

Today's Parish

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**LUPE ANGUIANO:
SHE EMPOWERS
THE POOR**

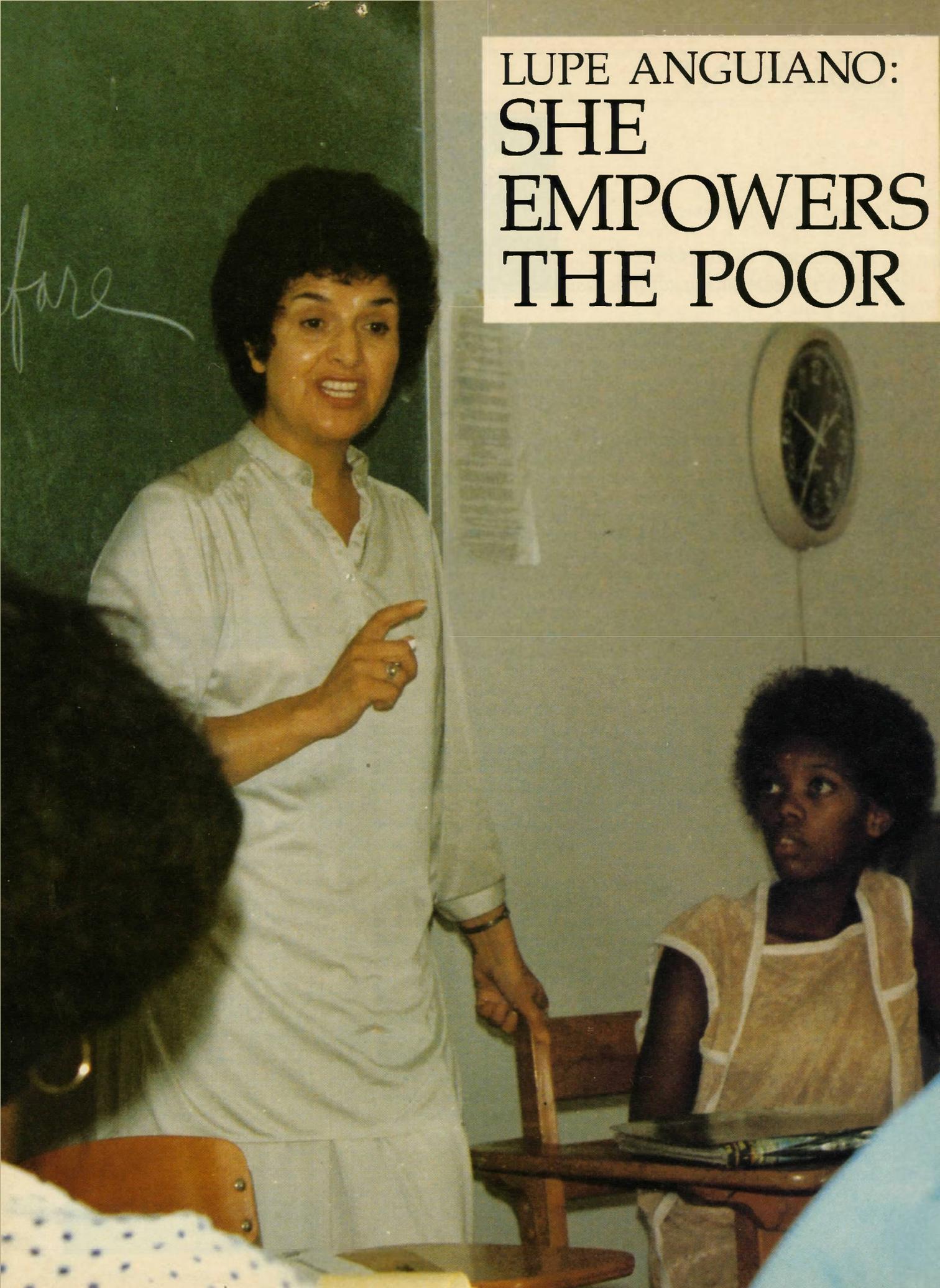
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THE POOR



*She saw—she felt—the pain of mothers on welfare. She found a way to set them free.
Your parish can do it too.*

CAROL CLARK

When you meet Lupe Anguiano, the vigor of her step, the direct look in her eyes, the determination in her voice, tell you she is a woman of power and purpose. As the daughter of migrant workers from Mexico, she has learned not only to empathize with the poor, but to respect them.

She is a woman on the move, who has allowed the Spirit to lead her from one corner of the United States to another. She has worked for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in Washington, DC, has served as a consultant to government agencies, and has testified before state and national legislative bodies. She has also lived among welfare mothers in a San Antonio housing project and picketed for farmworkers in Michigan. No matter where Lupe may be, her motivation is constant; she is determined to free the poor from oppression.

We met in Manhattan. Lupe had just come from a long morning at the United Nations where she had appealed for funds from various foundations. The money she was

seeking would be used to help welfare mothers in the South Bronx to prepare for and to find worthwhile jobs.

A subway ride, rich in sense appeal, brought us to the Bronx neighborhood where her organization, the National Women's Employment and Education, Inc, is headquartered on the third floor of a former school building.

Her work in the Bronx is just beginning. She has an office, a classroom, and a staff of two. But already the 21 women of her first "graduating class" have moved from welfare to well-paying jobs at J.C. Penney, Bloomingdale's, a computer factory, a hospital...

Lupe is on her way to liberating countless women in the New York area, even as she has previously liberated hundreds—thousands—of women in San Antonio, Denver, Tacoma, Dallas, and elsewhere.

In the light of the *Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, this extraordinary woman has a practical message for every parish that wants to put the gospel into practice.

Lupe, your adult life has been dedicated to helping underprivileged women become independent. How did you become sensitized to the problems of the poor? My father and mother immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico. I was born in Colorado and, when I was in third-grade, our family moved to California. Every year we picked crops from June to early December. We would work in the fields all morning, then attend school in the afternoon.

What are your memories of those years? Did you find that life difficult?

No!No! It was great. We would get up in the morning and pick our breakfast from the trees. I still remember one day when it rained very hard. Our tent got so wet that we had to sleep in a shed. It was a kind of adventure. For me, living poor has never been oppressive or dehumanizing.

Are your positive memories attributable in some way to the quality of your family life?

I think so. In Colorado the priest only came to our area once a month, so my mother was our catechist. She would sit us down on Sundays and tell us stories of Jesus. We would pray every night, and we really lived the spirit of the church seasons through the customs and rituals we had right at home. As a child I would play with Jesus. He was very real to me. I guess I never separated religion from daily living. We couldn't go to church—we had church at home.

How did this religious grounding influence your adult choices?

As I grew, I became very close to Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters. They worked in our community in Saticoy, California. They joined with us in the effort to improve our economic situation. I became very interested in participating in their work and entered religious life in 1949.

So you entered the convent to work for social justice?

Yes, especially social justice for my people—the Mexican-American people.

Were you able to achieve this goal as a religious?

In many ways. I was primarily a religion teacher. I most of all wanted to teach young people to express their beliefs through action.

Not many Sisters were into social action back in the '50s. Did your concerns create any problems for you as a religious?

One thing that got me into trouble was the open-housing issue. Long before the Civil Rights Bill was passed, or even considered in Congress, open-housing was an issue in California. Cardinal McIntyre had clamped down on many religious who had become involved in the issue. We knew the reason—many of the offending construction companies had contracts to build Catholic schools.

I decided not to obey the Cardinal's directive. I'll never

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forget picketing and distributing literature on open-housing at the Cathedral. I really got heck for it.

Did that incident influence your decision to leave religious life?

Well, incidents like this forced me to realize: If religious life does not allow me freedom to live up to my conscience and convictions regarding social justice, it is a contradiction for me. Little by little I began to ignore many of the admonitions.

The superior, who was a very good friend of mine, finally said to me, "Lupe, you know you are not obeying. Why are you still here?" And I said, "You know, you are right." I needed to do certain things—things I couldn't do in a religious habit. So I decided to leave.

Did you accomplish the "certain things" you planned to do?

At first I continued working on the open-housing campaign. Then I took a job as an employment counselor, working with high school drop-outs in East LA. I worked part-time and went to school part-time to earn a master's degree in sociology and education. During this period I was awakening to the social injustices I had never really seen or experienced before. My identification with the poor became so strong that I found myself arguing with the professors in class.

In 1965 a congressman from California, George Brown, recognized the value of what I was doing and recommended me to President Johnson. The President invited me to come to Washington.

Did your Washington experience allow you new opportunities to obtain justice for your people?

Yes and no. I worked in the Department of Education where I wrote part of the bilingual education bill. I was involved in the actual passage of it; I organized the strategy to bring both Democratic and Republican support behind it. That was exciting, but I was soon disillusioned.

The bill was intended to help Spanish-speaking children learn English as well as to develop their skills in the Spanish language. But after the bill was passed, I had no say in the implementation process. Those goals are not being met. That was one of the reasons I left Washington.

To work with Cesar Chavez in behalf of the farm-workers?

Yes. I am most proud that Cesar sent me to Michigan to represent him. Michigan became one of the only states that honored the boycott completely. We cleared the state of grapes... I did that.

What finally alerted you to the welfare problem that has been your greatest concern for several years?

In 1970 Elliot Richardson invited me to return to Washington to serve on a task force of 35 women who were to build an agenda for the '70s in terms of health,

education, and welfare. That experience sharpened my awareness of the needs of women on welfare.

How would you define the weakness in our present welfare system?

The present system provides funds for dependent children. But the needs of the mother who is a single parent are ignored. The legislation refers to her simply as the "caretaker." In other words, the children are really wards of the state and the mothers are being "paid" to care for them. That's ridiculous.

What suggestions did your task force make for improving the welfare system?

We discovered that most of the "welfare mothers" really want the opportunity to be independent, to support themselves and their children without help from the state. I was angry at the way in which the welfare system traps, dehumanizes, and destroys young, healthy, intelligent women. They need job education, job training, child care, and transportation. The real answer to welfare is to make these women productive members of the work force.

How did you propose to accomplish this?

We recommended that the welfare policy be changed to provide these women with training in employment skills along with emergency financial assistance. Once a woman lands a job, we recommended that the welfare system provide one year of support services until her employment stabilizes.

That sounds sensible...

Not only is it sensible, it would save 50% of the welfare budget!

Then why is the plan not being implemented?

Data I compiled in 1977 showed that 90% of families on Aid to Families with Dependent Children are headed by women. 85% of these women are able and willing to work.

When a husband and wife are divorced or separated, society usually feels that the children are better off with the mother. The catch is that the woman, therefore, has little or no chance to support the children. For a poor woman, the only alternative is welfare, and welfare means always living under the poverty level.

The United States public generally abhors the idea of a working mother who has young children at home. The truth is, however, that 49% of American women who have children three years of age and younger are already in the work force. The reason why the others aren't working, in most cases, is that the welfare system doesn't allow it.

It's almost funny. On the one hand, the liberals are shocked with the idea that a mother with very young children should be forced to work. On the other hand, the conservatives say, "Cut off welfare; make these women work." So you have the two extremes. In 1973 I left Washington convinced that the real change had to begin elsewhere.

You were one woman acting alone. Where did you begin to tackle the problem?

The National Council of Catholic Bishops invited me to become director of their Southwest Office for the Spanish-Speaking. I agreed, with the provision that I

could make welfare mothers a priority.

In order to gain firsthand knowledge of the situation, I moved into a housing unit in San Antonio. This allowed me to observe and experience the problems of women on welfare. I formed talk groups for these women.

Their frustrations with the system that had them trapped, along with their strong desire to be independent, led to the launching of a "Let's Get Off Welfare" Campaign. The aim was to raise consciousness, help them learn job skills, and find jobs for them.

In 1978, I received the first grant, which enabled me to arrange job-training for some of the women. I went to the local business community to solicit funds for education in job skills. Not only did I receive this help, but often the businesses agreed to provide this training themselves. In six months we had 500 women off the welfare rolls and into paying jobs.

That success must have convinced some people of the credibility of your ideas.

In 1978, the Department of Labor awarded me a \$150,000 contract to establish an organization called the National Women's Employment and Education, Inc., which could serve as a national model. The idea of the organization was to move welfare mothers into employment, making them self-supporting.

What process did you develop to accomplish this goal?

The program begins with a course of several weeks that motivates the women and strengthens their desire to compete for jobs. Participants learn how to handle job interviews and how to develop an employment plan that covers such needs as child care and transportation. The women also receive attitude and career testing.

In addition to this training, the program includes a job development effort. We reach out to businesses, encouraging them to make jobs available to women. We, for our part, try to recruit the right woman for each job opening.

Finally, we have a one-year follow-up program. Once a woman is employed, we offer her support services that include child care assistance and transportation stipends plus extensive counseling to help her deal with family problems and employment experiences.

What kind of woman makes a good candidate for the program?

I look for highly motivated women interested in working and in developing the traits that make a good employee.

Companies are actually cooperating in this effort to get women off welfare?

Yes. Many companies would rather underwrite the cost of training potentially desirable employees than deal with complex government programs. I've been particularly successful in locating and training women for non-traditional jobs in such fields as construction.

These jobs are more readily available because federal laws mandate that women make up at least three percent of the traditionally male-operated work force... and this percentage will certainly increase. Women are attracted to these jobs because they offer greater-than-minimum wage salaries and the opportunity for advancement.

I feel, if Christ were teaching today, right now, in New York City, he'd be talking about the injustice being done to women.

Have your hopes for the National Women's Employment and Education organization been realized?

In the first year we placed 205 out of 224 participants in jobs or job-training programs that led to stable employment.

But this does not tell the whole success story. It is impossible to capture in statistics the moral support that women receive from the members of the staff (who often are former welfare recipients) and from each other. These people are no longer struggling in lonely isolation.

In 1980 we began to export the program from the San Antonio area. I have worked with interested groups in Denver, Tacoma, Dallas, El Paso, Tempe, and Ventura. NWEE is at work in all these places today.

So the National Women's Employment and Education Model Program (WEEMP) has, in fact, been field-tested in a number of cities?

Yes. And it works!

And you are now tackling the Big Apple?

Yes, I have come to set up the program in the Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn. My experience has given me a lot of practical knowledge concerning the do's and don'ts of the process. I'm here in New York to demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of this way to move women from welfare to employment.

Are businesses in the New York area cooperating with your plans?

Presently we have grants from Exxon, Atlantic/Richfield, Dayton-Hudson stores, and Pacific and Southwest Telephone. Chase Manhattan Bank, Bloomingdale's, and J.C. Penney are among those offering employment to our "graduates."

What would make your job easier? I am thinking, in particular, of the readers of *Today's Parish*. How could Catholic parishes help women on welfare to become self-sufficient?

Efforts such as mine need the support of the church. And this must, first of all, take the form of developing healthy attitudes in people. Often men, including parish priests, figure that a woman is going to get married, one way or another. Her employment needs, then, seem to be only temporary and are not taken seriously.

The church has to promote the awareness that the non-working mother is almost non-existent. I think that only 14% of married women are not in the work force. And yet, many Catholic women still seem to think it is more virtuous to be a support system for a man than to be independent. When the church talks about family, it is important to help people remember that, in a lot of cases, "family" is a mother and child or children. For example, 46% of Black families are headed by women. 23% of Hispanic families are headed by women. About 16 or 17% of all American families are headed by women.

For the church to minister to the single parent is a dire

need. The parish staff needs to look at women not only as willing volunteers for one or another church-related task, but as heads of families. They need to realize that these women have the same needs as men who support families.

Would a parish be able to adapt the Women's Employment and Education Model Program for the women in their parish and community who are on welfare?

Very definitely. The parish council or staff could identify the women in the parish or local area who need jobs. They could also identify parishioners and others who would be prospective employers for these women. The program is available in printed form and can be implemented effectively by persons willing to invest the necessary time and energy.

Does your emphasis on the economic liberation of women appear unchristian to some people?

I feel very strongly that in the '80s and '90s the gospel is and will be expressed through the social and economic condition of women. I feel this because God is always active and present in the oppressed, and there is no doubt that women are in that position. I feel, if Christ were teaching today, right now in New York City, he would be a strong feminist. He'd be talking about the injustice being done to women.

My program is not to make women independent of men nor to downplay the value of marriage. I have noted that when women alone raise little boys, they tend to pass on to their sons their own insecurities. So,

many men, too, have been suffering from the oppressions suffered by their mothers and other women.

To me, a woman who has an opportunity to develop her talents and her human capabilities is better able to relate to a man and to become involved emotionally with him, and when a man has a similar capacity, they cannot help but have a stronger marriage.

What is your ultimate hope for the National Women's Employment and Education Program?

My hope is to see NWEE programs eventually funded by the welfare system itself as a savings to taxpayers. As the women become employed and leave welfare, the system will gradually dry up—the women will be free of the welfare trap, and the taxpayers will have less of a burden.

What keeps you going in the meantime?

Seeing the lives of women change as they become self-respecting, productive members of society. When I see this happening, I know what I am doing is worth the effort. ■

Note: Lupe Anguiano has developed a set of six manuals that contain the methods and techniques she has field-tested, modified, and perfected for preparing women to enter employment. For more information about the Women's Employment and Education Model Program (WEEMP) write: Twenty-Third Publications, PO Box 180, Mystic, CT 06355.

