Centro mourns death of friend, civil rights leader and community organizer, Gilberto Gerena Valentín

Centro, Hunter College and CUNY mourn the loss of a dear friend and champion of the Puerto Rican and Latino Community, Gilberto Gerena Valentín. Gerena Valentín, labor leader and former council member representing the Bronx, was one of the most important Puerto Rican leaders in the fight for civil rights. He passed away last Friday, February 19th in his hometown of Lares.

Gerena was born in Lares, Puerto Rico in 1918, and migrated to New York City in 1937. From humble beginnings as a dishwasher at a Greek restaurant, Gerena went on to fight for the U.S. Army during World War II. His performance as an aerial gunner and radio operator exemplified the courage and tenacity with which he took up later struggles at home.

[2]During the post-war era, Gerena returned to a New York City
where the increased migration of Puerto Ricans called for support networks still unavailable to what had been to that point a small community. Gerena played a key role in filling that void, leading the formation of several major Puerto Rican organizations, including the Congreso de Pueblos, the Hispanic Voters Association, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, the National Association for Puerto Rican Civil Rights, the Puerto Rican Folklore Festival, and the Puerto Rican Community Development Project. Though he presided many of these organizations, he focused on creating self-sustainable organizations that could support the efforts of all Puerto Ricans.

It was during this same time that Gerena also became one of the leading figures in the struggles for the rights of the Puerto Rican community. Standing first with Puerto Rican workers through his work as a union leader, he went on to organize massive mobilizations of Puerto Ricans during the Civil Rights Movement, including mobilizing our community en masse during the March on Washington and for the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Poor People Campaign in 1968.
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[From the Celia Vice Papers. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.]

His life accomplishments are many and all connected to the improvement of Puerto Rican, latino, and black communities at a local and national level. In 1965, Gerena provided testimony before Congress supporting Section 4(e) of the Voting Rights Act, an often ignored provision securing voting rights for non-English speakers commonly known as the Puerto Rican Amendment. In 1966, he was appointed by Mayor John Lindsay to helm the City Human Rights Commission's Business and Employment Division. On 1977, Gerena was elected in a contested election, defeating Ramón Velez, then one of the major political voices in South Bronx. The win stands as testament of Gerena’s charisma and ability to move others.

In 2013, Centro published Gilberto Gerena Valentín’s memoirs in both English and Spanish. In this book, written in Spanish by Gerena Valentín and edited by Carlos Rodríguez Fraticelli, readers are taken on a journey through the union, political, social, and cultural struggles Puerto Ricans experienced between the years following the Great Migration and the 1970s. Centro’s archives house the Gilberto Gerena Valentin Papers, which include biographical materials, clippings, correspondence, and some of his original publications.
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Beyond the many accolades and accomplishments he accumulated through his life, Gerena was the kind of man who would do whatever it took to help a friend, or a stranger, in need. We will remember him as such, for his fearless and unwavering dedication to his community. A true hero of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Our hearts go out to his family, friends and all who knew him and were impacted by his legacy, which will live forever.

Edwin Meléndez
Centro Director
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