

Las Tres Hermanas: Art, Education, & Activism

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Néstor David Pastor

In mid-November, “[Las Tres Hermanas: Art, Education & Activism](#)” opened for the third time this year. The traveling exhibit tells the story of three Puerto Rican activist sisters: Elba Cabrera, Lillian López, and Dr. Evelina Antonetty. “I never in a million years thought we would be honored in this way,” says Elba, the youngest and last surviving sibling. “I just wish my sisters were still alive so they could see their accomplishments.”

The exhibition is currently housed at the Centro Library & Archives in East Harlem, which, coincidentally, is not far from where Elba and her family were reunited with Evelina, the eldest of the three sisters. Evelina had left Puerto Rico in 1933 to live with an aunt in El Barrio, Spanish Harlem. The family stayed in the neighborhood for another decade before settling in the Bronx, just as thousands of Puerto Ricans began to arrive to New York City during the so-called “Great Migration” of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In the years that followed, Elba and her sisters would become pioneering figures among the Puerto Rican community in New York. Evelina, for example, founded United Bronx Parents, a grassroots nonprofit that

began with a focus on community development and educational reform in the South Bronx. She would also play a significant role in the Save Hostos Movement, which lasted for five years and prevented the school's merger/closing.

Hostos, the first college to be named after a Puerto Rican, had been founded in 1968 "in response to the demands of Puerto Rican and other Hispanic leaders who urged the establishment of a college to meet the needs of the South Bronx," according to the school's website. Consequently, Hostos was the second location to host "Las Tres Hermanas," with Nydia R. Edgcombe serving as curator for this second iteration.

The original exhibit had first opened in June at the Bronx Music Heritage Center. Co-Artistic Director Elena Martinez and Joe Conzo Jr., a member of the organization's Advisory Board, were the initial curators (Mr. Conzo is also Dr. Antonetty's grandson). "It was important for these women to get their due," said Ms. Martinez during the opening ceremony at the Centro Library & Archives. She had developed the concept of "Las Tres Hermanas" alongside Christine Licata. Ms. Licata, in turn, would curate a companion exhibit at the Casita Maria Center for Art & Education that included an educational coloring book and the commissioning of a [mural](#) near the entrance of the building.

Since its inauguration, the exhibit has taken on a life of its own. Here at the Library & Archives, for example, curators Nora M. Nieves and Natalia Viera have expanded "Las Tres Hermanas" to include more archival materials selected from Centro's holdings. "We wanted this [the exhibit] to be a window for researchers to look deep into the archives and see what we have," said Nieves. That includes letters, personal papers, organizational records, and oral histories, among other items. [Lillian's papers](#), in particular, are on display throughout the exhibit. "Even though all of our papers are here, Lillian was the librarian, so she was more...meticulous," Elba says with a laugh. In fact, Lillian was among the first Puerto Rican librarians in New York City and worked on outreach to Spanish-speaking residents and communities of color during her long tenure with New York Public Library.

The bulk of the exhibit, however, is made up of archival photographs. The hallway entrance to the exhibit, for example, is lined with photographs that introduce each sister and give the impression of an intimate, more domestic setting. Many of the images also feature important members of the New York Puerto Rican community that crossed paths with the three sisters.

Another addition to the Centro exhibit is a display case dedicated to the [memory of Lorraine Montenegro](#), daughter of Evelina Antonetty and mother of Joe Conzo Jr. Lorraine passed away in Puerto Rico in early October, less than two weeks after Hurricane Maria. Like her mother, Lorraine was known as a fierce advocate for the South Bronx, taking over United Bronx Parents upon her mother's death in 1984. Still, it has been difficult for the family to accept Lorraine's death, as well as the circumstances that may have contributed to her untimely passing. "We mourn for Lorraine and we mourn for Puerto Rico," Elba says.

"Las Tres Hermanas" will be on display at the Centro Library & Archives through January. Afterwards, it will likely make its way to Rutgers University where Elba believes it will provide a timely and enduring example for younger generations: "Hopefully, they'll be able to take this and do something with their lives."

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