

*Pa'lante in Pennsylvania:
Puerto Rican Educational and Cultural
Organizing through Aspira Inc. of Pennsylvania*

Aspira—meaning “aspire” in Spanish—was the first professionally staffed, private, nonprofit organization dedicated to the Puerto Rican community. As a youth development organization, it provided leadership training, academic support, and cultural heritage programming to its mainly Puerto Rican students, known as Aspirantes.¹ The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) holds sixty-nine boxes of materials related to the Pennsylvania branch of the organization, a treasure trove of materials for those interested in Latinx history, urban history, the history of education, or philanthropy from the 1960s to the present. Given the rise of the Latinx student population across the state and country, this material is particularly helpful in shedding new light on the longstanding contributions of East Coast Latinxs and their experiences with public schools.

Aspira was the brainchild of New York–based social worker and community organizer Antonia Pantoja. As an offshoot of the 1950s-era Puerto Rican Forum, Aspira kicked off its activities in 1961 from an office in Manhattan. Recognizing the importance of education in an increasingly credentials-oriented, information-based economy, Pantoja’s goal was to prepare a leadership class of Puerto Ricans for admission to and success in college, which would then continue the fight for equal rights and recognition as American citizens. The organization used the school-based club model and helped students and their families navigate the high school graduation and college application processes, learn about various professional career paths, and plan cultural events so that students would retain pride in their Puerto Rican heritage.²

¹ On this history of Aspira Inc., see Lauren Lefty, “Seize the Schools, Que Viva Puerto Rico Libre: Cold War Education Politics in New York City and San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1948–1975” (PhD diss., New York University, forthcoming 2019); and Antonia Pantoja, *Memoir of a Visionary: Antonia Pantoja* (Houston, 2002). Aspira embodied the spirit of “*Pa'lante*” (“Forward”), a common slogan among Puerto Rican community activists.

² For more on the organizing activities of Puerto Ricans in New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere on the mainland, see Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (Berkeley, CA, 1994); Carmen Whalen, ed., *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Historical Perspectives* (Philadelphia, 2005); and Lorrin Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City* (Chicago, 2010).

Following World War II, a large number of Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland in search of better jobs and educational opportunities in what is known as the Great Puerto Rican Migration. As US citizens since 1917, Puerto Ricans were able to move freely to the mainland and concentrated mainly in such East Coast urban centers as New York, Newark, and Philadelphia. Nonetheless, owing to their classification as a racial and ethnic minority and the precarious colonial status of the island, Puerto Ricans experienced high levels of discrimination and poverty and low levels of educational attainment. Organizations such as Aspira, led by a dedicated coterie of Puerto Rican professionals, worked hard to correct these trends while resisting outright cultural assimilation. Though Aspira remained a mainstream reform organization and not quite part of the radical *nuevo despertar* that such groups as the Young Lords came to represent by the late sixties and early seventies, Pantoja and Aspira nonetheless paved the way for the radical activities of the Lords, many of them former Aspirantes.

In 1968, a Ford Foundation grant allowed Aspira to expand its geographical reach to other cities with large Puerto Rican populations, including Chicago, Newark, San Juan, and Philadelphia. Aspira Inc. of Pennsylvania was thus created in 1969 to serve the large and growing Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia, Bethlehem, and elsewhere across the state.

The materials in the Aspira Inc. (Pennsylvania) Records at HSP mainly derive from the period between 1972 and 1986 and include a wide array of sources: correspondence, annual and monthly reports, project grants and reviews, job descriptions, personnel and student files, meeting minutes, news clippings, research reports, some print materials, and a large amount of financial data. Three major projects are chronicled, including Proyecto Amanece (Project Dawn), a community center located in Bethlehem; a talent search project that identified and supported promising college-bound Puerto Ricans across the state; and the Puerto Rican Youth Project, which chronicled the academic achievement and drop-out rates of Latinxs in Philadelphia schools during the 1970s.

The collection will be helpful not only for scholars interested in an organizational history of Aspira but also for those working on many other topics beyond the institutional realm. Anyone looking to uncover the experience of Latinx students in Philadelphia schools in the 1970s and '80s will find both helpful narrative reports and data on students with Spanish surnames. Urban historians interested in the role of nonprofit organizations

following the demise of the Great Society's Community Action Programs will also find rich source material. Those interested in philanthropy and the role of private and public money in shaping interest group politics will have much to explore, particularly regarding dependency versus autonomy debates in relation to corporate and government partnerships. Aspira also stands as a helpful case study for those considering the various sites of ethnic identity formation.

Aspira Inc. of Pennsylvania served and continues to serve a meaningful role in the history of the state, now providing such programs as Head Start and after-school enrichment. Its papers are a true "hidden gem" and deserve attention by researchers, educators, and activists alike.

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