



CIVICS LESSON

Helen Rodriguez-Trias/Luana Reyes

Expanding Access To Health Care

Just as Helen Rodriguez-Trias expanded access to health care with an initial focus on the Latino community, Luana has similar exemplary success improving health access for the Native American community.

Born in Portland in 1933, Luana Reyes was of mixed parentage: her father was from the Philippines and her mother was a Sin-aikst Native American, part of the Colville Confederated Tribes. Reyes' family grew up in poverty, living mostly in tents on the Colville reservation and challenged by food insecurity. When the Grand Coulee Dam was built in the 1930s, hers was one of the 300 indigenous families forcibly relocated from in and around the reservation.

Her challenging upbringing persisted when, at eight years old, Reyes parents divorced and she was sent to the Chemawa Indian Boarding School near Salem, Ore. Through her teenage years she bounced back and forth between her parents. Reyes and her siblings were the only nonwhite students at their high school, and she attended college but had to leave after a short time because she couldn't afford tuition. Seeking to support herself as a young adult, she moved in search of employment from Tacoma to San Francisco to Hawaii, working in department stores and restaurants.

Reyes eventually settled in Seattle and joined her younger brother Bernie Whitebear at the Seattle Indian Health Board; Whitebear had founded the agency, and it was the only one in the U.S. at that time devoted to Native American health. He left the Health Board to spearhead the Native American occupation of Seattle's Fort Lawton in 1970, and Reyes succeeded him as executive director. Over the next decade she transformed the small operation with a staff of five into a community health care with a multimillion-dollar budget, which continues to "provide health and human services to its patients, while specializing in the care of Native

people . . . recognized as a leader in the promotion of health improvement for urban American Indians and Alaska Natives, locally and nationally.”

While developing the Seattle Indian Health Board into a model for other urban Native American communities, Reyes helped to found the American Indian Health Care Association, which evolved into the National Council on Urban Indian Health, a “national organization devoted to the support and development of quality, accessible, and culturally-competent health services for American Indians and Alaska Natives living in urban settings.” Because of all of her successes, Reyes was recruited to work at the Maryland headquarters of the federal Indian Health Service where she eventually became director of operations, chief financial officer, and deputy director of the organization with 14,000 staff members.

Reyes worked together with her brother and many others to fulfill her calling to enhance health care access. The following principles will help you learn from her exemplary experiences as you:

SURVIVE THE TOUGH TIMES

Through her upbringing and young adulthood, the difficulties that Reyes faced were so extreme that she could have given up. Whatever you’re facing, it may not be as challenging as what she faced. If she made it through, so can you. Make up your mind — never give up — and

SEARCH FOR OPPORTUNITIES

Reyes traveled far and wide for her livelihood. Be willing to make an unexpected moves, and with each opportunity, look for ways to

SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS

Self-improvement is up to you. Like Reyes, keep getting better and you will be ready to go from mom-and-pop to big operation to national organization. Just be ready to

SCALE YOUR LESSONS

Always strive for excellence, whether you’re a solo entrepreneur or a major CEO. Apply those lessons to take your calling ever higher. In this way you just might be able to extend your work and impact the masses.

One important legacy of Reyes’ work is the Indian Health Service (IHS), an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services that provides comprehensive health services for Native American people.