



BEST BELIEVE: EXTENDED BACK MATTER AND ACTIVITIES

By NoNieqa Ramos

*The Bronx is a library of stories.
Of poetry in graffiti.
Of heroes who have changed history.
Of powerhouse families.
Of three sisters who changed destinies.*

Meet the Tres Hermanas: Evelina Antonetty, Lillian López, and Elba Cabrera. They moved from Puerto Rico to New York City as children and grew up to become leaders in their Bronx community. Evelina, an activist for social causes, founded United Bronx Parents. Lillian became a librarian and administrator who fought for Spanish and bilingual books and Spanish-speaking library staff. Elba worked closely with Evelina and became an ambassador and advocate for the arts.

Rhythmic verse by NoNieqa Ramos and vibrant illustrations by Nicole Medina provide a stirring look at three dynamic changemakers.

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Interview: Living Ancestor

When I originally presented a draft of this book to Hermana Elba Calbera in 2021, it was titled *Royalty*. My goal was to critique the idea of royalty. Kings and queens are often shown in books and media as special and even magical because they have a lot of money and power. But rarely do we look closely at the ways royal families have gained their money—often through harming Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color as well as women and the poor.

I wanted to hail the Tres Hermanas as true royalty. Elba, who was eighty-eight years old at the time, quickly called a meeting with me and explained why she did not like my idea. (Interviews are an important part of research!) After I spoke with Elba, I changed the way I told the story of the Tres Hermanas. Elba’s response to my earlier draft is the reason I included this quote from Evelina at the end of the book, “I don’t answer to being a queen. I answer to being a good human being.” What do you think Evelina’s words mean?

Interview a Community Member Activity:

Who is someone in your community you’d like to learn more about? Talk to your parents and caregivers. Talk to your teachers. They can help you do good research and safely interview someone special in your community!

Interviewing Skills Activities

- Write 3-5 sentences sharing what you already know about the interviewee, person you are interviewing.

- What would you like to know more about the interviewee? Jot down 3-5 open-ended questions you'd like to ask. ¹
- Ask the interviewee for permission to record the interview. Ask your parent or caregiver to do the recording.
- Take some notes during the interview, but don't worry about copying everything they say word for word. You can play back the interview later. Focus on being present, listening, and perhaps, asking a few more questions.
- Reread your interview notes. Listen to the recording. Answer the following questions on paper:
 - ◆ What new information did you learn about your interviewee?
 - ◆ What are some things you and your interviewee have in common?
 - ◆ How are you and your interviewee different?
 - ◆ What surprised you during the interview?

Add in any other details you think are important to share!

Mentorship: Evelina has many “a.k.a.’s, titles, and degrees.”

Evelina Every morning Evelina Antonetty would arrive at her United Bronx Parents (UBP) office, make fresh cafecito, and say, “Aqui estoy!” Everyone who came to see her was welcomed with a warm embrace. Evelina was always front and center for those who needed her. Congressman José Serrano (served 1990–2021), who credits Evelina with the success of his political career, said anytime he'd come to her office she'd greet him with a hot plate of rice and beans with fresh aguacate.

How did Evelina and Congressman Jose Serrano first become connected? In 1974, a group of South Bronx residents were looking for someone to fill an empty seat on the state assembly.²

¹ **Vocabulary:** An open-ended question is a question that cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Open-ended questions can start with “Why?” “How?” “What?” and “Can you tell me more about ...”

² **Vocabulary:** “State assembly” is a generic term referring to the legislative body that is responsible for making the laws for the state. Specific names vary by state, including “general assembly,” “general court,” “legislative assembly,” or even just “legislature.”

They wanted Evelina to run. She turned them down. She told her supporters to support a young man named José Serrano.

“When she said it, it was a done deal. She was always interested in promoting younger people. She saw something in me.” —former Congressman José Serrano

Evelina mentored many young people who became elected officials. A mentor is someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person. With Evelina’s encouragement, José Serrano became a representative of New York’s 16th Congressional District. He went on to serve as a member of the New York State Assembly from 1975–1990. He became a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1990–2021. He was the longest-serving Latino in the House! He never forgot where he came from or Evelina’s mentorship—and he dedicated millions of federal dollars toward rebuilding the South Bronx.

Mentorship was one of the many reasons Evelina was called “Titi” by everyone in the neighborhood. Titi is an affectionate name for tía or aunt.

“Everybody called her [Titi], because whenever she saw a need for anything, she tried to help. I’ve had people tell me if it wasn’t for her, they wouldn’t have gotten their start in this country.” —granddaughter Anita Antonetty³

One name will never be enough to capture Evelina Antonetty’s blazing spirit. She has been called a lioness who fought for the marginalized people of the South Bronx. Renowned poet Tato Laviera wrote in, “titi” about her:⁴

“El beso, Titi,

El Beso, Titi,

El Beso de to integridad.

... For you Titi, we offer our HEARTS ...”

Legislative authority and responsibilities of the New York State Assembly include passing bills on public policy matters, setting levels for state spending, raising and lowering taxes, and more.

³ Reference: <https://motthavenherald.com/2011/08/02/remembering-a-neighborhood-activist/>

⁴ Reference:

https://twitter.com/LaPoetaMariposa/status/1572029803779293186?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1572029906460049408%7Ctwgr%5E882e830441043c69731493f6eea98518d1563af1%7Ctwcon%5Es2_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailykos.com%2Fstories%2F2022%2F9%2F19%2F2123808%2F-Do-you-know-who-Evelina-Antonetty-was-Today-we-celebrate-her-100th-birthday-anniversary

Mentorship Writing Activities:

1. Answer the following questions in writing. In a paragraph or two, answer: Who would your dream mentor be? How would your mentor encourage and support you to follow your dreams? Share what you have written with a classmate.
2. Evelina started helping her neighbors when she was very young. Write a paragraph or two to answer the following questions. What talents do you have? What are your best personality traits?⁵ How can you mentor a younger child? Share what you have written with your class.

Research about Gentrification: *“We will never stop struggling here in the Bronx, even though they’ve destroyed it around us.” —Evelina Antonetty*

Across Dra. Antonetty Way, artist Tats Cru painted a mural that depicts Evelina Antonetty’s passionate words: *“We will never stop struggling here in the Bronx, even though they’ve destroyed it around us. We would pitch tents if we have to rather than move from here. We would fight back, there is nothing we would not do.”*⁶



⁵ **Vocabulary:** Traits are qualities like being optimistic or hopeful or persevering and working hard.

⁶ **Reference:** <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cp7llrzrcwK/>

Evelina's words remain relevant in modern times as the Bronx experiences gentrification. This word refers to a process in which middle-class and wealthy people renovate and build homes and businesses in a poor area, often part of a city. As a result, the cost of living and rent rises. The neighborhood's longtime residents can no longer afford to live in their own community and often have to move elsewhere. This move is called displacement.

Social Studies Activities:

1. Read the article, "*Gentrification Facts for Kids*" with a classmate. Now work independently. Fold a paper in half. On one side, write 3 to 5 pros of gentrification. On the other side, write 3 to 5 cons. Share your pros and cons with the class. On what do you disagree? On what do you agree?
2. Reflect and write. What are 3 to 5 ways middle class and wealthy people can support lower income people in the Bronx? What about in your community?

Role Model: "I have very strong children...and very strong grandchildren." Evelina Antonetty

After Evelina Antonetty's transition to the afterlife in 1984, her daughter Lorraine Montenegro remained in UBP leadership for thirty years. Lorraine's five children, including eldest son photojournalist Joe Conzo, called their single mom Wonder Woman.

Central to UBP was La Casita, a treatment program for homeless women suffering from drug and alcohol abuse. In the 1980s and 1990s mothers were commonly separated from their children even if they sought treatment. Lorraine said, "We are not going to let that happen. We're not going to have women give up their children to save their lives."

La Casita was unique because parents could bring their children to live within the treatment center, allowing families to stay together and heal.⁷

Role Model Writing and Art Activity:

1. Reflect and write a paragraph or two. Who is someone in your family that you consider a role model? Why do you admire them? How would you like to follow in their footsteps? Draw a picture of yourself and your role model together.

⁷Reference:<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/nyregion/a-life-of-service-ends-in-puerto-rico-but-lives-on-in-the-bronx.html>

Photography: “I am carrying on in the legacy of my grandmother, photographing music and the community.”

Joe Conzo, the grandson of Evelina Antonetty, was a self-taught photojournalist in his teens. Instead of focusing his lens on the poverty of the Bronx, he focused on its wealth—the people, the culture, and the birth of hip hop music. He documented Evelina’s daily demonstrations against the movie *Fort Apache*, starring Paul Newman, where protesters carried signs with messages such as “Fort Apache is an anti-Black, anti-Puerto Rican movie.” As a result of the people’s call for justice, the producers of the movie ran a disclaimer at the start of the movie explaining that the film did not portray “the law-abiding members of the community . . . and the efforts of the people and groups that are trying to turn the Bronx around.”

Today, Joe’s book *Born in The Bronx: A Visual Record of The Early Days of Hip Hop* documents a musical and cultural revolution that could have only been born in the Boogie Down Bronx. Among other places, his photographs have been exhibited in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture.⁸

Photography and Writing Activity:

1. As a child, Joe Conzo was a photojournalist who caught famous moments in history on his camera from the birth of the music genre hip hop to the demonstrations against the racist movie *Fort Apache*. How can you use a camera to capture important moments? Choose an event at your school, at your place of worship, or in your larger community. Document the event by taking 3 to 5 photos. In a paragraph or two, explain why these photographs capture the spirit of the event.

“Elba’s Queridos Amigos:” Elba’s Dear Friends

As described in *Best Believe*, Hermana Elba Cabrera became an advocate and ambassador for Latine people in the arts. She collaborated with renowned Latine artists such as Piri Thomas, Tato Laviera, Pura Belpré, Pepon Osorio, and Nicholasa Mohr. Elba would love for you to claim more of your inheritance and learn more about the Latine artists she supported over her career.

Piri Thomas (1928–2011) Author and activist Piri Thomas became one of the first Americans of Puerto Rican descent to win literary acclaim when he published his 1967 memoir *Down These Mean Streets* about his experiences living in Spanish Harlem. Thomas called the book “an explosion from my very soul.”

⁸ Reference: <https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/hiphop/conzo.php>

Richard Saiz said, “Thomas’s distinctive poetic style was the precursor to the youth poetry slams that exploded in the 1990s. Director Jonathan Robinson beautifully captures his voice, infused with a syncopated, rhythmic style, in the documentary, ‘Every Child Is Born a Poet.’”⁹

Poetry Activities:

1. Observe. Listen. Write! Describe your neighborhood streets. Are they mean or kind? Are they busy or quiet? Describe the sights, smells, sounds, and textures of your barrio. Describe the people, their voices, and their attitudes.
2. Create a title for your thoughts. Use this graphic organizer:
Fill-in-the blank with an adjective that describes your neighborhood in one word:
_____ Streets.
You have made a poem! Share the poem with your class.

Tato Laviera (1951–2013) Jesús Abraham “Tato” Laviera was a Afro-Puerto Rican poet and playwright in the United States. Laviera was the author of several collections of poetry, including *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* (1979), *AmeRícan* (1985), *Mainstream Ethics (Etica corriente)* (1988), and *Mixturao and Other Poems* (2008).¹⁰

Writing in the *New York Times*, David Gonzalez said, “His writings, which pulse to the flowing rhythms of Spanish and English, deal with the tug of allegiances to culture and home, as well as race and language.”¹¹

Poetry Activities:

1. Tato felt conflicted. He left Puerto Rico. If he went back, would Puerto Ricans still accept him as one of their own? Could he still declare himself Puerto Rican even though he was no longer living on the island? Read the poem “commonwealth,” by Tato Laviera.¹² Do you think Tato Laviera could still declare himself Puerto Rican? Why or why not? Write your opinion in a paragraph or two.
2. Investigate. Chat with family. What is your ancestral background? Your cultural heritage? What are you comfortable declaring yourself?

⁹ Reference:

<https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/remembering-artist-piri-thomas/#:~:text=Thomas's%20distinctive%20poetic%20style%20was,rhythmic%20style%2C%20in%20the%20documentary>.

¹⁰ Reference:<https://centroarchives.hunter.cuny.edu/repositories/2/resources/112>

¹¹Reference:<https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/remembering-artist-piri-thomas/#:~:text=Piri%20Thomas%20was%20a%20writer,middle%20of%20the%20last%20centur>

¹² Reference: *Commonwealth* by Tato Laviera:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/nyregion/13poemweb.html>

3. Write a list declaring who you are. Start with “I (know) declare I am ...” How many declarations about yourself can you make?

Pura Belpré (1930-1982) was an Afro-Puerto Rican educator who served as the first Puerto Rican librarian in New York City. She was also a writer, collector of folktales, and puppeteer. Her books include *Perez and Martina: A Portorican Folktale* (illustrated by Carlos Sanchez), *The Tiger and the Rabbit, and Other Tales* (illustrated by Kay Peterson Parker), and *Dance of the Animals: A Puerto Rican Folk Tale* (illustrated by P. Galdone).

Belpré resigned her position in 1945 to focus on her writing. According to Hermana Elba Cabrera, after the death of Pura’s spouse, she struggled with money. In 1960, she connected with Hermana Lillian Lopez. Lillian hired Pura and the two worked closely together on the South Bronx Project. Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College (CENTRO) holds the notes and video recording of the interview, as well as news clippings, photographs, scrapbooks, and scripts of Pura’s work with Lilian and the New York Public Library. Pura retired officially in 1968¹³¹⁴.

Reading and Creative Writing Activity:

1. Think about a favorite folktale or fairy tale. Read it aloud. How can you enhance your story telling with art? Can you change the sound of your voice to match a character’s personality? Can you create a drawing, use a prop, or make a puppet? Retell the story with your enhancements.
2. Write your own fairy tale or folktale. How can you bring the story to life with dolls or puppets?
3. Help carry on Pura Belpré’s legacy! Participate in the National Youth Storytelling Showcase! “The Showcase is an annual event sponsored by Timpanogos Storytelling Institute in Lehi, Utah. It’s open to kids from ages 8 to 18 across the country to submit an electronic audition in the hopes of being selected as one of 18 to 20 youth storytellers to be featured in the Showcase.” Click on the link and find out how to participate!¹⁵

¹³ **Reference:**

<https://centropr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/education/pura-belpr%C3%A9-documentary-teaching-guide>

¹⁴ **Reference:**

https://centroarchives.hunter.cuny.edu/repositories/2/resources/37/collection_organization

¹⁵ **Link:** <https://nationalyouthstorytelling.org/>

National Youth Storytelling Showcase: <https://nationalyouthstorytelling.org/>

Pepon Osorio was a Puerto Rican Sculptor and installation artist. Viewers can walk through installation artworks, which often take up an entire room or gallery space. Osorio said of his art installation called “Pepón Osorio: My Beating Heart/Mi Corazón Latiente,” which is at the New Museum, “My mother used to be a baker. My work consists of pouring out knowledge which I gained in the midst of my family. They are very creative people. They used to bake some incredible productions: fountains ... sugar ... dolls ... oceans.”

Of Osorio’s many art installations, including “No Crying in the Barbershop,” he said, my childhood is “my center, the axis of my practice.”¹⁶

Fine Arts Activity:

1. It’s time for you to be an artist like Osorio. Don’t have an entire room to make an art installation. How about a corner of a room? How about making a diorama? A diorama is a replica of a scene, typically a three-dimensional miniature model. The purpose of making a diorama is to showcase your knowledge in a subject. You may have made one in science or history class and displayed your work of genius in a shoebox.

With Osorio’s work in mind, make a diorama. Showcase your family. Choose a room in your house where your family spends a lot of time. Think about what you do in that room. How can you showcase your family, the room, and what they do in that room in your diorama? What colors represent your family? What objects will you make or include? How can you showcase the language and culture of your household in your diorama?

Nicholosa Mohr In 1973, Nicholosa became the first Latin woman in the twentieth century to have her literary works published by the major commercial publishing houses. Mohr published her first book *Nilda* in 1973, which depicts the life of a teenage Puerto Rican girl who confronts prejudices during the World War II era in New York. She was awarded the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award. Along with writing the story, Mohr created the book jacket and eight illustrations for the book. Mohr’s second book, *El Bronx Remembered*, published in 1975, is a collection of stories and a novella about the struggles of Puerto Ricans living in New York from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s. Mohr’s book was named a New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year, making Mohr the first Latina to receive such an honor.

Jane Addams Children’s Book Award Research Activity:

¹⁶ Reference: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/13/arts/design/pepon-osorio-new-museum.html>

1. Do some research. Answer the following questions in writing. What is the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award? What are some books that have won this award? Which ones would you like to read? Make a to-be-read list. Check one of the books out of your school or public library!

Supplemental Timeline

In the **1970s**, 80 percent of housing in the Bronx is lost to fires, and 250,000 people lost their homes. The media reported that the residents were at fault for the fires. Vivian Vázquez Irizarry, who grew up during this period, directed the film *How the Bronx Burned: Decade of Fire*. In it, she reveals that in fact, landlords set fire to their properties for insurance money rather than spend money to repair their properties.¹⁷

In March 1980 the movie, *Fort Apache, The Bronx*, starring Paul Newman, Ed Asner, Danny Aiello, and Pam Grier, begins filming in the Bronx. Evelina reads the script. All Black and Latino people are cast as criminals and all the white people are depicted as heroes. Evelina leads the “Committee Against Fort Apache” (CAFA) to protest the racism in the film. Protesters carry signs with message such as “Fort Apache is an anti-Black, anti-Puerto Rican movie.” Though still problematic, many revisions are made to the script due to the protests and a disclaimer is added at the beginning of the movie. Pepin Osirio includes a depiction of the movie *Fort Apache, The Bronx* in his art installation, “Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?).”

This is the disclaimer that appeared onscreen at the beginning of *Fort Apache, The Bronx*: “The picture you are about to see is a portrayal of the lives of two policemen working out of a precinct in the South Bronx, New York. Because the story involves police work it does not deal with the law-abiding members of the community, nor does it dramatize the efforts of the individuals and groups who are struggling to turn the Bronx around.”¹⁸

The Tres Hermanas and their families worked hard to turn trials and tribulations into triumph. In a commemorative service in **1985**, Aurora Flores spoke about what Evelina Antonetty meant to the community:

“Mujer, compañera, luchadora... ¡MADRE!” Evelina “sparked energy, strength, and courage into these words, standing out as a woman, mother, and champion of the Puerto Rican community. She was the biological mother of three; the grandmother of five; the inspirational

¹⁷ Reference:

<https://jacobin.com/2019/08/decade-of-fire-film-south-bronx-nyc#:~:text=The%20city%20had%20zero%20enforcement,fear%20of%20being%20held%20accountable.>

¹⁸ Reference:

<https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/epza4j/dr-evelina-lopez-antonetty-100-centennial-exhibition-new-york>

mother of the young Latino leadership; the mother of mothers who found themselves in a strange cold land whose language was both harsh to their ears and confusing to their minds. ... the mother of the South Bronx, giving birth (after a long, hard labor) to United Bronx Parents Inc.; the mother of our roots; and with all the fury of a lioness protecting her young,” Evelina “was a mother to those who would oppose this frontline fighter for freedom, dignity, and unity among all people.”¹⁹

In **September 2017**, Evelina’s daughter Lorraine Montenegro was in Puerto Rico when Hurricane Maria hit. Because of the devastation left in the wake of the Hurricane, she did not have access to adequate water and healthcare. Sadly, she transitioned to the afterlife a week after the storm.

In **2018**, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo honored Lorraine’s life’s work helping Bronx families struggling with addiction and cut the ribbons to open The Lorraine Montenegro Women and Children’s Program facility. The intersection at Prospect Avenue and East 156th Street was co-named the “Lorraine Montenegro Way,” just across the street from the “Dra. Evelina Antonetty Way” to honor their powerful legacy.²⁰

¹⁹ **Reference:**

Information from this post came from Nelída Pérez’s encyclopedia entry in *Latina in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Volume 1 (Vicki Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, eds.) and Aurora Flores’s commemoration speech (Aurora Communications, 1985.)

²⁰ **Reference:**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/nyregion/a-life-of-service-ends-in-puerto-rico-but-lives-on-in-the-bronx.html>

<https://www.bxtimes.com/lorraine-montenegro-street-co-naming/>