 1960s, Olivencia protested the Vietnam War. She also joined students and Latine faculty members at the college to fight for the creation of an ethnic studies program, which led to the founding of Mexican American Studies, now known as the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies.

In 1976, Olivencia became a recruiter at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She eventually became an Assistant Dean of Students and served as Dean and Director for Multicultural Programming, where she worked with Chicano, Puerto Rican, Asian, Native American, and African American students. In 1991, she became Director of Latino Student Programs at UW–Whitewater. For nearly two decades, Olivencia recruited, advocated for, and advised countless Latine students. To do so, she worked tirelessly to secure funding that enabled students to study abroad, attend conferences, and participate in language programs. Through those opportunities, Olivencia hoped that students could learn about their backgrounds, discover the world, and uncover commonalities that we share as people. Much like her parents did for her, Olivencia has helped people take pride in who they are.

Throughout her career, Olivencia has belonged to numerous organizations, including the National Association for Chicana & Chicano Studies (which she also chaired in 2015-16), the Puerto Rican Studies Association, and the Wisconsin Women’s Political Caucus and Governor’s Commission. She co-founded both the Wisconsin Women of Color Network and the Wisconsin Women’s Network. She has been widely recognized for her work, receiving the UW–Whitewater Non-Instructional Staff Award in 2003 and the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents’ Diversity Award in 2009. Olivencia was also profiled in *Somos Latinas: Voices of Wisconsin Latina Activists* by Andrea-Teresa Arenas and Eloisa Gómez. Nelia Olivencia continues to be active in her community and involved in politics at both the state and national levels.

**Quoted from Olivencia’s April 9, 2013, Somos Latinas Project oral history interview.*

To learn more, visit <https://womeninwisconsin.org/profile/nelia-olivencia/>