Nuñez, Louis
Reflections on Puerto Rican History: Aspira in the Sixties and the Coming of Age of the Stateside Puerto Rican Community
The City University of New York
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This paper focuses on the development of Aspira from a small organization to the first national educational and leadership development institution in the Puerto Rican community in the United States. Written from the perspective of an early staff member who became the executive director and later the first national executive director of Aspira, the paper assesses the impact that Aspira had in the emergence of a new leadership among the youth of the rapidly growing stateside Puerto Rican community. [Key words: Aspira, Puerto Ricans in the United States, youth, leadership program, development, heritage]
It is clear from its beginnings, that the vision of Antonia Pantoja, the founder of Aspira, was not only to create a youth agency and to foster postsecondary education, but also to create a new leadership for the community. The founding of the agency, in 1961, also witnessed the beginning of the coming of age for stateside Puerto Ricans as they changed from a community largely based in New York, to one spread across the country. The post-World War II period had been difficult for the rapidly growing community. The conventional view was that Puerto Ricans comprised a poverty-stricken New York community with little chance for advancement. These views were reinforced by the media and such popular works as *West Side Story*, *Down These Mean Streets*, and Oscar Lewis’s study, *La Vida*, a portrait of a Puerto Rican family at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. It was not that these and many other books and articles were inaccurate, but that they presented a one-sided negative view of what was by then the fastest growing ethnic community in the city. However, this image, as well as the realities of the social and economic conditions, began to change during this period.

The United States as a whole experienced perhaps the most significant social and economic changes in the modern era. This was especially true for racial and ethnic minorities across the country. The elections of John F. Kennedy, followed by Lyndon B. Johnson, and the emergence of Martin Luther King as a national leader, all had a profound effect on all groups confronting prejudice, discrimination and lack of opportunity. The War on Poverty, the Civil Rights movement and the radical change in attitude as to the role of young people and what they could accomplish, through such confrontational tactics as civil disobedience, had a direct impact on the future prospects of all these groups.
For the Puerto Rican community, the founding of Aspira, its first non-profit professionally staffed leadership development and educational institution, played a major role in changing the attitudes as well as the prospects for the community. Puerto Ricans had begun migrating to New York since the beginning of the 20th century; mass migration began at the end of World War II. Puerto Ricans were the latest of a long line of newcomers to the city who had to overcome similar prejudices and stereotypes in their quest to become fully participating members of the city. In her study *From Colonia to Community: The History of the Puerto Rican Community in New York City, through the Fifties*, Virginia Sánchez Korrol presents a different picture, describing a much more positive story of the early years of the community. The history of the migration was similar to that of many other ethnic, racial and national minorities, who during the 19th and early 20th century had moved to New York. Initially Puerto Ricans migrating to the states settled overwhelmingly in the city, but by 1960 they began to spread across the country. The 1960 census reported that 892,513 Puerto Ricans lived in the United States, of which 72 percent lived in New York City. By 1970 the total number had grown to 1,391,463 persons, and the percentage living in the city had declined to 59.2 percent.

A KEY ORGANIZER OF THESE GROUPS WAS THE CHARISMATIC SOCIAL WORKER, ANTONIA PANTOJA.

To serve the needs of this growing community, the government of Puerto Rico, in the Forties, had established a Migration Office to assist migrants in the states with the challenges of assimilation into the mainstream. Until Aspira was founded, this was the only agency, in the city and across the country, with a mandate to serve the needs of the community. There was a problem, however, for by the early Sixties it became evident that the needs of the growing community, especially the second generation, were not exactly the same as the needs of Puerto Ricans living on the island or the recent arrivals. Although the Migration Office offered valuable services in terms of employment and social services, it began to run into problems in its efforts to guide the development of a community leadership. The emergence of a small but significant college-educated group of second-generation Puerto Ricans, who had different ideas as to what was needed to advance the community, presented a challenge to the Migration Office.

By 1960 this new generation had founded the Hispanic Young Adult Association, which later became the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs. Also created was the Puerto Rican Hispanic Leadership Forum, which is now the National Puerto Rican Forum. Dedicated to the betterment of the community, these voluntary organizations developed projects in such areas as community organization and political development. A key organizer of these groups was the charismatic social worker, Antonia Pantoja. In her autobiography, *Memoirs of a Visionary*, she relates the history of the period and her work at the New York Commission on Intergroup Relations, leading to the establishment of Aspira.
The Commission, a city agency, had been established to enable the city government, recognizing the rapid growth of both the African-American and Puerto Rican communities, to lessen potential group conflicts among these growing groups and the many other older and more established groups in the city. Encouraged by the Commission’s director, Frank Horne, to develop a project that would begin to affect the future of the growing Puerto Rican community, Ms. Pantoja proposed a project that would, through leadership training and educational development, lead to a new leadership for the city and community. This project became the basis for the establishment of Aspira. The Puerto Rican Hispanic Leadership Forum became the initial sponsoring organization for Aspira. Its mission of fostering leadership for the whole community and developing specific projects to foster this goal fit with the mission of Aspira. Underlying these goals was the premise that if the community was to progress, individual success had to be translated into group progress.

Based on her background as a teacher, social worker and her experiences in organizing community groups, as well as an assessment of the almost complete failure of the public school system to provide an adequate education for the vast majority of Puerto Ricans students, Pantoja developed a project to deal with this priority concern. The overriding philosophy guiding the “New Leaders for New York” project was developmental in approach. Rather then just dealing with the educational deficits of the youth to be served, the Aspira process would focus not on remedial programs, not on preventative programs, but on building on the innate strengths of young people. These included their desire to join together and work towards a common purpose, as well as their desire to feel pride in their culture and heritage. They would also be given the opportunity of functioning as a leader.


*Aspira in New York*

“We wanted an upbeat name, one word to express belief in one’s self. The word Aspira was finally selected. It was chosen because to aspire is upbeat. We all wished the meaning would be I will aspire and I will attain. The Spanish command form aspira, of the verb aspirar was perfect” (*From Memoirs of a Visionary*, Antonia Pantoja).

This vision led to the development of such specific programs as the Aspira Clubs and Federation, and the Areyto ceremony and annual seminars in Puerto Rico.
Other developments included programs such as group and career counseling on the need to stay in school and pursue postsecondary education, and programs to connect students with role models, members of the community, who while of similar backgrounds, and despite many obstacles, had achieved some career success.

Aspira opened in 1961 after receiving grants from five foundations, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, The New York foundation, The Field Foundation, the Hofheimer Foundation and the Taconic Foundation. With its budget of less then $100,000 and with a staff of seven, it had ambitious goals and modest resources; however, it had one unique resource: the great leadership of Antonia Pantoja. For the first two years the agency operated out of a loft on West 72nd street. The first year was devoted to renovating and the recruitment, orientation and training of the staff as to the Aspira approach, establishing relations with high schools with high enrollments of Puerto Rican students, and initial work to recruit young people to the program.

What was different about the Aspira approach was not the fact that a small number of young Puerto Rican New Yorkers had individually overcome many obstacles to achieve some academic and career success, but that a group process involving hundreds of young people, not a mere handful, began to occur.

This writer joined Aspira in its second year, February 1963, as its business and administrative officer. Over the next nine years that I worked for Aspira, the institution was transformed from a struggling small neighborhood agency—albeit with truly ambitious goals—to a national institution with affiliates in Chicago, New York, Newark, Philadelphia and San Juan, a budget of several million dollars and a staff of one hundred people. It gained a reputation as one of the most effective and professionally managed Hispanic institutions in the United States. As for many others working or benefiting from its services, it changed my life.

I was recruited by Antonia Pantoja, who convinced me of the exciting prospects of becoming part of a movement to create the new leadership for the community.
My background was representative of that small group of Puerto Rican New Yorkers, among whom were Jose Morales, Josephine Perez, Paul Caballero, Josephine Nieves, Charles Cuevas, Maria Valle, Magdalena Miranda, Yolanda Sanchez, Blanca Cedeño, Frank Bonilla and John Carro, who had managed to graduate from college in the Fifties and had gone on to professional careers.

What was different about the Aspira approach was not the fact that a small number of young Puerto Rican New Yorkers had individually overcome many obstacles to achieve some academic and career success, but that a group process involving hundreds of young people, not a mere handful, began to occur.

When approached to work for Aspira I was ready for a challenge, having majored in business administration at City College of New York, and essentially working in administrative positions primarily in the export field. I met Ms. Pantoja while in college, in the early fifties, when I became a member of the Hispanic Young Adult Association (HYAA). This organization provided me with an opportunity to express my growing interest in serving the community. The invitation to work at Aspira came at the right moment. I felt my business career was stagnant, and this opportunity offered me the chance to combine my interest and concerns about the future of the community into a professional, life-changing opportunity.

Initially, Ms. Pantoja gave me two major assignments, the first being to create an administrative and accounting system with adequate fiscal controls to enable the agency to be audited and to file with the Internal Revenue Service. Second, she wanted me to implement her decision to purchase a small building on lower Fifth Avenue. In her opinion the purchase of the building was essential in creating an atmosphere where Aspira was viewed as a permanent entity, not a temporary agency renting loft space. These tasks were accomplished by the end of 1963.

The importance of maintaining adequate administrative and financial controls for a nonprofit organization cannot be over-emphasized. Over the years, I have found that one of the primary reason nonprofits get into trouble is inadequate financial records and controls. It soon became evident that my primary duties would need to change from administrative to development (fundraising). It was apparent that there was a need to expand the program and broaden the base of support, and I found myself spending most of my efforts in this area.

Although Ms. Pantoja had both a theoretical grasp of and a genuine commitment to fundraising, and had been instrumental in securing the initial funding, her growing responsibilities as both the chief program developer and implementer did not give her sufficient time to implement a consistent funding strategy. My task was to follow up and implement her initial fund raising plans. We immediately instituted a process of identifying and reaching out to additional foundations for support, started the process of creating a corporate funding base and launched several community fund-raisers. We began with a radio marathon, a fund-raising event and individual solicitations. With the support of Dr. Francisco Trilla, at that time the Chair of the Board and a general practitioner with a commitment to the community, we were able to secure the support of Governor Luis Muñoz Marin, and get a direct grant from the government of Puerto Rico. By 1964, I may well have become the first professional fund-raiser in the community.

Aspira through 1965 remained essentially privately funded; however, with the launching of the federal War on Poverty and the involvement of the New York City government, through its creation of a Council against Poverty, substantial funds became available to support nonprofit agencies with a mission to serve the poor.
Ms. Pantoja, aside from her leadership of Aspira, had in these years become a citywide leader in the struggle of the community to gain a fair share of the funding becoming available, as a result of the significant increase in federal support. Through the Federal Office of Economic Opportunity and the New York Council against Poverty, the other agency designated to administer the program, substantial funds became available to support the programs of Aspira. Initially, in an effort to coordinate community and neighborhood programs, all seeking support from the city, the Puerto Rican Hispanic Leadership Forum received a planning grant, through the efforts of Ms. Pantoja, from the city government in 1964. The grant was intended to help develop a citywide strategy in the Puerto Rican community to deal with the overriding issue of extreme poverty.

ASPIRA THROUGH 1965 REMAINED ESSENTIALLY PRIVATELY FUNDED; HOWEVER, WITH THE LAUNCHING OF THE FEDERAL WAR ON POVERTY AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE NEW YORK CITY GOVERNMENT, THROUGH ITS CREATION OF A COUNCIL AGAINST POVERTY, SUBSTANTIAL FUNDS BECAME AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT NONPROFIT AGENCIES WITH A MISSION TO SERVE THE POOR.

Ms. Pantoja, in 1964, took a one-year leave of absence from Aspira to head up the planning group, and Blanca Cedeño, a board member, was appointed acting director during this period. I was also granted a half-time leave of absence to head up the administrative support for the planning task force. The job necessitated arranging numerous community meetings, recruiting numerous consultants and the preparation of a final report. The findings and recommendations of the report documented the dire state in which most Puerto Ricans lived in the city, but also revealed that in less than one generation, a new leadership had emerged capable of analyzing and proposing realistic solutions for the problems of the community.
Although the recommendations of the report were not fully accepted, the Council against Poverty, recognizing the lead role of Aspira in dealing with youth and their educational future, made a grant to Aspira that quadrupled its program and budget and enabled it to open additional centers in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx; the staff grew to over 50. I returned to full-time status at Aspira as Assistant Director with additional responsibility for establishing the new centers, recruiting and training the additional staff and instituting a more sophisticated program reporting system. Throughout 1965 and 1966, the agency was involved in the process of transforming a local agency to a citywide institution with an increasing relationship to the City’s administration, the Board of Education and other community groups. During this period, many of the agencies developed at the local level faced major program and administrative problems in implementing their programs. Although we at Aspira encountered many similar problems, the fact that we had been in existence prior to the massive influx of new government funding for community groups, and the fact that we had in place a proven organizational structure and core staff for managing citywide programs, made the expansion much easier.

We were also able to attract, as a citywide organization already gaining a reputation as a professional organization, many talented recent college graduates. Our growing reputation for excellence in the delivery of programs was a double-edged sword. We were accused of being an elitist organization. The fact that almost our entire professional staff was composed of young college graduates gave us an advantage in rapidly training and orienting them to the Aspira philosophy and work ethic.

OUR GROWING REPUTATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE DELIVERY OF PROGRAMS WAS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD.

As we moved more aggressively to seek private and public funds, it became apparent that the unique organizational structure under which Aspira operated, as an agency of The Puerto Rican Hispanic Leadership Forum, was becoming a source of confusion and a possible obstacle to our growth. Aspira had no legal life as an agency of the Puerto Rican Forum. The Forum’s primary mission was to provide an organizational structure for the emerging leadership in the community, not just its youth; it also saw its mission to act as an incubator for developing other programs such as Aspira. The continued expansion and growth of Aspira was seriously distorting the framework of the Forum and its other programs goals. Ms. Pantoja and I began to see the necessity of separating the organizations. We also accepted the responsibility to ensure that the Forum secure additional funding to enable it to move forward on its next major goal, the establishment of a community-based economic development project. In 1966 we were able to secure funding from the Ford Foundation and a commercial bank, Manufacturers Hanover Bank, now part of JP Morgan Chase Bank, to establish the Forum as the first economic development institution serving the growing small business community. Aspira emerged as an independent agency with its own nonprofit status and Board of Directors.
In 1966, we were all disheartened to learn that Antonia Pantoja had decided to resign to accept a position as an assistant professor at the Columbia University School of Social Work. Ms. Pantoja had been the founder, the initial fund-raiser and the developer of the Aspira program. During this period her reputation as one of the most farsighted and ethical leaders in the community, and in the city as a whole, had grown. To succeed her, the Board of Directors selected Frank Negron, the director of the Brooklyn Center as its new Executive Director; I was appointed Associate Director.

The late 1960s marked a dramatic change in the attitude of young people, both nationally and locally. No longer did they accept traditional authority figures to lead them. I had been appointed a member of the New York City Board of Higher Education, the governing board for the City University of New York. In a one-year period, one-third of the college presidents resigned and another third resigned under pressure, mainly because of their inability to deal with the increasing militancy and the lack of acceptance of traditional leadership by the students. At Aspira we encountered similar problems; our focus on Leadership Development and training of youth leaders to be aggressive and at times confrontational was turned inward. It became evident that a new style of dealing with youth was required. Several of our program directors could not deal with this new environment. Within a year, Frank Negron, having encountered increasing difficulty in dealing with these new attitudes, resigned. I was selected as the new Executive Director in 1967. In less than five years, my responsibilities had changed from primarily administrative and fundraising duties to an overall role as Program Director of training, community and government relations and with primary responsibility for dealing with the student leadership.

As I assumed the role as executive director, I realized we faced many immediate challenges. The city was already cutting back on support for organizations such as Aspira; foundations with their differing funding priorities could not be depended on to continue to make grants to support ongoing programs on a continuing basis.
Their priorities were to support new programs. Much more extensive corporate funding appeared to be one area of possible significant growth. In this regard, Ms. Pantoja had left us with a series of contacts that now had to be more directly involved in providing additional financial support. Prior to her departure, Ms. Pantoja and I had met with Samuel J. Silberman, then Chief Executive of Consolidated Cigars Corporation, one of the largest employers in Puerto Rico at that time. With extensive experience working in Jewish philanthropies, a commitment to social work education, and a major interest in Puerto Rico, he agreed to support us and help recruit other corporate leaders to broaden support. He introduced us to Teodoro Moscoso, who became a key leader in helping us in expanding our funding base. He had recently resigned as the Administrator of the federal program “Alliance for Progress,” and at that time was the highest ranking Hispanic in the federal government. He had previously served as the Administrator of Fomento, the Economic Development Administration of Puerto Rico, and was considered the architect of the economic development of Puerto Rico. Through their increasing involvement and influence, we developed fund-raising campaigns in both Puerto Rico and the United States.

Antonia Pantoja, although no longer at Aspira, continued her interest in the organization and the issues of school reform. She was appointed by the Mayor as a member of a city commission on school reform, chaired by the President of the Ford Foundation, McGeorge Bundy. The recommendation of the Commission calling for a complete decentralization of the school administration was accepted by the city government. It, however, caused a firestorm of opposition by school administrators, the Teachers Union, local organizations and political leaders, who were satisfied with the system as it was. This was the period where “maximum community participation” was a cornerstone of the “War on Poverty.” Aspira, as an institution calling for new leadership and reform, supported the effort to implement the school decentralization plan, which was soon characterized as community control. The fact that our program focused on change gave an opportunity for our youth leaders to involve themselves in an important issue, the reform of the largest public school system in the nation, which was failing our community.

With staff support, our youth leaders, the Aspirantes, participated in public hearings, press conferences and demonstrations. We were criticized for getting too involved in a controversial public issue. It was our contention that our involvement was proof that our program to develop leaders who could take public stands was working. Also, having a major institution in the community take a public position, gave legitimacy to the efforts to overcome the opposition to school decentralization.

**Building a National Institution**

By 1968 it was clear than an institution such as Aspira could deliver effective programs in the fields of education and leadership development, as well as carry out meaningful advocacy initiatives involving its constituency and staff. Having an agency in place with its administrative resources: copy machines, telephones and typewriters, and a staff devoted to pursuing public policy issues, strengthened the community. Many other community organizations established during this period had similar advocacy goals, but Aspira was the pioneer.

The growing reputation of Aspira had brought it to the attention of community groups in other cities with rapidly growing Puerto Rican populations. We received letters and visits from groups interested in our program in different parts of the
country, for instance, from some in Chicago, Illinois, and Newark, New Jersey. Although there was still much to be done in New York, an exciting prospect emerged, the expansion of Aspira into a national organization.

There seemed to be possibilities for funding an expansion. Ms. Pantoja, prior to her departure, introduced me to Mitchell Svirdoff, the administrator of the city’s Human Resource Administration, who, during this period, resigned to accept the position as Vice President of the Ford Foundation’s community programs, at that time, the major philanthropic financial supporter of community organizations in the nation. Shortly after I assumed my new duties, I approached him about the possibility of support for Aspira. Mr. Svirdoff pointed out that although he had great respect for the agency and what it had accomplished, the foundation’s major funding priorities were to support new and innovative programs capable of being replicated. He led me to understand that if we could come up with an innovative program for Aspira, the Ford Foundation would give it serious consideration. We had also been in contact with Barbara Feinberg, a program officer at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, who gave us a planning grant to look into the possibility of expanding the Aspira program nationally.

ALTHOUGH THERE WAS STILL MUCH TO BE DONE IN NEW YORK, AN EXCITING PROSPECT EMERGED, THE EXPANSION OF ASPIRA INTO A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION.

The Carnegie planning grant enabled us to review the prospects for expansion, and to determine what cities would provide the most favorable sites for expansion. In 1968 we began a six-month planning process. We commissioned a study of the educational conditions confronting Puerto Rican students in cities with rapidly growing communities in the Northeast and Midwest. We hired a consultant, Richard Margolis, who focused on seven cities to gather information from Puerto Rican community leaders, teachers, students and administrators (in Bridgeport, CT; Chicago, IL; Philadelphia, PA; Newark, Hoboken, Paterson, N.J.; and New York City). He visited 16 schools in those seven cities and out of those visits, a report was issued: “The Losers.” The report pointed out the almost complete failure of the public schools in the cities surveyed to provide an adequate education to Puerto Rican students. It also highlighted the need for new and effective approaches for dealing with Puerto Rican students. We believed that the Aspira program represented one of those new approaches.

We also convened a conference on the status of Puerto Rican education nationally, and brought together educational and community leaders from the various communities. We hired Victor Alicea, now President of Boricua College, who was a young New York-based community organizer who had received a
scholarship through Aspira to obtain his social work degree with an emphasis on community organizing. He was given the assignment of visiting the various communities around the country, meeting with local leaders and assessing the feasibility of organizing Aspira affiliates in those communities. These efforts led to the preparation of a proposal to expand Aspira nationally to be submitted to the Ford Foundation.

We proposed to reorganize Aspira as a national organization with four affiliates. The national umbrella organization was to be known as Aspira of America, and the four affiliates were to include the original one, Aspira of New York, and three additional ones: Aspira of Illinois, based in Chicago; Aspira of New Jersey, based in Newark; and Aspira of Pennsylvania, based in Philadelphia. The Ford Foundation approved a two-year grant, later extended for an additional two years, to support the expansion. Several months later, another affiliate, Aspira of Puerto Rico, based in San Juan, was formed. The idea of expanding to Puerto Rico was not an original part of the national strategy. The organization of Aspira in Puerto Rico came about for a variety of reasons. Antonia Pantoja had moved back to Puerto Rico and was working with an education group there that fit the Aspira model. Pantoja approached me and said the group would easily fit into the national expansion scheme. I wasn’t enthusiastic about the idea because I was practically overwhelmed with what we had started already, but Pantoja pushed and suggested that she could secure the funding from the Ford Foundation for this group. Under that condition, I agreed that we could go forward with this plan. Thus, Aspira of Puerto Rico was founded with Sammy Segui as its first director, who in the first year was replaced by Hilda Maldonado, who served as the Director for the next 38 years. The initial two-year grant from Ford to Aspira was for more than $600,000.—an extremely large grant then, as it still is today. It was the largest grant the Ford Foundation had made to a Hispanic organization up to that time. Ford made it clear that this was seed money to establish the national organization, and that after the initial two years, we would be expected to sustain the Aspira organizations without their support. Although we did not meet this goal in the initial two-year period, we were able to meet it in 1972.

Expansion to a national level presented new challenges. Having been appointed National Executive Director, I initially retained the directorship of Aspira of New York, but after a year, it became evident that the responsibilities at the national office were more than full time. I resigned as Executive Director of Aspira of New York and moved the national office to separate locations in downtown New York. It took more than a year to organize the affiliates, create a local board of directors, hire directors and staff and provide the necessary training. Luis Alvarez, who later became the National Executive Director, was a member of the New York staff who transferred to the national office as well, had begun to assume my responsibilities for fundraising. He was given the additional assignment as a coordinator, troubleshooter and liaison to the various communities and their leadership. Dr. Gilbert Ortiz, a practicing obstetrician, who had replaced Dr. Trilla as chair of the board of directors, also played an invaluable role as a community leader. The community and I will always be grateful for his volunteer services and the amount of time he was able to take from his busy practice to travel and meet with community leaders in the cities where the affiliates were established.

Equally challenging was the necessity of developing a national funding campaign to sustain the total structure. Teodoro Moscoso helped us secure the support of Luis A. Ferré, at that time the most prominent industrialist in Puerto Rico.
Ferré’s family fortune was made in banking, engineering services and cement manufacturing, among other industries. In 1969, he became Governor of Puerto Rico and we organized a major dinner to welcome the governor to New York’s Puerto Rican community and its corporate community. The success of this activity enabled us to significantly increase the number of national corporations, either with operations in Puerto Rico or based in cities with concentrations of Puerto Ricans that supported Aspira. Although difficult and arduous, by 1972 we were able to raise sufficient funds in the private sector to sustain our basic operations, without added Ford Foundation support, in all affiliates.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ASPIRA AS A NATIONAL INSTITUTION AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF KEY PUERTO RICAN LEADERSHIP FROM THE ISLAND CAUSED A CHANGE IN ATTITUDES.

The establishment of Aspira as a national institution and the involvement of key Puerto Rican leadership from the island caused a change in attitudes. No longer could the leadership on the island view the stateside community as a problem that needed assistance and orientation from the island government and private sector. It would now have to be recognized as a growing and vibrant community that could marshal other resources, and that secure government and private sector support to develop programs would benefit the entire Puerto Rican community both on the island and the states.

Interestingly, the major issues that arose in this period were not so much financial, but ones of governance and maintenance of a uniform program. The organizational model for Aspira and its affiliates was partly based on the Urban League’s organizational model; a national office tied to its affiliates through a written agreement. Many of the community leaders recruited to serve on local boards were products of the social turmoil of the late Sixties. Each local board, as well as the national board, had two Aspirantes (youth participating in Aspira program) serving on the board. At the national level, we encountered increasing difficulty in maintaining a uniform quality of service.

Some have suggested that it might have been better to set up a national office with branches rather than affiliates reporting to a central office. Given the tenor of the time, the concept of maximum feasible participation at the local level, this would have never, in my judgment, been accepted by the local communities. Also, we encountered difficulties in operating in different areas. For example, although we had encountered few difficulties in recruiting staff with basic academic credentials in New York, we encountered considerably more difficulties in other communities. In Puerto Rico, we found that our program to assist a minority community to move into a new leadership position required some modification.
Puerto Ricans, on the island, were not a minority, and the concept of developing a new leadership was considered by some, who were already leaders, as threatening. During the early Seventies, I found myself continually traveling to the affiliates to resolve problems between the directors and staff, the board and the constituency, i.e., the Aspirantes.

In April 1972, I submitted my resignation to accept the position of Deputy Staff Director of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Reflecting on my nine years with Aspira, I departed with a feeling of great satisfaction with what had been accomplished during this period. My mentor, Antonia Pantoja, during the initial years had been a source of guidance and knowledge to me, and I will always be in her debt. With her departure, I entered a new phase upon assuming the responsibility for the continued growth of the organization at the national level. Aspira gave many on the staff a wonderful opportunity to grow and exercise leadership that no other institution at the time offered.

My perception is that the issues present at my departure are still before the institution today. These include the relationship between the affiliates and the national office, the need to deliver a consistent program in different community environments, and the changing composition of the Aspirantes. It was evident, even in the early Seventies, that an increasing number of youth being serviced were not Puerto Rican but other Latino/as. There was clearly a need to modify some of the cultural orientation of the program, i.e., the development of pride in one's Puerto Rican heritage. Finally, Aspira provided an opportunity to build a solid bridge between Puerto Rican organizations on the mainland and in Puerto Rico.

The Aspira association today, if viewed as one organization, is the largest Latino organization in the nation, servicing the needs of Puerto Rican and other
Latino youth. In addition to the original four affiliates, it has added two additional ones in Connecticut and Florida. Each of the affiliates has developed in different directions. Aspira of Puerto Rico is the largest of all the affiliates, and several of the Aspira affiliates, like Aspira of Illinois, have developed their own charter schools.

The demographic trends noted in the Seventies have come to pass, and the stateside Puerto Rican community is no longer concentrated in New York City. Of the nearly four million Puerto Ricans estimated to live in the states, the 2000 census estimated that approximately 23.2 percent resided in New York City. In the year 2009, it may well be true that the population of stateside Puerto Ricans now exceeds that of Puerto Ricans on the island. Also, the explosive growth of the Latino population, which includes Puerto Ricans, now estimated at 15 percent of the total U.S. population, presents new challenges and opportunities for the work of Aspira.

**REFLECTING ON MY NINE YEARS WITH ASPIRA, I DEPARTED WITH A FEELING OF GREAT SATISFACTION WITH WHAT HAD BEEN ACCOMPLISHED DURING THIS PERIOD.**

Aspira’s most important accomplishment was to enable an impoverished community, with seeming little hope for social and economic advancement at the beginning of the Sixties, to establish a quality community-controlled professional organization, which succeeded in developing a cadre of committed and competent leaders. A significant number of Puerto Rican youth going on to college in this early period were involved in the Aspira program.

Among the thousands of young people enrolled in Aspira during this period, I would like to cite several whose careers and service to the community has been outstanding. Digna Sanchez, an early Aspirante, and an educator and social service administrator, today is the Assistant Commissioner of New York State Office of Children and Family Services. Wilfredo Caraballo, who in the late Sixties was President of the Aspira Club Federation, moved on to become an outstanding attorney, having served as New Jersey’s Public Advocate and Public Defender as well as President of the Hispanic National Bar Association. He is currently a professor of law at Seton Hall University School of Law in New Jersey, as well as a member of the General Assembly in New Jersey. Perhaps the best-known alumni of Aspira is Fernando Ferrer, who served as the Vice President of the Aspira Club Federation also in the late Sixties, and went on to become a New York City Councilman, the Borough President of the Bronx for 14 years and, most recently, the Democratic Party candidate for Mayor of New York City. Today Aspira has continued to grow and face new challenges. What was accomplished in the first decade should be a continuing source of pride to subsequent generations.