

# A PhD in Life:

Cec Ortiz's journey from  
low-wage worker to city leader



On a breezy, cobalt blue day in mid-summer, the revolving door at the base of Republic Plaza whooshed and out stepped Cec Ortiz. In tow were six Making Connections co-workers, celebration and purpose in the air. Destination? The mayor's office just five blocks away, where, 30 minutes later, Cec would publicly accept an appointment to lead Denver's Office of Workforce Development. A flock of community organizers joined in as she entered the City and County Building, only to encounter an even larger crowd waiting to greet them in the foyer of the mayor's office. It was a hubbub of hugs as neighborhood residents, city officials, Cec's co-workers, personal friends, husband, sons, and grandson added to the swell.

## A rural childhood

The human wave that Cec rode into the Mayor's office that morning has been building for 52 years. Anyone who knows her will tell you, Cec Ortiz is all about relationships. She learned it from her mother, Rosario, when she was growing up in



Holly, a small, windswept farming and ranching community in southeast Colorado. Rosario knew everyone in town. "Mom was a natural community builder," said Cec. "She was committed to family and community. And church was big – we cooked for every funeral, and our family took a turn cleaning the church each month. She was also the lady that farmers would call when new immigrants were coming. Middle of the night, she would take them in, which meant that we would have to move out of our beds so they could sleep. Ten, twelve people at a time. Crying babies. Exhausted mothers. I lived it, it wasn't optional."

Cec's father, Marcial Ortiz, emigrated from Mexico when he was three. Holly locals had difficulty pronouncing his name, so he changed it to Percy, but to his wife and children, he was always the quiet and awe-inspiring Don Marcial. "I was brought up to be proud of being Mexican American," said Cec. "In those days, people were a little concerned about being Mexican, so many families from Mexico would call themselves



The mayor's office, Denver City and County Building. August 14, 2003.

Spanish. There was a lot of pressure around assimilation. Not having an accent was critical. Being able to read and write English well was very important. But my dad was always real clear that we were Mexican Americans."

Cec had heard of Denver, the big city, because neighboring farmers and ranchers took livestock up to the Western Stock Show every year. "I'd think, wow, Denver," said Cec. "Holly was so insulated. I was very naive to the world." Until she started high school, Holly was Cec's universe. Then her brother was called up to serve in Vietnam, and suddenly the world became a lot larger.

## The big city

Cec left Holly for the first time the summer of her junior year in high school, when a state leadership development program selected her to spend a week in Denver studying government on the campus of Colorado Women's College. "I loved history, and I loved civics," she said. "The

campus was wonderful. I wished I could go to school there, but I knew I never could afford it. And my mother didn't even know there were colleges just for women. Anyway, I wasn't planning on going to college. I was going to work. One thing the Ortizes do, we work. We have a strong work ethic."

When she interned for the Migrant Action Program in Holly the following summer, one of the administrators encouraged her to go to college. "In 1969 there was lots of pressure on the University to bring in people of color," said Cec. The University of Colorado in Boulder offered her a spot in the freshman class, and she took it.

"I came up to the University, and it was very traumatic," she said. "There were 20,000 kids there, and of course they were all doing things I had never thought about doing. I wasn't ready. The first year, I just blew it. So the second year, I think I tried to find someone like my father to take care of me. I fell in love, got pregnant, got married. I dropped right out of school."

Cec moved to rural Lafayette, near her husband's family, and gave birth to two boys in three years. Times were rough. "We were always on the edge," said Cec. "I remember having to get food stamps. It was humiliating, people not looking at you when they're talking to you. You sit there, asking for help, and the person on the other side has something you need, but you have to jump through six hoops to get it. It's a constant criticism of your life."

Cec was on and off public assistance for three years as she struggled to get a steady job. She served food behind the line at Furr's Cafeteria and worked as a janitor at Storage Tech. "I remember, they had these huge buildings that just go on and on," she said. "I remember cleaning the cubicles, seeing piles of papers, and looking at the people in the pictures and thinking, 'I wonder what happens here? I wonder if I could do this?'"



Cec Ortiz and Making Connections co-workers Tracey Saulters and Candace Redshirt.

#### **An activist is born**

Some people in Cec's life were prodding her to think about what she wanted to do, including an outreach worker at Rocky Mountain Planned Parenthood. "She'd ask me, 'What do you want to be? What do you want to do? You've got to do something with your life,'" said Cec. "It was the first time I had women handling my medical needs. Many of them were activists." She began to volunteer at the clinic, helping women get better access to healthcare, including birth control. With close friend Danny Escalante, she also started Los Ayudantes, a program for Lafayette kids who were getting in trouble with the law. "It was the beginning of my activism," said Cec.

In the course of her volunteer work, Cec met Pete Garcia, an ex-priest working in mental health in Lafayette. He asked her to take a job as his secretary at his storefront clinic. "He taught me a lot,"

said Cec. "As one of my first mentors, he was so compassionate. It made me realize how important that is in the work we do, because every one of us is in need at some point." Cec went on to work as a secretary at Boulder County Mental Health for five years. "Thank God for shrinks," she said. "They helped me raise my boys."

After she divorced in 1979, Cec did need some help. "It was a hard divorce, because there was no money," said Cec. "My kids had to deal with the electricity and the telephone being turned off when I couldn't pay the bills. I was just praying for that check to float – sending it before there's money in the bank, then hoping you can make a deposit before it's cashed. In some ways, the kids and I raised each other during this time, and that's why we're pretty close today."

In spite of her economic troubles, Cec continued

to gain valuable work experience. She led a summer youth program for Boulder County Workforce, then accepted an appointment as volunteer housing commissioner for Boulder Housing Authority. She continued her work with young people, this time volunteering at Clinica Campesina, a health clinic in Lafayette for uninsured patients that Cec helped found with her mentor Pete Garcia and others back in 1977.

#### **Learning from mentors**

When Clinica's director Pauline Romano decided to move on, she asked Cec to take her place at the helm. "Pauline mentored me on how to become a director," said Cec. "It didn't come easily to me. I don't consider myself brilliant. I'm really good at adapting, and I'm really good at problem-solving. I pick up stuff quickly, enough to be able to assess the situation and make it work."

In 1986, Cec and her boys moved to Denver. During that time, she fell in love again and got married. "It ended in six months," said Cec. "I was like, now wait a minute, I'm still not getting it right."

Suddenly single and living in Denver, Cec started looking for a job. The director at Mi Casa Resource Center for Women asked her to start a youth peer counseling program in adolescent health. (Mi Casa's mission is to support self-sufficiency for low-income Latinas and youth.) "I knew I was really good with young people, and I hadn't done that in a while," said Cec. "I knew I needed work that would touch my heart, and working with people had always grounded me."

In 1987, she started the Fenix project, which is still going strong today. "Young people taught me about building teams," she said. "They didn't have anything else. The system was just beating the shit out of them, but as they came together through Fenix, they found a place. They developed a sense of belonging and loyalty to the group." Cec took over as director of Mi Casa the following year, and she won the Gloria Steinem Award for her work at Mi Casa in 1991.

Work was going well, but her personal life was not. "In the 1980s, I was in my 30s," said Cec. "Most people say they love their 30s, but they were horrible for me. I did really stupid things and lost important relationships. I lost important times with my boys. My addiction wasn't alcohol, my addiction was work. People I loved started saying, 'Cec, you're just not here. What's going on?'"

"I had to embrace my dragons," said Cec. "I had to come back to myself and say, I'm going to have to do something different about my boys, or I'm going to lose them. And, I've really got to think about what it means to have a man in my life. Having a background in mental health, I quickly got away from the idea that you don't go to counseling."

#### **Back to school**

In 1991, the year she turned 40, Cec left Mi Casa to go back to college. She went to Regis University for the two-year fast track program in business administration. "It was great, because everything I had done, I was now able to put into theory," she said. "And to have time to think – that was great." Meanwhile, she coordinated a statewide intergenerational drug and alcohol prevention program to put herself through school. When she met Mary Davis, the head of research on the prevention program, Cec knew she had found another mentor. "She helped me find my heart in this work," said Cec. "She helped me learn what it means to delegate, because if you are going to build things, you have to be able to delegate. And she taught me the management side of things."

"After my 30s, my God, 40 was just kind of wonderful," Cec said. "Of course, I do everything at once. I left Mi Casa and started school, and I found my Ernesto. We've been married for almost 11 years."

When she graduated from Regis, Cec took a job with the Governor of Colorado when colleague Patricia Barela Rivera recommended her. "The Governor's work wasn't really my passion, but it was an important piece because I got to build my

### **Cec Ortiz's Lessons from a PhD in Life**

Listen. Be flexible and adaptable. Sometimes, leading is following.

You're only as good as the people around you.

Never ever assume you're alone, because you're not.

Make sure somebody's got your back. Be clear about who's there for you and who's not.

Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Turn and face your personal dragons. Understand and embrace them.

Be open minded. You can learn something for every single person you meet.

Know yourself. Notice what you're good at and then build people around you that take care of the things you're not good at.

It's not what you want, it's what you need that is important.

Delegate.

Don't be afraid to get counseling if you are having trouble.

Have faith that people will show up in your life to help you on your way. Because they do. They do.



career,” she said. “I got to know a lot of people, I got to work all over the state, and I learned about economic development.”

### **Making Connections**

In 1999, Cec met Garland Yates from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and started her work with Making Connections Denver. “I wanted someone who had a range of life experiences that reflect the range of people we need to interact with,” said Garland. “Cec had that. She grew up poor. She was a single mother. She is self-taught in many ways. I also needed someone who could walk and talk in many crowds.”

One of the first things Garland asked Cec to do was research the history of community organizing in Denver. Then she attended a training in organizing. “It made me re-examine my ideas about community building – I was a community builder,” said Cec. “Ultimately, I came to wonder, is community building about change, or is it about charity? There are so many reasons why, ‘Gosh, why can’t we all just get along,’ doesn’t work. Organizing is about change, which means that there’s a shifting of power. In my own mind, it’s a big shift from a sense of doing for a person to supporting people doing for themselves.”

To get the initiative off the ground, Cec and others conducted hundreds of one-on-one conversations with residents in Denver’s four Making Connections neighborhoods. The goal was to create an initiative that responded to issues and ideas raised by residents. Cec also drew on her personal relationships with people in non-profit organizations and local government to pull together a strategic team to support and guide the initiative.

With so many individuals and institutions involved, the first four years of Making Connections work hasn’t always been smooth sailing. “Cec has been able to bring people in and keep them here by the power of her relationships with them, through her charisma, her ideas and her vision,” said Kit Williams, interim site coordinator for the initiative.



Family portrait:  
Cec Ortiz de Sanchez,  
husband Ernesto  
Sanchez, sons Ron  
and Jeff Garcia, and  
grandson Joaquin.

“With many people, you get the sense that they think they are right,” said Garland Yates, site team leader for Making Connections Denver. “With Cec, she is not convinced she is right. If anything, she’s convinced she doesn’t have the answer. She believes completely in the idea that, ‘I’m going to learn something from each person and that will help me get closer to the answer.’”

“I always say my PhD is in life,” said Cec. “Every person in my life has taught me something.”

### **People are what matter**

Friends and mentors continue to play pivotal roles in Cec’s life, as evidenced by a note pad on her desk that says, “Thank God it’s Monday,” a friend’s teasing reminder not to ignore her tendency to over-work. Although she still works 12-hour and 16-hour days, “Cec knows how to party,” said Sun Valley resident Phil Kaspar. Whether it’s hanging out with her sons and grandbabies, taking her girlfriends on a shopping expedition to Betty’s to feed her exotic jewelry habit, or spending time with friends in a film club she and Ernesto are part of, Cec has her passions outside of work. Although she enjoys black-and-white and foreign

films, nothing beats curling up on the couch with her husband to watch her two all-time favorite movies – Aliens and Terminator.

As Cec begins her new job at the mayor’s office, she is grateful for her experience with Making Connections. “It has been very empowering for me personally,” she said. “I feel a much higher level of competence and confidence than I have ever felt before in my life. I consider myself a late bloomer. When I’m 65, I’m just going to be hot.”

“I know that this new work has to be about people, because when all else is said and done, people are what matter,” said Cec. “If you can’t impact this world, then why be in it?”

Story and photos by Tory Read,  
Making Connections Denver Diarist

Making Connections Denver is an initiative to improve life for families in four lower-income Denver neighborhoods - Baker, La Alma/Lincoln Park, Sun Valley and Cole. For more information, contact Gloria Marrujo, 303-454-5369.