

Statesman

Christine Stephens worked to ‘help others advocate for themselves’

By Ariana Garcia

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Christine Stephens, a Catholic nun known for her work organizing and training leaders for groups that support low-income communities such as Austin Interfaith, died Thursday due to complications of a stroke she had recently suffered. She was 78.

In her 45-year organizing career, Stephens served as national co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a community organizing network, and the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation, where she was instrumental in developing and supervising Austin Interfaith and its sister organizations across the Southwest United States.

Austin Interfaith is a coalition of 43 congregations, public schools and unions that works to address community issues.

Stephens worked alongside close friend and mentor Ernesto Cortes in training and developing leaders throughout the United States. Cortes said it was Stephens' anger that first caught his attention.

“George Orwell had a quality he called generous anger,” Cortes said. “Christine had that quality of generous anger. She was always there in the fight and took herself with a great sense of humor.”

Cortes said Stephens was a firm believer in helping people exercise their power to do something about education and immigration reform. He said she believed strongly in the values of a democratic society and was a woman of faith.

“She was a tireless and committed worker,” said Cortes. “She cared deeply about people, particularly poor people and people of color. She worked tirelessly to teach them how to be their own advocates.”

Stephens, who was born Dec. 22, 1940, in Austin, entered the Congregation of Divine Providence in 1962 and professed first vows as a Sister of Divine Providence in 1964.

“She joined the sisters because of their vision and model of strong and powerful women who worked for justice,” Cortes said.

She served for seven years as a teacher, then as a social worker for eight years. Her organizing career began in Houston, followed by serving as lead organizer of Communities Organized for Public Service in San Antonio.

Stephens lived and worked in Austin for much of the latter part of her career with the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national network of organizers that partners with religious congregations and civic groups to help identify and develop leaders to take on community issues.

Stephens identified and trained leaders and organizers throughout the country, and worked to bring millions of dollars for water and wastewater treatment to colonias along the Texas and New Mexico border.

“She was remarkable in her work along the border,” Cortes said. “That work changed the territory. You would not recognize those communities if you go down there today. They are thriving.”

Stephens helped in developing the Alliance School strategy, which works to improve student achievement in low-income areas and has helped hundreds of schools across the country, including a quarter of all elementary schools in the Austin school district at one point, according to Austin Interfaith. She also was instrumental in the creation of national renowned job training programs such as Capital IDEA in Austin.

During her career, Christine and her colleagues grew the Industrial Areas Foundation to 65 organizations, making it the largest and longest standing network of faith and community-based organizations in the country, according to Austin Interfaith.

“Through her work with IAF organizations statewide, these workforce and education strategies gained bipartisan support and funding at the Texas Legislature,” said Rev. Michael Floyd, member of Austin Interfaith Clergy

Caucus. “Her work helped hundreds of Austin Interfaith clergy and leaders to act on their faith to better the lives of families in Central Texas.”

Stephens is survived by her sister Sarah Howell, her niece Angela Duhon, and their children, Emma and Nathaniel.

Austin Interfaith will have a rosary for Stephens at 4 p.m. Thursday followed by a wake at 6:30 p.m. at the Sacred Heart Chapel at 515 SW 24th Street in San Antonio. A mass of resurrection will be at the chapel at 10:30 a.m. Friday.