

Consuelo Ornelas-Garcia, Northwest Indiana’s First Hispanic Nurse: A Collaboration of IUN Archives & Special Collections and Hispanic Heritage Month

ERIN CASSIDY
Graduate Intern
Indiana University Northwest Archives

NICHOLAS A. CASAS
Assistant Librarian for Teaching & Learning
Indiana University Northwest

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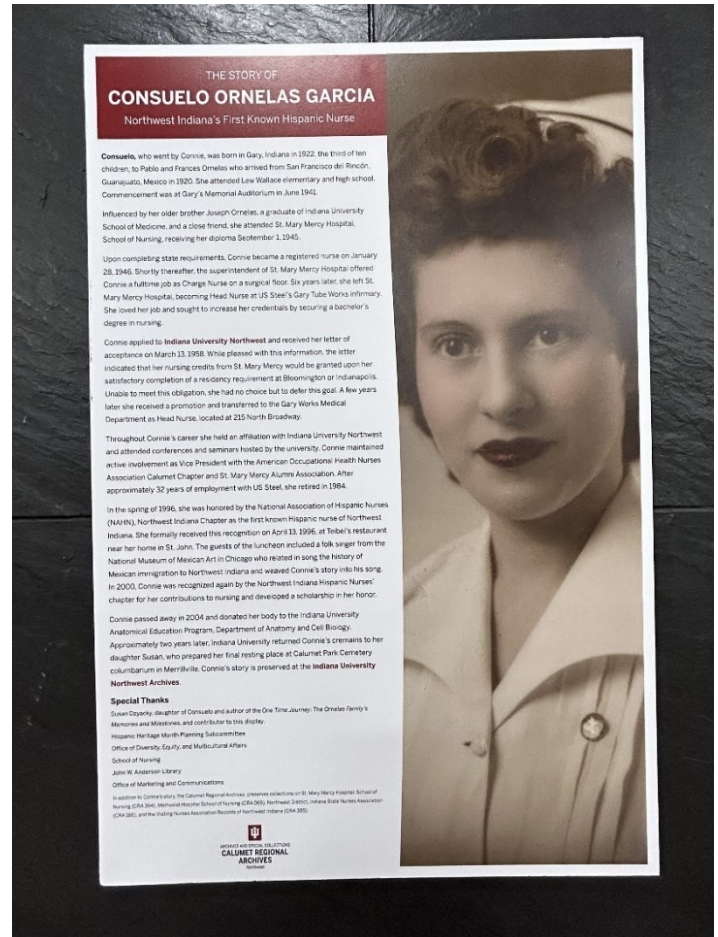
Student viewing the exhibit in the Anderson Library lobby.

Indiana University Northwest (IUN) Archives & Special Collections collaborated with the campus’s Hispanic Heritage Month Planning Committee (HHM) to create a display exhibit of the life of Consuelo “Connie” Ornelas-Garcia, who is Northwest Indiana’s first Hispanic nurse. Jeremy Pekarek, the campus archivist, obtained and secured the materials from the Ornelas-Garcia family. Erin Cassidy, a graduate student at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB), put together the exhibit. Nicholas A. Casas, a librarian at IUN and chair of HHM, helped to promote the exhibit for the campus’s celebration of National Hispanic Heritage Month 2023.

Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) Designation

IUN is Indiana University's only Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and only 1 of 3 in the State of Indiana, a federal designation by the US Department of Education for higher education institutions with a Latine student population of 25% or higher. (IUN's population is 29%.) Because of this designation, it widens the campus's eligibility for national grants and has been responsible for major initiatives on campus including the brand-new STEM Center located in the John W. Anderson Library.

IUN celebrates National Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15 to October 15) with a wide variety of programming such as celebrations and activities. Activities have included an annual major campus celebration with Latin food and live music (with more than 400 attendees), discussions regarding important issues for Latinos, film screenings, arts, and crafts activities, and more. Nicholas A. Casas is chair of the Hispanic Heritage Month Planning Committee (HHM), which consists of 30+ members of students, faculty, and staff across all departments. This year, he wanted to get the library more involved with programming.



Text panel (poster).

Northwest Indiana's First Hispanic Nurse

Consuelo "Connie" Ornelas-Garcia was born in Gary in 1922 to a large immigrant family. She spent her life in Lake County, Indiana, and was influenced by her older brother Joseph Ornelas to go into medicine. In 1945 Connie graduated from St. Mary Mercy Hospital, School of Nursing, becoming Northwest Indiana's first known Hispanic nurse. Within a year Connie was offered a full-time position as a Charge Nurse on a surgical floor of St. Mary Mercy Hospital. Later, Connie left St. Mary Mercy and became the Head Nurse at US Steel's Gary Tube Works infirmary. Working hard, Connie received a promotion to become the Head Nurse of the Gary Works Medical Department. In the Spring of 1996, Consuelo was honored by the National Association of Hispanic Nurses, Northwest Indiana Chapter as the first known Hispanic nurse of Northwest Indiana. Connie loved the medical field so much

that when she passed away in 2004, she donated her body to Indiana University, Anatomical Education Program, Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology. She was finally put to rest in 2006 in Calumet Park Cemetery in Merrillville, Indiana.

Securing the Materials

In the summer of 2023, campus archivist Jeremy Pekarek alerted Casas about securing items belonging to Connie for the Calumet Regional Archives (CRA) located in the IUN Archives & Special Collections. These items include Connie's diploma, her original nursing license, and other nursing belongings. He was working with the Ornelas family to preserve this important milestone for the Region and to make it a collection in the CRA. The items were secured, and Casas placed the exhibit on the calendar of events for IUN's celebration of National Hispanic Heritage Month 2023. Pekarek then designated IUB graduate student Erin Cassidy to put together the exhibit.



Left wall display case.



Right wall display case.

The Exhibit

Putting together an exhibit is not as hard as some might believe. The hardest part is going through all the material, there is picking out not only the most useful information but also things that will catch the eye of the passing viewer. The main goal of looking at all of Consuelo's items was to not only tell her story but to do so in a way that would grab that attention. Because why tell an important story if no one takes the time to stop and learn about it? Leaning on previous experience with fine arts, the goal was very achievable.

The first thing that needed to happen was understanding the materials to tell the story of Connie best while taking care to keep a good number of photos and eye-catching pieces. Eye-catching pieces included the original high school diploma and her original nursing license. The next important part was taking measurements of the shelves and travel cases that were to be used and then sectioning off the table to be used to best figure out the spacing of the items. This was when more of the material needed to be weeded out from the materials that were most important to the exhibit. One of the few items that did not originally belong to Connie was the nursing cape. This cape is from a different woman from a sister hospital but matches the design of one that Connie was found wearing in multiple photos. This cape was also a major eye-catching piece. Even though it was not from Connie or St. Mary Mercy, it was an important part of the display.

After weeding materials and keeping what is the most important, the focus then shifted to see how the story should be told to those who passed by. Using previous knowledge of the school itself, the plan was to have the most eye-catching material, the nursing cape, to be what was first seen as a viewer would enter through the North Entrance. Within this same case, the focus became Connie as a nurse, leading to the middle table holding the travel cases with her nursing license and then her high school diploma. A poster with "The Story of Consuelo Ornelas Garcia" was placed behind these travel cases between the two display cases. These then lead into the second display case which then held the items that focused on the story of Connie. This case held not only the newspaper clippings of the event with the National Association of Hispanic Nurses but also the book about the Ornelas family written by Consuelo's daughter Susan.

National Hispanic Heritage Month 2023

The HHM Committee typically begins planning for National Hispanic Heritage Month very early. From May 2023 the committee solicits programs from many different departments across campus. This was around when Pekarek approached Casas about his communication with the Ornelas family.

After careful planning between Pekarek and Cassidy, the exhibit was officially displayed during National Hispanic Heritage Month. To boost visibility, Casas added it to the official calendar of events, the first-ever exhibit during IUN's celebration of HHM. The official calendar of events is created by IUN's Office of Marketing and Communication (OMC), and

paper flyers and foam poster boards of the calendar are displayed all over campus. This also includes images of the calendar via IUN's major social media accounts.

The exhibit had far reach all over campus and all over Indiana University. IUN was fortunate enough to have a visit from IU President Pamela Whitten during the Hispanic Heritage Month Kick-off Event where she saw the exhibit.