EVELINA'S EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISM

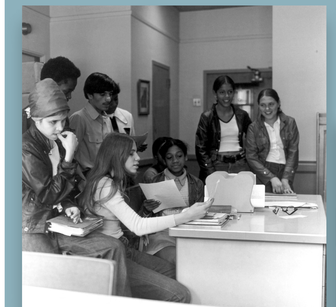
Evelina Antonetty was a Puerto Rican nationalist and communist in the US who was fiercely committed to the fight against the colonization of Puerto Ricans. Her political consciousness prompted her response to the institutionalized class and race oppression in New York City's public schools. She realized that radical measures were necessary to change the Board of Education, which operated within a stagnant and "sick" bureaucratic structure that relegated New York City's Black and Puerto Rican children to an inferior education (Rogers, 1968). Puerto Rican parents and community leaders identified that New York City's schools failed to educate children properly through its English-only curriculum. They assembled around the urgent need for bilingual education at that time. Antonetty's objectives for community school reform included: creating bilingual classes and bilingual schools; hiring more Hispanic personnel; and forming open and humane school environments that emphasized critical thinking. She realized that she needed to organize South Bronx parents to foment constant bottom-up pressure on the NYC educational system (Schepers, 1978). Evelina Antonetty founded United Bronx Parents in 1965 to accomplish their overall goals.

In 1967, United Bronx Parents began to offer training so parents could learn to evaluate schools and advocate on behalf of their children– with a particular focus on the issue of student suspensions. UBP also informed South Bronx parents of their rights, which transformed residents into a knowledgeable and confident critical community base prepared to demand improvements in education. UBP staff created English and Spanish-language training materials that encouraged hands-on learning through a role-playing approach that the UBP favored. They also provided parents with copies of the Board of Education's regulations so that they might learn school policies addressing suspensions and the management of disruptive children (Schepers, 1978; UBP, History of United Bronx Parents, n.d.). UBP's radical activism included the occupation of abandoned buildings in which the UBP established the first bilingual elementary school and bilingual daycare center in the Bronx. UBP also hoped to expand its community base to areas outside the South Bronx and create a citywide parental network for applying pressure on schools.

UBP's training explicitly emphasized the need to transition the locus of blame from South Bronx parents to the power structures governing education in the city. For several years, school staff members told mothers that bad Puerto Rican parents produced failing Puerto Rican children. However, United Bronx Parents taught the community that other factors such as discrimination, bureaucracy, unequal resource distribution, and the lack of accountability and interest led to inequitable outcomes for their children (UBP, 1967).

Evelina Antonetty and United Bronx Parents helped Puerto Ricans and other minority groups overcome circumstances that stemmed from poverty and addressed issues of internalized oppression and a sense of inferiority through Freirian-based programs which provided adult education and training. Under the UBP program, New York City's parents were enlightened and became fearless fighters for education rights for their children. Their efforts were the groundwork to secure a future filled with possibilities for their children and to liberate themselves. The history of United Bronx Parents and Antonetty's leadership demonstrates how a grassroots agency of determined people can demand accountability for the poorest and most disenfranchised citizens.

DR. LAURA KAPLAN
Clinical Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Pace University



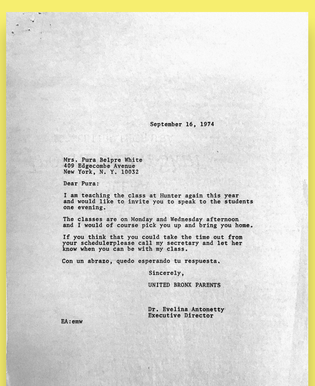
Community students benefiting from Evelina's Educational Initiatives

United Bronx Parents GED Graduation

IN HER OWN WORDS

(scan QR codes to hear audio files)

- "A FREEZING NIGHT AND THE BOARD TURNED ON THE AC"
- "AFTER THREE DAYS OF OCCUPYING THE BOARD OF ED THEY ARRESTED US ALL"
- "I STARTED TO ASK THE WRONG QUESTIONS"
- "IM READY TO CLOSE ALL THE SCHOOLS IN THE AREA"
- "THE TYPE OF PUERTO RICAN THE PRINCIPAL COULD USE"
- "THERE WAS A SCRAMBLE FOR SEATS AND WE BECAME THE NEW BOARD OF ED"



September 16, 1974

Mrs. Pura Belpre White
459 Edgecombe Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10032

Dear Pura:

I am teaching the class at Hunter again this year and would like to invite you to speak to the students one evening.

The classes are on Monday and Wednesday afternoon and I would of course pick you up and bring you home.

If you think that you could take the time out from your schedule,please call my secretary and let her know when you can be with my class.

Con un abrazo, quedo esperando tu respuesta.

Sincerely,

UNITED BRONX PARENTS

Dr. Evelina Antonetty
Executive Director

EA:esw

Invitation letter from Evelina to Pura Belpré, 1974

Piri Thomas addressing Evelina Antonetty's classroom