

The spotlight was on women when the League of United Latin American Citizens held its 1994 national presidential campaign. There was Belen Robles, who hailed from El Paso's historic Council 9, which in 1934 had fought successfully for equal membership for women in the civil rights organization. And there was her opponent, Rosa Rosales, San Antonio's reform candidate, whose female supporters were nicknamed "The Hats," for their colorful and ever-present head pieces.

Robles won. She had run for LULAC president 23 years earlier, but the male leadership had turned its back on her. One of the past national presidents had told her: "We cannot have women lead our organization. You're very special, but..."

This time, Robles was supported by a solid block of women, a national constituency and former past presidents—who some consider the "old guard". She narrowly won the 1994 election, becoming LULAC's first female president since the organization's founding in 1929. She has led the Latino rights group in a climate many civil rights experts consider anti-women and anti-people of color.

Cynthia Orozco, a historian who specializes in the study of LULAC, says that while women could vote almost from the outset, the organization was male-centered and dedicated to fighting racial, not gender, discrimination. Between 1937 and 1941, LULAC member Alice Dickerson Montemayor wrote articles criticizing LULAC for neglecting women's issues. Yet women were integrally involved in all of LULAC's struggles, Orozco says. Women had been state and district directors and local presidents, and Robles' candidacy in 1994 represent-

While Robles never received a college education, she boasts that she holds "a master's in hard knocks". Then she adds, "By now it's a doctorate." Robles and her family of five marched with César Chávez in Texas to highlight the plight of farmworkers; and in Albuquerque, N.M., in 1967, she was among a large group of Mexican American leaders who walked out on a member of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission who did not take their grievances seriously. The walkout led to the creation of a cabinet-level position for Mexican American affairs, a post that no longer exists.

In the two years she has been president, Robles has been busy travel-



**Belen
Robles**

LEADING

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LULIAC

Robles, Its First Woman President, is a Reformer

By P. Catherine Gonzáles

ed the fourth attempt by a woman to head the organization.

Robles' biggest internal challenge was restoring LULIAC's credibility, which many say her predecessor, José Veléz, had left in shambles. Veléz ended his term in 1994, amid charges of immigration fraud, and was convicted of illegally helping immigrants obtain residency. Even members who opposed Robles' candidacy say she is "squeaky clean."

"Anybody who knows me, knows I'm nobody's puppet," Robles says. She is a woman with a lot of determination. She recalls the time she was told at a job interview, "You must be mistaken, we don't hire Mexicans." (Except as elevator girls, Robles adds, with a hint of sarcasm.) The year was 1956; the place was El Paso, Texas. Robles, voted "Most Likely to Succeed" at the *barrio* school Bowie High, walked out of the prestigious bank in her hat and gloves, and shortly thereafter joined LULIAC.

Today, she is a chief inspector with U.S. Customs. On her way to that post, she trudged across lots of railroad ties while inspecting for contraband, and diffused an equal amount of male angst from colleagues who were not used to seeing a woman do a "man's job". Robles not only resisted the roles ascribed to women of her time, but her own mother's opposition to her efforts.

ing across the country countering Congressional assaults against Latinos. She and LULIAC Council 100, of north Texas, spearheaded the campaign against Howard Stern when his comments about the late Tejana superstar Selena got him into *agua caliente*.

Under her leadership, LULIAC organized its first educational summit, its first civil rights symposium, supported the court challenge to California's anti-immigrant Proposition 187, and organized a summit to evaluate the "Contract with America" and its impact on Latinos. LULIAC countered the contract with a proposal, "A Commitment with America." In 1994, she represented Latinos at the first-ever Summit of the Americas, which brought together representatives from all democratically elected countries in the Americas.

In response to the anti-immigrant movement, LULIAC is creating scholarships for which all youth are eligible, regardless of citizenship. Robles also is vice chair of the Hispanic Leadership Agenda—a coalition of major national Latino organizations dedicated to fighting for civil rights.

During her 40-year struggle for civil and human rights at LULIAC, much of Robles' inspiration has come from other women, such as Amadita Valdez, who is nearly 100 years old. Valdez was the first president of Ladies LULIAC Council 9, and up until a few years ago, she chaired the "shoe committee," which provided shoes to needy children. "If they don't have shoes," Robles says, "they won't go to school."

While Robles still thinks about LULIAC's male-centered past, that's not the way she sees the future. She is especially proud of the youth, not of it led by young women. "The Hispanic youth of today show so much potential, so much ability and so much passion for achieving what needs to be achieved, for changing what needs to be changed," the LULIAC president says with determination in her voice.

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