

Railroad Commission pioneer

■ First woman, minority to serve faced résumé scandal

By CLAY ROBISON
AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — Lena Guerrero, who became the first woman and the first minority to serve on the Texas Railroad Commission but saw her political career unravel over a misstated résumé, died overnight following a long struggle with cancer, friends said Thursday.

She was 50.

A native of Mission in the Rio Grande Valley, Guerrero began working in political campaigns while a student at the University of Texas at Austin. She was still in her 20s when she was elected from Austin to a seat in the Texas House and 33 when then-Gov. Ann Richards named her to fill a mid-term vacancy on the Railroad

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HISTORIC: On Dec. 3, 1990, then-Gov. Ann Richards, right, announced Lena Guerrero's appointment to the Texas Railroad Commission.



DAVID PELLERIN : SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

GUERRERO: She later completed degree, became a lobbyist

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Commission. Her appointment to the previously all-male, all-Anglo oil and natural gas regulatory body was one of the first acts of Richards' new Democratic administration and symbolized a "New Texas" that Richards said she was trying to promote.

But Guerrero's political career crashed in 1992 after it was revealed that she had lied about having graduated from UT-Austin. After resigning from the commission, she tried to regain her seat in the election that year but lost to Republican Barry Williamson.

Guerrero later completed her degree requirements and began a lobby practice in Austin.

Diagnosed in 2000

In a 1998 interview with the Houston Chronicle, Guerrero acknowledged she had made serious mistakes during her resignation ordeal.

"I don't mean to say it wasn't real and it didn't hurt," she said. "But I have learned. And if you can't learn and go on and you dwell too much in the past, then you're really wasting your present."

Guerrero was diagnosed with two malignant brain tumors in 2000 and began "proton beam therapy" at Loma Linda University Medical Center in California. A friend, lobbyist Mignon McGarry, said Guerrero went to California for treatment after being advised by physicians at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston that she would be dead within two years.

"She just decided to fight it," McGarry said, noting she lived long enough to see her son, Leo G. Aguirre, graduate from high school and begin a baseball career at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.

Gov. Rick Perry, who served with Guerrero in the House and who won her re-election endorsement in 2006, directed that flags at the state Capitol and other state buildings be flown at half-staff in her memory. He said she was a "bright, passionate woman who worked hard to represent the interests of her constituents."



CHRONICLE FILE

MOVING ON: In 1998, Guerrero said of the scandal, "I don't mean to say it wasn't real and it didn't hurt. But I have learned."

Former Speaker Pete Laney agreed.

"I don't think there was anyone who was more passionate about their service in the Legislature or (about) their constituents and beliefs," Laney said.

Guerrero served in the Texas House for six years. She made Texas Monthly's 10 Best Legislators list in 1989. She also received favorable publicity in national publications such as Newsweek and USA Today and was awarded a speaking slot at the 1992 Democratic National Convention.

Then the résumé problem erupted.

With tenacity and humor

In a statement issued by former Guerrero aide J. Thomas Stewart, her family called Guerrero a "champion."

"She dealt with the struggles in her personal life in the same way she dealt with those in her public life — with tenacity, vigor and a sense of humor that we will miss more than words can say," the statement said.

A visitation will be held today at 6:30 p.m. at Mission Funeral Home, 6204 S. First in Austin, followed by a rosary at 7:30 p.m. A funeral Mass is scheduled for 9 a.m. Saturday at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, 1206 E. Ninth. Burial will be in the Texas State Cemetery.

Guerrero is survived by her son and her husband, Lionel "Leo" Aguirre.

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Guerrero, former state legislator

LENA GUERRERO, a former Texas House member and appointee to the Texas Railroad Commission, died in her sleep after a long battle with cancer. She was 50. Guerrero was elected to the House in 1984 and served until 1991, when Democratic Gov. Ann Richards appointed her as the first Hispanic and first woman on the Railroad Commission. But Guerrero's political rise ended when, while seeking election to the commission seat, she was forced to acknowledge she had lied about having a University of Texas degree. Republican Barry Williamson defeated her.