

TOMÁS RIVERA

1935-1984

So Proud of You Forever

Dr. Tomás Rivera, whose death on May 16, 1984, ended an ever-ascending series of accomplishments, was the first member of a minority group to ever be appointed chancellor in the University of California system. He was also the youngest, 43, at the time of his appointment to this position for which he was nominated without having applied. Rivera began his academic career as a high school teacher in Texas in 1957, and after progressing through the academic hierarchy to the chancellorship at the University of California, Riverside, he stated in an interview that his ultimate goal was to return to the classroom. This goal was reached in a way he had not en-

visioned, for simultaneously with his other accomplishments, he had established a reputation as a prize-winning creative writer in both Spanish and English. Wherever Chicano literature is studied, Tomás Rivera will always be in the classroom.

A list of achievements tells only facts about a man whose personal qualities set him apart from other men. Rivera, who began his life in Crystal City, Texas, the son of migrant workers, knew firsthand the hardships and prejudices inflicted on his people. For a nickel a day, he

studied in Spanish-speaking *barrio* schools as well as in public schools throughout the Midwest, wherever necessity led his family. His parents, Florencio and Josefa Hernandez Rivera, instilled in him a love of reading and a belief in strong family ties, both of which were evident throughout his life.

After high school in Crystal City, Rivera earned degrees at Southwest Texas Junior College, Southwest Texas State College, and at the University of Oklahoma, where in 1969 he completed an MA in Spanish and a PhD with a major in Spanish and a minor in French. Because of his recognizably outstanding qualities, a friend of his had recommended that Dr. Low-

By JAMES H. ABBOTT



Shortly before his death, Chancellor Tomás Rivera, right, cut the 30th anniversary cake commemorating the founding of the University of California, Riverside.

ell Dunham, then chairman of the department of modern languages, offer him a graduate assistantship, and after Rivera had completed his graduate courses, the chairman asked him to supervise student teachers in foreign languages.

From the University of Oklahoma, Rivera moved with extraordinary ease and rapidity to positions as professor of Spanish at Sam Houston State University and the University of Texas at San Antonio, where he later became dean of the College of Multi-disciplinary Studies, then vice president. At San Antonio he was a key force in the organization of the curriculum for the opening of that new university. Immediately prior to his appointment at the University of California, Riverside, Rivera was vice president of the University of Texas at El Paso.

The man who accomplished so much in a relatively short time attracted opportunities for success because of what he was and because his ideals and his abilities were apparent in all situations: professional, familial, social and creative. Rivera was a man who, like Don Quixote, knew who he was. He built on his past and projected himself dynamically into the future with a

great human sentiment and a constant sense of humor, never hesitant to manifest either of them.

In his professional life he made decisions based on substantial knowledge of each situation but always without undue delay. His self-knowledge and confidence led him to be impatient with cumbersome committees, although he always adhered to democratic processes. When faced with difficult problems and decisions, he remembered the Spanish proverb, "a mal paso, dale prisa" (when you have something bad to do, hurry up and do it); he disliked leaving important issues unresolved.

His decisions were based on his belief in quality education for everybody, but he was especially sensitive to minority needs. At times Rivera was concerned that media attention to his own background might create a caricature or stereotype. He preferred to be accepted, not because he was a Chicano, but because of his own qualifications and his qualities as a human being. He found such an acceptance in many places, but especially at the University of Oklahoma. When he dedicated a copy of his prize-winning work, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Part*, to Dr. and Mrs. Lowell

Dunham, he wrote, "quienes me han recibido como persona y como amigo. El profesor Dunham . . . siempre me ha humanizado las cosas." (" . . . who have always received me as a person and a friend. Professor Dunham . . . has always humanized things for me.")

Rivera also was concerned with Chicano community reactions to his position as a role model and his decisions regarding quality education. Although his own background was an inspiration to him in the creative process, he did not want minorities relegated to a minority world, preferring instead that they be well-educated first and minorities second. This attitude no doubt contributed to his plans to abolish both the program of Chicano Studies and Black Studies at the University of California, Riverside, a decision he made without fear, because he believed that it was the best decision for everybody.

Because he knew himself, Rivera was not afraid to inject his wry humor into any situation, once declaring to a reporter that his only defect was, "I'm fat." Again, during an interview for the UCR chancellorship, when a committee member expressed astonishment that Rivera planned to spend only a week studying the University of California system, he replied, "O.K., two weeks." As co-director of the University of Oklahoma Summer Session in Madrid in the 1970s, he began every day with a smile that set the tone for the group, and his presence helped create one of the happiest and most productive sessions in the life of the program.

His love of people and his eagerness to help began in his relationship with his own parents, extended to all of humanity, and is nowhere more evident than in his own closely knit family. "The family is the final support group that one has," he once remarked. He and his wife, Concha, in spite of their busy schedules, always made room for at least one meal a day as a family unit, and they made a practice of spending a week's vacation time alone with each of their three children. He and Concha communicated to them a love of reading, a set of moral and social values, and their creative talents. Rivera's success as a parent is evident in the success of his children. Ileana,

a teacher, Irasema, who works in drug rehabilitation, and Javier, a high school senior, exemplify the high personal, social and educational standards that their father wanted for everybody.

Rivera's standards of quality applied to all phases of life, but especially to education. As a student he always was prepared, always cheerful and considered the extensive readings required of graduate students as a part of the habits he already had established. Many of his teachers recognized that his global grasp of concepts and his awareness of the role of his own studies as a fragment of a larger fabric marked him as a thinker and a man capable of acting in a world beyond specialization.

Like Ortega y Gasset's *hombre selecto*, Rivera set his own goals, always demanding more of himself than merely fulfilling requirements established by others. His thoroughness and the quality of his academic interests are evident in his dissertation on León Felipe, a substantial part of which was published in *Cuadernos Hispano-americanos*. His numerous papers, more than 72 by 1979, attest to his continued interest in scholarly activities. His participation in many symposia on Chicano literature, the first one organized at the University of Oklahoma, kept him in touch with scholars and writers in his field. His activities in that area became international in scope, and he was to have participated in a Chicano literature symposium in Germany in the summer of 1984.

He seemed always to find time, however, for his creative writing, and his first published, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Part*, won the Quinto Sol National Literary Prize in 1970. Other works have appeared in collections such as *Songs and Dreams*, *El Espejo/The Mirror*, *Cafe solo*, and in *Aztlan: An Anthology of Texas Poets*, and *The Chicano Short Story*. He also contributed to professional journals and was a member of the editorial board of MICTLA Publications and *El Magazin*, as well as contributing editor to *El Grito* and *Revista Chicana-Requena*. *Always and Other Poems* was his last volume of poetry, and at the time of his death

he was working on a larger volume of poetry and a novel, *The Large House in Town*. His writing ranged from his critical studies of literature to his own literary creations, now themselves the subject of critical works and topics for dissertations on Mexican-American literature. Rivera's works show both his interest in the creative process and his association with the Chicano Community, since his creative production is centered around the Chicano experience.

Although he was always an integral part of the Chicano culture, Rivera never advocated special consideration or favors simply on the basis of minority status. He did not want to become chancellor at UCR as a concession, but rather because he was qualified for the position. His attitude about his personal goals represented his hopes for all Chicanos, as well as all of humanity. He accepted responsibilities with the hope that he could somehow improve the human condition, and he was ever optimistic about the possibilities. His appointment to President Carter's Commission on a National Agenda for the 1980s, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advance-

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
ment of Teaching, the American Association for Higher Education, the American Council on Education and Educational Testing Services, are only a few of the challenges that he met with the same sense of dedication that he showed in his other endeavors. Even with such a great number of demands on his time, he still found energy for visiting elementary schools to encourage children to strive for excellence in their studies to achieve high standards of moral behavior.

In all of his activities, whether as teacher, administrator, father or writer, Rivera never lost sight of the human qualities and the humanitarian values he believed to be essential

to all progress and justice. His sense of humor, his self-knowledge and an unlimited love for humanity are only some of the qualities which drew to him the opportunities and challenges he accepted so enthusiastically. He has returned now to the classroom through his writing and the example he set for so many people. His ultimate goal has been reached, and with his burial in Crystal City on May 19, 1984, he has returned to the point where his life began.

Memories of Tomás Rivera will last forever in the history of higher education, as well as in the classroom and in Mexican-American literature. In a letter to Dunham, October 5, 1979, Rivera recalled, with humor and sentiment, the lean years of graduate school and the human qualities he appreciated in others:

"How can I ever thank you and the modern languages faculty enough for the advice, academic preparation and professional ethics that all of you gave me? As I have told you many times, coming out of Texas, looking and feeling as if I had fallen out of a tree (as you would say), I had no idea what waited for Concha, myself and our three kids. What we found in Norman was a group of warm, caring people who were willing to take a chance on us. We grasped every minute, and Concha and I have the fondest memories of you all (as they say in Texas). Concha and I still remember that Thanksgiving Day when we really were down to a couple of dollars (no turkey, no booze, *nada*, except three kids with chicken pox) when out of nowhere you showed up at our door with a couple of bottles of wine and two of the best-tasting loaves of bread (homemade). We were so proud of you forever."

The University of Oklahoma and everybody who knew Tomás Rivera can make these words their own: "We were so proud of you forever." 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: This tribute to Tomás Rivera was written by Dr. James H. Abbott on behalf of his colleagues in the OU department of modern languages. A David Ross Boyd professor since 1974, Abbott was director of Rivera's doctoral dissertation.