



This entry is from the book *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990, A Biographical Dictionary*, edited by Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast, Indiana University Press, 2001.

The Chicago Women's History Center holds the copyright to this book. The excerpt is for personal and/or academic use. Please do not reproduce any part of it without permission from CWHC.

To properly credit this entry, use the citation, below:

Citation (Chicago Manual of Style/Turabian):

Espinosa, Martha Elena. "Maria del Jesus Saucedo," *Women Building Chicago: A Biographical Dictionary 1790-1990*, edited by Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Accessed online www.chicagowomenshistory.org/wbc-entries

[researcher inserts date of access] pdf

SAUCEDO, MARIA del JESUS

April 23, 1954–November 12, 1981

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST, POET, THEATER PERFORMER,
TEACHER, REVOLUTIONARY

Born in Monterrey, Mexico, Maria Saucedo grew up in the United States during the rising fervor of the Chicano (Mexican American) movement of the 1960s and 1970s. She fought for the rights of oppressed people; for the working class; for quality education, including bilingual education; and for pride in Mexican culture and heritage.

Daughter of Juan and Maria (Reynosa) Saucedo, she was the eldest of eight surviving children and originally a twin; however, her sister did not survive. Her other siblings were Juanita, Silvia,

-- *Continues on next page*

This space is blank

Juan Jr., José, Fernando, Alicia, and Teresa. The Saucedos also adopted a nephew named Marco Antonio. Saucedo's parents met and married in Monterrey, and in 1955 her father migrated to the United States to find work. Mexican immigrants with permanent visas increased significantly during this time; nearly two hundred seventy-five thousand Mexican immigrants arrived legally in the United States in the 1950s. Holding permanent resident status, Juan Saucedo served in the army shortly after arriving. His wife and three children waited until 1959 to join him.

The family settled in Pilsen, a growing Mexican neighborhood that would later become a primary locus of Mexican population, and they moved from apartment to apartment within Pilsen. Their constant moving allowed Saucedo, who always surrounded herself with people, to observe her neighbors' lives and experiences. Everyone remembers "Chuchis," as Saucedo was called, for her humor, wit, and curiosity. From childhood, Saucedo was a strong-willed and outspoken person who commented on her family's and other people's conditions.

The family faced difficulties common to Mexican immigrants. Chicanos held low-paying jobs, and many lacked adequate English-language skills. As a result, they often did not receive necessary services or were poorly treated at hospitals and other public service agencies. With relatively few registered voters and little wealth, Chicano neighborhoods had poor public services and schools. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) routinely arrested immigrants found without proper documents. Saucedo and others came to see these problems as structural, systemic, and shared by non-Chicano working-class and poor people. Thus, she believed, fundamental change was required to solve her community's problems.

Besides Saucedo's social awareness, a great impetus for her development as an activist was her mother's activism. Maria Reynosa first learned to communicate for the welfare of herself and her family; she then focused on the community. In 1962 she began helping pregnant mothers who had no knowledge of the English language to claim insurance rights and receive proper care in hospitals. Reynosa and Saucedo attended strikes, rallies, and solidarity marches in Pilsen, and they followed the Chicano movement throughout the country. They supported the efforts of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and other leaders of the United Farm Workers Union (UFWU) in organizing farm workers in California and New Mexico. Although they were strong advocates of the Chicano movement, the Saucedos did not limit themselves to this cause. They marched with civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. to integrate neighborhoods in the Chicago area and rallied against the United States involvement in Guatemala and El Salvador.

In 1973 Maria Saucedo began studying at Northeastern Illinois University (NIU), where she majored in early childhood education and graduated with honors in 1975. For the Saucedos, school in the United States had been an early challenge, since the Catholic school they attended did not teach in English but in Polish, because Pilsen at the time had predominantly Polish residents. However, Saucedo was a bright student and advanced rapidly. As a child, she had begun first grade at age four; she entered college as a sophomore rather than a freshman.

When Saucedo began attending NIU, the university did not have a large Latino population. Saucedo pushed the school to

recruit more Latino/Chicano students and faculty; she developed recruitment methods herself. Saucedo, Mariestela Carabez, Elvira Carrizales, and Alma Alvarado together founded the Chicano Student Union (CSU) in 1974. Prior to the establishment of the CSU, the Union for Puerto Rican Students (UPRS) was the only Latino organization existing at NIU. Saucedo and other Chicanos objected to UPRS's efforts to subsume Mexican American students under the UPRS. CSU founders wanted their own identity and "a piece of the pie" (interview with Santos Rivera), but not, they insisted, the Puerto Rican students' piece. They were not being divisive as the UPRS charged but rather were demanding expanded resources for Latinos/Chicanos. Saucedo wrote the CSU constitution and served as the organization's first chairperson. The CSU strove to unify and organize the Chicano/Latino student body at NIU, to "create awareness of identity, culture, history, and to develop a political consciousness for the progress of Third World People" (CSU Constitution).

Through CSU, Saucedo began the Noche de Familia, an event that encouraged interaction between students, parents, and professors on campus. With donations from local businesses, students and parents prepared food served at the event, which featured live music and entertainment. Saucedo emphasized student and parent involvement; because many of the students were or had been involved in gangs, the experience was new, different, and necessary. Saucedo also led the attempt to recruit Chicano professors to teach Chicano history, Latino sociology, and bilingual education.

Saucedo was a prolific writer. During her time at NIU, Saucedo founded and edited *Contra la Pared* (Against the wall), a newsletter that addressed Chicano issues. A metaphor for their political situation, the name alludes to a Spanish saying, "entre la espada y la pared" or "between a rock and a hard place," having nowhere to turn. Saucedo wrote articles about INS raids of places where Latinos were employed, mass deportations, and Chicano history in the United States.

Throughout her years in school, Saucedo remained active within Pilsen. Her fellow activists and friends described her as an intellectual totally in contact with less educated members of the community. Saucedo became involved with *Compañía Trucha*, a street theater housed at Casa Aztlán. Previously a settlement house called Howell House, Casa Aztlán was a grass roots organization and the center of the Chicano movement in Chicago in the 1970s. Many Chicano youths felt they needed a center where they could organize, discuss issues in the community, and provide medical, educational, and civic activities. At Casa Aztlán, *Compañía Trucha* developed as a street theater group and performed throughout Chicago. Street theater was a prevalent form of activism during the 1970s. *Compañía Trucha* itself was styled after *Teatro Campesino*, which came out of Cesar Chavez's UFWU and was headed by Luis Valdes. In essence, these were political theater groups. Both street and political theater drew upon a long tradition of religious theater in Mexico and other Latin American countries. In Chicago itself in the 1940s, ANGELINA RICO choreographed such cultural performances.

Saucedo and her husband Filberto Ramírez formed *Compañía Trucha's* core leadership, along with Hector and Maria

Gamboa and Antonio and Ricardo Zavala. They produced theater that dramatized significant events extracted from the lives of Mexican people in Chicago. For example, INS officers—the dreaded *migra*—harassed Mexicans, demanding to see documentation papers both on the street and in places of employment. The actors also addressed issues regarding the quality of education, poor medical attention, and the condition of the working class in the United States, among other themes. Their performances were satiric and biting but also educational. *Compañía Trucha* aimed to teach people in the audience—many illiterate and uneducated—about their rights.

As a tool of protest, *Compañía Trucha* demonstrated at Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Hospital in 1976. There an employee was fired after seventeen years of service for talking to patients and Latino medical students about a patient's right to informed consent, that is, the right to be fully informed about treatment options and to agree or decline to be treated. Around the country, public hospitals were being challenged for allegedly sterilizing Latinas and other low-income patients without their knowledge and consent. A support committee called for rehiring the employee and also for hiring more Latino staff and interpreters. Spanish-speaking janitors were being asked to translate, a task that was outside their job description and for which they were neither trained nor paid. The members of *Compañía Trucha* supported the committee's sit-in demonstration and held performances alleging poor treatment of Latinos. Twenty-three protesters were arrested; four, including Saucedo, chose to represent themselves in court. Ultimately, charges against all twenty-three were dropped.

Saucedo met her husband, Filberto Ramírez, while working with *Compañía Trucha*. They married in June 1977 on a day when they were scheduled to perform at the Daley Center, where they could obtain a civil marriage ceremony. They had one son, Albizu Emiliano. The name Albizu was for Albizu Campos, the Puerto Rican independence leader imprisoned in 1950; Emiliano was for Emiliano Zapata, a leader in Mexico's revolution of 1910–20, who fought for land rights and land redistribution among agrarian workers. Saucedo also admired Cesar Chavez, Cuban revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and Mao Ze Dong, leader of the People's Republic of China. Like them, she gave herself completely to her cause. Saucedo assigned full custody rights of Albizu to her mother in case anything should happen to herself and her husband. To those who did not understand her reasons, she would respond, "I can stay home and take care of my child, but if I only take care of my child, I cannot take care of the rest of my children" (interview with Saucedo family).

Influenced by Saucedo and Gamboa, *Compañía Trucha* addressed women's issues. Both in their plays and in discussion with other theater groups, Saucedo emphasized that it was important to be unified in the struggle for rights but not to relegate women to supportive roles or limit them to the virgin/whore stereotype. She argued that women's portrayals must reflect their actual roles as leaders in their communities and that women's issues needed to be addressed rather than swallowed up in the bigger struggle. At the same time, Saucedo did not call herself a feminist. She did not see the Latino male as the primary problem for Latinas. Because Latino males were oppressed

themselves, she believed in a unified struggle involving both men and women.

With *Compañía Trucha* and other youth from Casa Aztlán, Saucedo traveled to Iowa, California, Texas, New Mexico, Mexico City, and several other places to lend support to other groups and perform with the theater. During protests, Saucedo often played her guitar and sang *corridos* (traditional protest songs). She wrote songs in support of each cause and used her poetry to vent her frustration. Her poetry not only documents her life but also reflects the struggles and hardships Chicanos endured. One such poem emerged during a demonstration, which lasted several days, in favor of bilingual education. A portion of the poem reads, "Tengo hambre / no he comido / siento el estómago vacío / este pinche sistema / me está robando el corazón / me está robando el grito" (Maria Reynosa Papers) (I am hungry / I haven't eaten / I feel my stomach empty / this fucking system / robs me of my heart / robs me of my voice).

The three things that Saucedo valued most were family, her people, and education. She saw education not only as a method of self-improvement but also as the key toward the improvement of living conditions for Mexican people. She not only became an educator but took action in the building of the Benito Juarez High School in Pilsen. Even during the 1970s, overcrowding in schools was already an issue. Once the Board of Education approved the building of a new high school, the community appointed a committee to push for the school to be built in Pilsen. Saucedo, her sisters, and her mother were involved in this effort. Community activists lobbied for Mexican-style architecture. Many issues remained unresolved in spite of the struggle for the Benito Juarez school: the board built a school that was too small, and it assigned a principal even though the Pilsen community wished to select the principal.

After graduating from Northeastern Illinois University in 1975, Saucedo taught at Kosciusko Elementary School and later at Pickard School. Shortly before her death, she was fired from Pickard for refusing to implement a new policy whereby teachers had to ask students to show a green immigration card proving that they were legally in the United States. Saucedo believed all children had a right to receive an education regardless of immigration status.

Among her projects, Saucedo cofounded the Mexican Teacher's Organization (MTO) around the same time she began teaching. Not only was it difficult for newly arrived immigrant children to attend school, but bilingual education was also under attack. The MTO's goals were to improve the quality of education of Latino children and to encourage more Latinos to become educators. For Saucedo, language was a strong tie to both culture and identity. At the time, Saucedo was attending DePaul University; she was studying for a master's degree in reading with a bilingual component.

On November 12, 1981, Maria Saucedo died in a fire. Although most who knew her prefer to think it was an accident, almost all conclude that the fire was most likely due to arson. Fire Department officials first claimed it was arson and then, without an official investigation, declared the cause to be the electrical system. Family members were forced to jump from their third-story apartment. Her son and husband survived but suffered severe injuries. Saucedo, who was eight months pregnant, also

jumped, but she fell head first. She died instantly. Whether or not her death was accidental, its circumstances—arson, aging and easily flammable housing stock, and inadequate fire services—were not unique. Following her death, her activist friends formed the Maria Saucedo Fire Committee to push for better equipment, service, and code enforcement. True to Saucedo's commitment not to take some other group's "piece of the pie" for her community's benefit, the committee rejected a "cherry picker" for removing people from upper stories of burning buildings when they learned it had been taken from the African American community.

The day of her wake, a throng of people who had known and loved Saucedo gathered at Casa Aztlán and marched through the neighborhood to her home, ending their pilgrimage at the funeral home. A crowd of perhaps three hundred marched in the streets, carrying a banner imprinted with her name and the words "Revolutionary, Teacher, Mother." The crowd read her poetry and told stories. After the wake her body was sent to Monterrey, Mexico, where she is buried. In 1986, Harrison High School was renamed the Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy in her honor.

Maria Saucedo dedicated herself to challenging class and racial/ethnic inequality. She used her socialist beliefs, her love for her people, her struggle against injustices, and her wit and humor to make people aware of their rights, to instill pride in Mexican culture, and to create another level of consciousness for future generations. An obituary identified Maria Saucedo as a leader who had dedicated herself to the liberation of all people who suffered from oppression.

Sources. Maria Reynosa has a large amount of information, including photographs, video documentation taken at Saucedo's wake, and her collection of poetry. Laura Paz also holds newspaper clippings on Saucedo's death, including an obituary taken from an unnamed and undated newspaper article. Martha Espinoza conducted extensive interviews with Saucedo's parents, Maria Reynosa and Juan Saucedo; sisters Juanita and Teresa; and brothers Juan, José, and Fernando; as well as friends and coworkers Maria Gamboa, Isaura Gonzales, Laura Paz, Victoria Perez, and Santos Rivera. Juanita Saucedo provided a video taken of the tenth anniversary of the naming of the Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy. Information about the fatal fire is from *El Herald de Chicago*, December 3, 1981, and *La Raza*, December 2–8, 1981. The "Chicano Student Union Constitution" (n.d.) is available at Northeastern Illinois Univ. in the Chimexla Student Union archives. Information on Mexican Americans is found in Jorge Casuso and Eduardo Camacho, "Latino Chicago," in *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait*, ed. Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones (4th ed., 1995); Carlos E. Cortés, "Mexicans," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (1980); and Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, "The Chicano Experience in Chicago: 1920–1970 (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1976).

MARTHA ELENA ESPINOZA