

While some waged war abroad, nurse fought for health care, birth control in Texas

By Darcie Stevens

As the news came over the radio of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, 20-year-old Apolonia Muñoz started dreaming of places worlds away from her dorm room in Corpus Christi, Texas.

None of the students at Fred Roberts Nursing School had ever seen war.

"We were so innocent," she said.

Her dreams would lead her down many roads, but she wouldn't leave Corpus Christi. Her helping hands were much needed on home turf. Soon after the war ended she married Antonio Abarca and continued her volunteerism under a different name, but not a different heart.

Six months prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, "Polly" Muñoz left her family's home in Mission, Texas, to pursue an education in nursing. She knew years earlier that she wanted to be a public servant.

At only 15 years old she had found her calling when she helped a nurse take handicapped children to a hospital in Galveston for treatment. Volunteering her time to help those in need became a constant in Mrs. Abarca's life.

She spent the rest of her school years volunteering at the Department of Immigration while participating in several school activities and working at the local dry goods store on Saturdays - a task her father disapproved of. To Antonio Muñoz, father of ten children, education was the primary goal.

However, Mrs. Abarca continued volunteering and working until she left for Corpus Christi in June 1941.

When she arrived at Fred Roberts Nursing School, Mrs. Abarca realized that she was the only Hispanic in the class. Although she had grown up in segregated schools in Mission, now she faced a whole new dilemma. Mrs. Abarca's roommate was frightened of her.

In her hometown in Virginia, the young lady had been told that "Mexicans would kill you," Mrs. Abarca recalled laughingly. Fortunately, the fear was quickly dispersed, and the two became close friends. Other than that instance, Mrs. Abarca has no recollection of discrimination.

"We [Hispanics] always had to work a little bit harder to prove ourselves," she said. "But that was all."

During her first year at nursing school, Mrs. Abarca's older brother Antonio Muñoz was sent to Europe as a gunner in the Air Force.

"We were a very close family," Mrs. Abarca said. "We were afraid because we didn't know what to expect."

The next year, her fiance joined the Army and was sent to Germany.

Money was becoming scarce in the Muñoz family, and Mrs. Abarca began to think that joining the Cadet Corps as a nurse was her only option. She wrote to her brother and her fiance telling them of her plans to join them in the service, but both of them begged her to stay at home.

"I think they talked me out of it," Mrs. Abarca said. "I was up there ready to help anybody."

Her brother sent money to pay for the remainder of nursing school, and Mrs. Abarca graduated in 1944 as a registered nurse.

As the war raged on, Mrs. Abarca worked at Memorial Hospital in Corpus Christi, where she set up new operating and emergency rooms and soon became the supervisor of the outpatient clinic.

In 1946, she joined the U.S. Public Health Service hospital in Corpus and also began volunteering as a Red Cross Nurse in the Settlement House. There she taught home nursing in Spanish and English, again as a volunteer.

That same year her fiance, Antonio, came home, and the two were married.

The end of the war by no means ended Mrs. Abarca's stint as a volunteer and a caregiver. For the next 15 years she worked as a nurse at the City-County Health Department.

In 1964, Mrs. Abarca helped win the first federal grant in the United States for family planning - a milestone for health care. She said she supported providing birth control after working as a public health nurse for so many years. Poor young women were constantly asking her how to not get pregnant too soon. Families lived in poverty. Children were neglected and undernourished.

"At that time the word birth control was a no-no," she said. "I was daring, I guess."

In 1965, Mrs. Abarca was hired as the executive director of the area Planned Parenthood center and remained there until the services were turned over to the local health department.

Mrs. Abarca later worked as the director of nursing at the state-operated Corpus Christi school for mentally retarded children. She retired in 1974.

Her husband, Antonio Abarca, died in 1984.

"I married a man who was very happy," she said. "The two of us together made a good pair."

These days, Mrs. Abarca volunteers at her church and spends time with her son, David, and her two grandchildren, Anna and Anthony.

Now 81, Mrs. Abarca lives in her home in Corpus Christi, where she enjoys painting and arts and crafts. She considers herself fortunate, but the many people who have been helped by her are the fortunate ones.

"I'm 81 years old," Mrs. Abarca says with a grin. "I think I've done my share."

(Mrs. Abarca was interviewed at her home in Corpus Christi on Aug. 18, 2001, by Erika L. Martinez.)