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Editorial Page

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## A Death That Didn't Suit a Hero

**An educator's unfitting end is even harder to behold for one of the many he helped.**

By Nilda Ruiz

When I was about to graduate from Olney High School, a guidance counselor there told me, in essence, that I was too stupid to go to college. Ignoring the A's and B's on my report card, the counselor told me I should become a non-degreed nurse, saying that was the only school program I would be able to get into. I assume this fit his preconceived notion of an appropriate aspiration for a Puerto Rican girl.

Today I am the chief executive of Philadelphia-based APM (Asociacion Puertorriquenos en Marcha), a nonprofit organization with a \$20 million annual budget and a staff of 142, providing health care, human services, and economic and community development throughout the city. I am doing this because of one man, Joaquin Rivera.

When Rivera, a bilingual counseling assistant at Olney, heard about the guidance counselor's pronouncement, he told me, "Nilda, if you want to go to college, you absolutely can. I will help you." With his great talent for communication, Rivera, much as the spirits in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* did, painted a picture of my academic future. I saw it and was therefore able to achieve it.

Two college degrees later, I owe my professional life to this man, who died among strangers last month at the Aria Health-Frankford Campus emergency room. Ignored by staff, he was later discovered dead only because he was being robbed of his watch.



In my job helping thousands of people in crisis every year, I've seen a lot of devastating situations. I am no stranger to adversity. But I never expected to hear such a story about the death of one of my personal heroes and mentors.

Rivera was an American treasure. He gave me my true future, and he did the same for countless other students day in and day out, for decades, at Olney High. He was an extraordinary educator whose energy, humanity, and caring seemed limitless - until the terrible winter night when he was egregiously neglected and effectively left for dead.

Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* with the intent of highlighting the life-threatening social injustices and grim realities facing England's working class. He used the specters of "Christmas Past" and "Christmas Future" to paint the visions necessary to awaken the wealthy to what was ailing their society. He openly advocated for reform and warned that, without it, "Want" and "Ignorance" - which he personified as demonically menacing children - would lead to "Doom" for everyone, including the rich.

This holiday season is also showing us some pictures we don't want to see. But I will be looking at them. Perhaps this is Rivera's legacy - the spotlight we needed to truly look at the understaffed hospitals, the occupational callousness, the sickness of the people who abused him, the decisions based on ethnic and economic bias, and the inequalities in medical care between suburban and inner-city hospitals.

This is what we need to see. And I will be looking, because that's what Joaquin Rivera taught me to do when he was looking out for me.



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