Irma Cota, Winner Of Cesar Chavez Award, Recalls Struggles That Inspired Career

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By Alison St John
San Diego State University alum Irma Cota caught the leadership bug when she was a schoolgirl translating for her fellow crop pickers during the United Farm Workers strike in Salinas in 1970.

Cota, now president and chief executive officer of North County Health Services, will receive SDSU's Cesar Chavez Lifetime Service Award.

Growing up in Calexico

When she was a schoolgirl in Calexico helping her mother pick carrots and tomatoes in the fields, Cota never dreamed that she would one day lead a multimillion-dollar nonprofit corporation.

Cota is a warm, engaging woman with a touch of gray in her dark hair and an easy laugh. Sitting in her small corner office at North County Health Services headquarters in San Marcos, she talked about her childhood and the events that shaped her life.

During the school year, Cota and her sister and mother earned their living in the fields around Calexico.

“In Calexico, the winter season was carrots and broccoli, which I never ate until I became a professional and went to fancy restaurants,” she said. “In the spring, we (picked) the onions and the garlic and tomatoes.”

In the summers, Cota traveled to Salinas with her sister, mother and aunt for the strawberry harvest. In the season before her junior year of high school, the United Farm Workers went on strike in Salinas. Because she spoke the best English, Cota found herself thrust into a leadership role, translating for her group of workers.

That was when she learned about the free clinics run by the United Farm Workers union. Twice a week in the evenings, she would volunteer as a translator.

When she returned home to Calexico for her junior year, her mother had a health crisis and was taken to the hospital. She had terminal cancer.

“She was diagnosed in November and she died in May,” Cota said. “For six months I was the one that helped take her to El Centro on the Greyhound bus — we didn’t have cars. I can almost try to walk in her shoes, in terms of the pain, to walk to get her treatment in the El Centro hospital. I was her interpreter and her support system, as well as giving her her painkillers.”

“The experience and this sudden health crisis that our family faced, as well as my experience with the farmworkers clinic, is what I feel gave me my career,” Cota said.

Getting to college

Though she attended a Catholic girls' school where some of the other students were going on to college, Cota said college was not in her sights.

“That was not something we could afford,” Cota said. “I did actually travel to work in the fields the summer I graduated from high school. There was a little bit of depression: ‘What am I going to do with my life?’

“I was lost. I didn’t know what I was going to do. Then, one angel appeared,” she said.

Her sister's friend, who was going to Imperial Valley College, came to stay with them and encouraged Cota to carpool with her to take classes. Cota thrived. She took part in the student assembly and became one of only two women to join the men's tennis team. But after two years of college, she was tired.

“I was about to quit because I was tired of bumbing rides, living on $5 a week for food. When the dean and the counselor, Mr. Lopez, found out that I had not applied for a transfer, Mr. Lopez decided he was going to pay for my application. He convinced me not to drop out,” she said.

Cota was accepted at SDSU. In the fall of 1974, she moved to San Diego and began taking courses in social work and subsequently transferred to health sciences.

She eventually earned a master’s degree in public health from San Diego State and has four certificates in health administration leadership from various institutions.

Running North County Health Services

Cota has built North County Health Services from an organization, which was in trouble in 1997, into a thriving network of 10 clinics that cover 1,000 square miles of San Diego’s North County. Cota calls the clinics the “medical home” for their clients, now 62,000 people.

“When I got here, the budget was $12 million. And now this year the budget is $68 million,” she said. “The staff was 200, and now we have more than 700."

Some of the patients still work in the fields, Cota said. But the causes of health problems have changed since she worked in agriculture.

Pesticide poisoning is much less of a problem today. And patients are older now.

“We don’t see children 7, 8, and 10 working in the fields,” Cota said. “Because of labor laws.
A lack of affordable housing is creating the latest health issues, she said.

“What we do see, because of lack of low-cost housing, you see multiple families living in a crowded condition or in a barn that has been converted to living quarters, so you do see more asthma among children and adults,” she said.

But the Affordable Care Act has made a difference.

“Many of those individuals who used to make a decision between buying food or coming to see a doctor don’t have to make that difficult decision because they now have health insurance,” Cota said.

She looks back at her early experiences as sowing the seeds of her passion for making high-quality health care accessible to all. “I feel fortunate, actually, having come out of those crises in a way that I could have a future in health care,” Cota said.

Though she plans to retire in two years, Cota is still working to expand the network of North County Health Service clinics to improve access to care beyond San Diego’s North County.

“Riverside and Imperial counties still have some of the worst access to care in the state,” she said.

A new clinic opened recently in the Riverside County city of Perris.

For her work and achievements, Cota was chosen this year’s recipient of SDSU’s Cesar Chavez Lifetime Service Award.

She will be honored at SDSU’s 14th annual Cesar E. Chavez Commemorative Luncheon on April 8 at Montezuma Hall.

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