

# The Woman Who Dared to Stand Tall on the Border

MEMORIAL BY MOLLY MOLLOY

DECEMBER 31, 2009

## **Esther Chávez Cano Left This World on Christmas Day, but Her Voice Continues to Echo Through the Alleys and Backstreets of Juárez**

**“We have much work left to do, the road ahead is long and hard. There will come a time when my voice becomes silent so that new voices can be heard to carry on the struggle for the rights of women, which, as I have said, is also for the rights of men, because it is the struggle for a more just and democratic society for all.”**

*Esther Chávez Cano, November 9, 2007, Las Cruces, New Mexico*

Esther Chávez always made an impression when she stood up—tiny, graceful, modest, beautiful, strong... and angry about the situation in her city. On a cold night in Santa Fe last year, in an elegant black dress, bright gold cashmere shawl and red leather high heeled mary-janes we had found in a shop near the plaza that morning just for this occasion, Esther’s conviction shone like a beacon to the audience as she was recognized for her work for the women and for other victims of violence in Ciudad Juárez.

In the past two years, Juárez has become the most violent city in the world. Its murder rate is three times higher than that of Baghdad—more than 177 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Since January 2008, more than 4,200 people have been victims of homicide in this city of 1.5 million people on the U.S. – Mexico border. What can anyone do in the face of such horror?

At this Santa Fe program in November 2008 sponsored by the Lannan Foundation, writer Charles Bowden answered the question by asking Esther to stand and told the audience, “Esther runs Casa Amiga, a shelter in Juárez that helped more than 27,000 women and children last year. If she can do that for the victims of violence, there must be something the rest of us can do if we just decide to get up and do it.”

Esther was a very beautiful woman and she loved being a woman and being beautiful. During one of her many bouts with chemotherapy, she and her caregiver Paulita had to make a quick trip to the supermarket and Esther forgot her headscarf at home. As they waited in line at the store, Esther heard a little girl ask her mother “What’s the matter with that bald, old woman...”? Esther laughed and threw up her hands as she told me the story, “Ay, que horror! I might be bald, but I’m certainly not OLD!”

The last time I saw her just ten days before her death, at a presentation of her autobiography to be published in March 2010, she came in a wheel chair, in the black dress, dark red garnet jewelry sparkled at her throat and that same bright gold shawl graced her thin shoulders. Her physical voice was barely a whisper, but her joy of life sounded clearly through her pain.

Esther’s deeds and voice always outweighed her physical body and strength, even before her battle with cancer began in 2005 and ended on Christmas Day 2009 at her home in Juárez, surrounded by her family. A photo of a stern-faced woman hung on the wall in her bedroom. I asked once if that were Esther’s mother? Of course it was not. Her mother had died in 1961 after years of various illnesses rooted in undiagnosed severe depression. Her father had died at age 42 when Esther was too young to remember him and the eight brothers and sisters were raised as orphans. The photo on the wall was her aunt. I asked how old she was when she died. Paula and Esther conferred and came up with the age of 101 or 102. At that time, despite the cancer, I felt it might be possible that Esther would live forever and yet even if she did, I knew that never would she be an old woman.

I first heard of the work of Esther Chávez Cano in the late 1990s and by that time, she had already been working for nearly a decade to document the changes in Ciudad Juárez that often crept into the pages of Mexican newspapers with notices of young girls and women missing, or found dead, in the vacant lots of the sprawling desert city of free trade factories and fear. It was late into the NAFTA decade before these events made it into the English-language press, and even as the real body count rose, those in power sought to diminish the significance, or even the reality, of the deaths of women and men in the border region.

As with other cultural and social reformers, Esther's work has long been recognized more outside of Mexico than inside. She faced down national, state and local leaders, demanding that they pay attention to the violence against women and children and the conditions that continued to breed violence. Her work, and the accusations against her that arose not only from the powerful in the city, but also from some of the families of victims and rival women's rights organizations, has been well-documented, mainly by Esther herself.

Starting in the early 1990s, Esther kept a file of news clippings on the murders of young women in the city and as the years went on, she created a list of victims, their characteristics and the circumstances surrounding their deaths. This list has been used in various ways by scholars, journalists and activist groups, yet the actual data that Esther compiled sometimes conflicted with the discourse on the "Juárez femicides" that has become popularly known through news reports and a few books and Hollywood movies.

In 2007, she donated her file of documentation to the archives of New Mexico State University so that this wealth of information would be preserved. Esther continued to collect these clippings until the last year of her life and would give me new materials to add to the archive when I visited. In February 2008, when the killings in Juárez already seemed out of control—more than 45 in one month—I mentioned to her that I was trying to keep a list of all the murders. She applauded the effort, even though as time went on, we both realized the task was impossible. From the early 1990s through 2007, the annual number of killings in Juárez hovered between 250 and 300 and of those, women were usually between 10 and 12 percent of the total. In 2008, the murder toll was 1,623. Writing today, December 31, 2009, the number is approaching 2,660—and 163 of that number are women—6 percent of the total and by far the largest number of women—and the largest number of men—ever killed in the history of the city.

Esther documented that the overwhelming majority of the murdered women in her list were victims of domestic violence and she plowed that knowledge into her magnum opus—Casa Amiga Centro de Crisis. When it opened in 1999, Casa Amiga was the first and only rape crisis center to serve women in the border region. Since that time, it has become a model for centers in many other areas of Mexico though the need still far outweighs the services such places can provide. The city of Juárez has promised for years to fund a second Casa Amiga in the poor western zone of the city. Once a few years ago, the mayor mentioned a plot of city-owned land that would be made available. Esther got in her car and drove to the address, but there she found that the land was already occupied by numerous pallet-houses that were homes to poor families.

It is not easy to build a non-governmental organization in Mexico, especially one that points out the government's failure to protect its citizens. Local government and business entities tried to impede the creation of Casa Amiga ten years ago, fearing that a public focus on violence suffered by women in the city would discourage industrial development that relied on the labor of thousands of young women in factories called maquiladoras. Esther was maligned in the media and accused of trying to enrich herself by raising money based on publicizing the deaths of young women. What Esther actually got for speaking out were assaults to her character and threats to her life.

But she continued with the work and made Casa Amiga a reality. As Esther said in her address in Mexico City on December 12, 2008, after receiving the National Human Rights Award from President Felipe Calderon, "Events of extreme brutality define the daily life of my city." But Esther did not just "speak truth to power." Since Casa Amiga opened in February 1999, more than 400,000 women, children and men have received direct therapy or have participated in violence prevention classes, always free of charge.

After one visit with Esther during the last year of her life, I wondered if the cancer was her body's way of internalizing her deep awareness of the cruelty of the society she was born into and that seemed to be careening out of control into brutality that even she could not have imagined? A society that treated women with such contempt destroyed families and left children to the streets where they were "nurtured" into a short and brutal life of crime.

For more than 15 years Esther wrote newspaper columns describing this social breakdown and she predicted the horror being played out today on Juárez streets. In a speech commemorating the death of Hester Van Nierop, a Dutch woman murdered in Juarez in 1998, Esther said: "Ninety percent of the victims and their killers also live in conditions lacking the basic ingredients for human life. They are not sick, they are not monsters, but common human beings. Their violence is learned and lived day by day and minute by minute, in their homes, in schools, in workplaces and in the streets. They do not know other ways of communicating."

And at the same time, the beauty of her face and her character and her work expressed strength and resistance to both the cancer in her body and the social evils of her city that she so astutely observed and pointed out to the government and business leaders who had the power to change things: a sociological "Picture of Dorian Gray."

Columnist Lydia Cacho, writing on 25 December 2009 said: "I don't know if it was the cancer, or the accumulated pain and fears. I don't know if it was the anguish of seeing her Mexico overrun by soldiers and narco-traffickers and bathed in blood. I don't know if it was the knowledge that she had traveled the world to seek help for her city and its people, warning us 15 years ago that a country which ignored the selective assassination of its women and girls would soon come to see the systematic murder of its men and boys also. I don't know.

But Esther knew. I remember a visit in April 2008. On the front page of the newspaper was the story of a captain in the Juárez municipal police, shot to death inside of his truck in front of his home. More than 200 rounds of high-caliber ammunition had been fired at the truck killing the captain instantly. His 8-year-old son rode in the passenger seat of the truck. Bullets ripped into the boy's head and body, destroying his arm and he died en route to the hospital. Interviewed the next day, neighbors said "We don't know if the father was bad and deserved to die like that, but there was no reason to kill the boy that way...he

This sentiment is common in Juárez and it is nothing new. It was the reasoning of the police, the prosecutors and many of the public during the years when Esther recorded the murders of women. “If they were killed, then they must have been bad, they must have deserved it.” These were fighting words for Esther. That day I mentioned the murder of the police captain and his son and made the careless remark, echoing those neighbors, “Well, maybe the captain was into something bad Esther... Perhaps there was some reason...?”

She raised her voice—not something she did often: “MOLLY! HE WAS A HUMAN BEING!” Regardless of the captain’s supposed crimes, he was hunted down and slaughtered with no arrest, no indictment, no trial, no defense of any kind...nothing but a death sentence for nothing but suppositions. Esther would not stand for it.

She did live to see a decision against the Mexican government in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for its malfeasance in the investigations of the murders of three young women whose bodies were found in 2001. The Court ordered Mexico to pay compensation to the victims’ families and to resolve the cases—an ironic decision, considering that since January 2008 more than 4,200 people have been murdered in Juárez and of that number of cases, less than one percent have even seen the beginning of any kind of judicial process that might lead to a conviction of their murderers.

Esther calculated that the current “drug war” slaughter had created at least 10,000 orphans: “And what will become of those children who have been left without parents if nothing is done? In a few years they will become the brutal assassins that cut off heads or hang bodies in the streets.”

Esther Chávez lived her life as a feminist and the outrages against women in Juárez spurred her to action nearly 20 years ago. But when she died on Christmas Day, Esther continued to stand tall, still fighting for the human rights of all of us—the women, the children and the men.

---

<sup>1</sup>Paula Villarreal Arellano, lived with Esther for more than 26 years, initially to care for Esther’s elderly aunt and later she cared for Esther until the end of her life. Paula was also instrumental in Esther’s activist work and was a charter member of the Eighth of March group. Paula assisted in searching and clipping the daily newspapers and helped to organize the files that formed the basis of the list of the women murdered in Juarez beginning in the early 1990s.

<sup>2</sup>“No sé si fue el cáncer, o el dolor y el miedo acumulados, no sé si fue la angustia de ver su terruño tomado por soldados y narcotraficantes y bañado de sangre; no sé si fue saber que ella le dio la vuelta al mundo para pedir ayuda y nos advirtió hace 15 años que un país que ignora el asesinato selectivo de sus niñas y mujeres luego verá la muerte sistemática de sus hombres y niños. No lo sé. – [www.vanguardia.com.mx](http://www.vanguardia.com.mx)

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Judith Torrea, DPA, <http://www.elpais.cr/articulos.php?id=17661>  
 “¿Qué será de los niños que se han quedado sin padre si no se hace nada? Dentro de unos años serán los asesinos brutales que cortan cabezas o cuelgan cadáveres en las avenidas”, preguntaba Esther Chávez Cano.