

THE  
LATINA  
EDITION

# THE CHARMED LIFE OF LINDA GRIEGO

Story by Judi Jordan Photos by Ejen Chuang

Like a guided arrow tracking an improbable target, luck follows the intrepid entrepreneur, public servant, and board maven Linda Griego as she pursues her curiosity across the country, around the globe, and back. With every seemingly random chance Griego takes, she comes closer to her powerful destiny with humor, hard work, heart-led strategy, and focus. Latino Leaders honored her achievements with the 2014 Los Angeles Maestro Award. Here is the delicious, inspiring tale of her astonishing life.



LINDA GRIEGO, INSIDE MLK COMMUNITY HOSPITAL OF SOUTH LOS ANGELES. GRIEGO IS ON THE BOARD OF THE BELEAGUERED MEDICAL CENTER THAT IS SCHEDULED TO REOPEN THIS YEAR, AFTER BEING CLOSED FOR EIGHT YEARS.

## DREAM ON

It's 1967 in Tucumcari New Mexico, and the tall, willowy 18-year-old girl with the wide, engaging smile, dark soulful eyes, and straight A's decided to ignore the 'well meaning' high school guidance counselor.

"I had a scholarship to University of New Mexico but I didn't want to go to a local school. I wanted to go to Mills College in Oakland! I'd read about it in a book. . . but my student 'advisor' said "No, your parents can't afford to send you there—they can't afford to send you anywhere! You shouldn't be dreaming like that."

Linda Griego had just encountered one of many obstacles that would melt in the presence of her gentle tenacity. Her calm, determined presence would take her to Washington—twice—before she was 21.

It would also break barriers for Latinos and women in high places, including a rewarding and terrifying tenure as Tom Bradley's Deputy Mayor during the LA Riots, a thorny passage in the aftermath with Rebuild LA, an uphill run for mayor of Los Angeles, and a string of successful entrepreneurship and storied board directorships. She would also experience sexual harassment, and resistance, but Linda loves problem solving and that trait has carried the day for her more than a few times.

But first, back to that seminal moment in 1967.

"I had it in my head that I wanted to go to college but even with a scholarship we couldn't afford it."

Griego put wish into her back pocket and went to work with the rest of her family in a local bakery.

Tucumcari's a small place—population hovers around 5,000, more or less. Word got around that Linda, the first in her extended family to ever graduate high school and now 'dreaming' of college, was stuck in limbo—and elbow deep in flour. Then, it happened. The first of many strange and miraculous events in the life journey of Linda came in the form of a job.

But not just any job.

Griego: "My first grade teacher, Connie Morris' husband was Congressman Tom Morris."

The congressman's aide came by the bakery where the entire Griego family was employed, and spoke to Linda, who was 'still dreaming' while working there trying to save money for her education.

The aide took Linda aside: "Why don't you go to Washington and go work for Congressman Morris, there's an opening."

Griego met the congressman and after an interview, he offered her the job.

"My first questions were who's going to pick me up at the airport, where will I live?"

Known for his compassion, Congressman Morris understood Linda's situation and assured her, "*We will take care of all that.*"

And they did. In what has become a defining characteristic of her life trajectory, Griego said 'Yes'.

She went from backwater to deep water with one word and thus began the ascent. Linda was astonished to realize that she'd be earning a good wage.

"It paid \$400 a month—more than anyone had made in my family." She came from a long line of bakers and railroad workers. Money was always tight at home and she'd always made her own spending money.

Griego recalls, "I arrived in Washington, and I was sort of the 'gofer' you know go for coffee, go to the post office. . .and one of my jobs was 'robo-signing,' this was placing the letters under the machine that put the congressman's signature on 10,000 letters to constituents."

A potentially boring task. But what made it very interesting for Griego was her proximity to power.

"In his office there was a little cubby hole near the congressional office where I did this signing, I could hear everything that was going on—him in discussions with President Johnson—and everyone—it was like a living newspaper or a radio. I was doing 'robo-signing' but it was this ongoing stream of events. I could even watch all these politicians; it was such an education. Tom Morris had been in congress for a long time and was very prominent in armed services, army, navy, later, as result of those days, that would become my area of expertise when everyone else was concerned with the environment or health."

Griego worked during the day and at night attended classes at George Wash-

ington University, and the Department of Agriculture to fill in the gaps in her education. She had quickly realized that her 'inferior' high school education—even with her perfect grades—had not prepared her for the rigors of political letter writing.

The congressman's Chief Of Staff, Anna Marie Ryan, only one of two female COS in the entire government—was patient with her, "But I knew my letter writing was horrible—she'd give me back letters with everything underlined in red".

Linda was—and remains a 'quick learner.'

"I went to school at night—and my letters improved."

This penchant for learning and self-improvement never left Griego; instilled by her beloved grandmother, Aurora Griego, who raised her with wisdom, compassion, and generosity.

"My grandmother only had an eighth grade education but she was the most learned person I ever knew. She always said "If you can't find a job it's because you don't have the skills, so get the skills!"

This shaped Griego's immediate future even when Morris was headed home.

"He lost the election in 1968 and by that time I was planning to come back to New Mexico."

**"WHAT DRIVES ME IS THE CHALLENGE—IT'S ALMOST AN ENGINEERING MIND THAT SAYS O.K. YES—IT'S BAD BUT HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT MENDING IT AND I THINK THAT FOR ME, IN ALL OF MY CAREERS—WHETHER IN GOVERNMENT OR THE PRIVATE SECTOR IT'S ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT TROUBLE SHOOTING, PROBLEM SOLVING, SOMETIMES AT THE MICRO LEVEL SOMETIMES AT THE MACRO LEVEL."**



Back in New Mexico, Senator Joseph Montoya offered Griego a job. This was a pivotal moment when Linda discovered her love of start-ups.

"I thanked him but told him I really wanted to work for somebody new."

Senator Montoya was helpful, and offered to help Griego.

"Well, a friend of mine, Senator Alan Cranston just got elected in California—send me your resume and I'll send it to his office."

Griego: "They called me, I spoke to him and they offered me a job. I really wanted a job in Westwood so I could attend UCLA, but they said "Look we don't have anything in LA now but the first one that opens up—we will let you know—go back to Washington and help us with military, you know a lot of military congressional stuff 'help us with that.'" So I went back to Washington we were all sworn in on the same day in January of '69."

"We were 13 people on staff we did everything—we just worked around the clock. He was such a great person, Senator Cranston. Actually, both he and Congressman Tom Morris were great mentors. I remember there were a lot of Bobby Kennedy staffers that worked great with the senator. It was a very liberal group and they were very busy on the 'Hill.'"

"My job with the senator was defense—anything military, because remember—I came from that background from Congressman Morris' office—and Senator Cranston was an anti Vietnam, anti war, anti nuclear proliferation—and all these staffers were really interested in health and the environment but not military so I was the military person at a very young age. There was an invitation that came to Joint Chiefs Of Staff they were giving a briefing to congressional aides who were the military expertise. So, I went, and when I got there they turned me away—they said no women. I said, 'Well, I am the senator's representative.' They said, 'sorry, you can't come in!'"

She smiles.

LINDA GRIEGO, IN HER RESTAURANT AND COFFEE SHOP, ETCHEA, IN LOS ANGELES. SHE LEARNED TO BAKE FROM HER FAMILY BUSINESS DAYS BACK IN NEW MEXICO.



“The Pentagon is overwhelming, OK? Big buildings, guys with guns, big doors it was very intimidating. Just being there and then to be told go away? So I got in a cab and went back to the senator’s office. I said you need to send a man, they won’t let me in. He said ‘Why aren’t they letting you in?’ I said, ‘they don’t let women in. they’re just men.’ Senator Cranston said, ‘you are my representative—you go back. I will call them right now.’ Linda laughs. . . I was like ‘Senator—they have guns.’ He looked at me and said “Just get back there.”

By now the seminar is ongoing—I walk in the only woman.”  
 “That was my first taste of not taking no for an answer. It gave me this feeling of empowerment —I should have argued and stayed— the senator always gave me opportunities.”

To say that Griego was lucky was not to discount her appetite for hard work. It would evince in her next stop: back to Los Angeles where she also would work full time for the senator in his office while studying full time at UCLA.

Infinitely practical, flexible, and determined, Griego took courses around her work schedule, majoring in History. By 21, Linda was married to attorney Ron Peterson; she’d found the man she’d spend the next forty-five years—and still counting—with.

They went to Africa for their honeymoon and this is where it gets more eclectic. Maybe it was all that travel, but whatever it was, it gave Linda wanderlust.

She left politics. She wanted change and ownership and experimentation. She got it.

Griego went to work for AT&T training as one of the first female installers and successfully ran telephone service crews for a few years. She launched Griego Enterprises, Inc and opened a 700 square foot chili stand on La Cienega Boulevard.

“I left my jobs to follow my passion, where I was making no money, but what I got from my grandmother you should always do something that puts people to work.”

She then opened a 20,000 square foot restaurant in an abandoned Downtown LA firehouse called Engine Company 28, then another restaurant in West Hollywood (Griegosold the chili shop, closed the West Hollywood location but held on to Engine Company for 23 years before selling it).

Griego currently has two new ventures: ‘*Etchea*,’ two Café/Bakeries and Salad/Sandwich shops in Downtown LA featuring delicious Basque French style food and baked goods. But this parallel food universe would co-exist with Linda’s board management and return to politics. . . sort of.

Impressing people with her business skills, heart and tenacity, Griego came to the attention of Tom Bradley, (Los Angeles’ mayor from 1973-1993 who became the second African-American mayor of a major city) who invited her to be Deputy Mayor. After they survived the riots, Linda was hired to head Rebuild LA.

Seeing the great dearth of jobs as the city’s key problem—one she could fix—Griego decided she’d like to be LA’s first female mayor. That didn’t happen but she made a ton of good contacts and all along she’d been working on the boards of non-profits, for-profits and various foundations.

Over the years, Griego has served on at least 30 different boards. With every step she’s made inroads, fans, and colleagues to forge a better LA.

The time was coming for her big third act. It arrived in the form of a chal-

lenge: The beleaguered Martin Luther King Community Hospital, which served the economically-challenged sector of South Los Angeles and closed in 2007 after complaints, required additional funding to support much needed facilities for an expanded maternity ward and more. Ten plus million dollars later, thanks to the hard work of Linda Griego and her colleagues, the ward will open with the new Hospital in spring 2015.

#### A WITNESS TO HISTORY: GRIEGO ON THE TWO APRIL KING RIOTS

“When Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, I was working for Congressman Morris; I was at a Democratic fundraiser at one of these big hotel. [President] Lyndon Johnson was set to give remarks. Right in the middle of the dinner someone comes up to the speaker and says “Dr. . . .the Reverend Martin Luther King was just assassinated.” The room—there was a thousand people— went quiet, just quiet. Then the sirens went—you could hear sirens everywhere. I was pretty young and I thought, oh my God what’s going to happen?”

“There were no cabs available, no buses. It was chaos—total chaos. We got a ride home from someone from the building in the where we lived. Shops were closed, there was no food. It was a hard time. The hardest was looking out the window of our apartment building and seeing smoke everywhere—all around us— my roommates’ parents kept calling; they were from North Dakota.”

“I got no calls. I thought maybe they didn’t know that there were riots going on so I called my grandmother and said ‘I just want you to know that I’m OK.’ ‘She says ‘Of course you are!’”

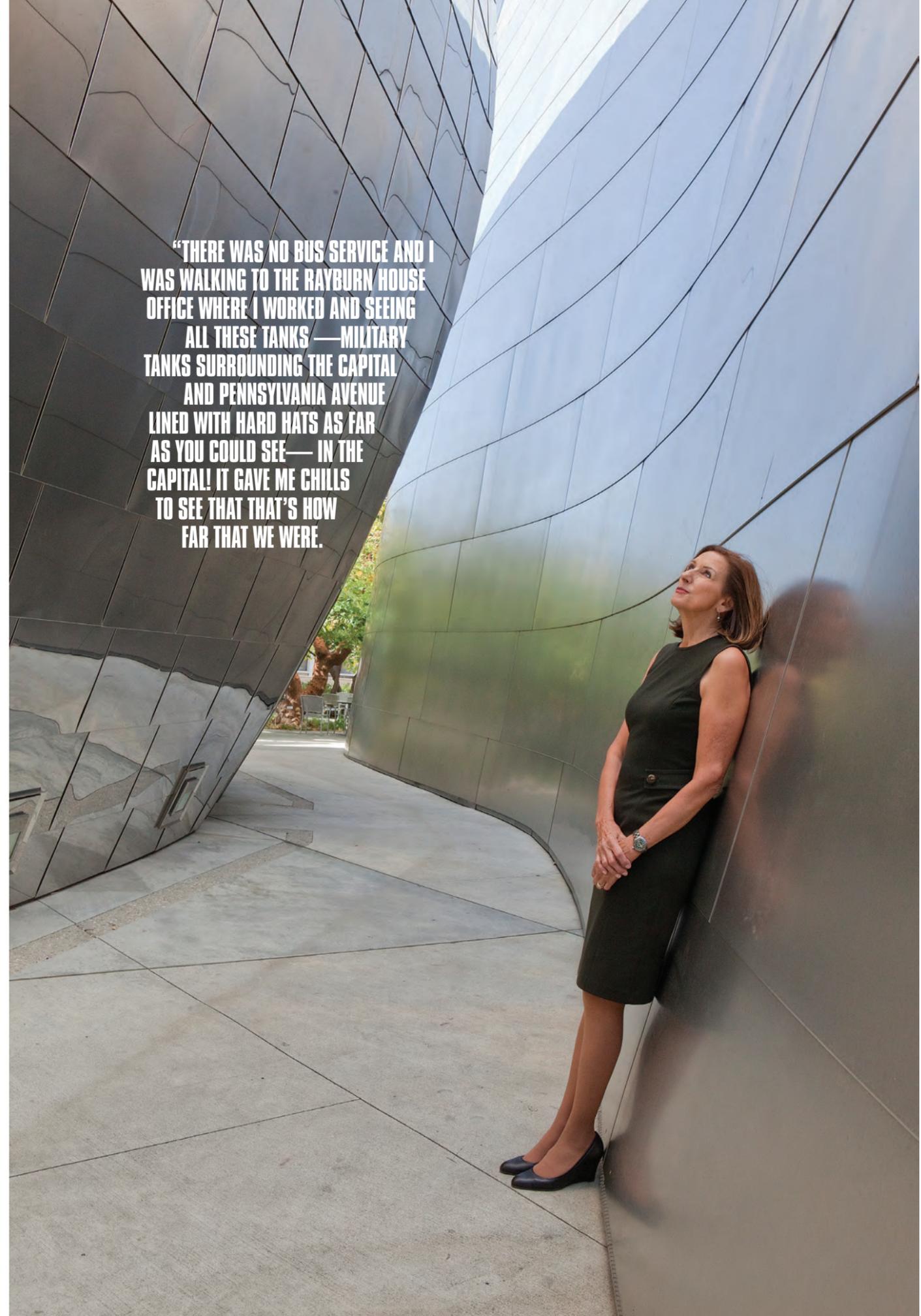
Linda’s expression recalls her confusion. “I said, ‘Oh, OK.’”

She thought maybe they hadn’t heard about the riots.

“I said, are you watching the television?”

Griego’s grandmother Aurora, always wise and unshakable replied, “Oh yes! It’s about time! Sometimes you have to take to the streets— sometimes that’s what it takes. Because nothing has changed and people have to sometimes do what they are doing.”

“THERE WAS NO BUS SERVICE AND I WAS WALKING TO THE RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE WHERE I WORKED AND SEEING ALL THESE TANKS —MILITARY TANKS SURROUNDING THE CAPITAL AND PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE LINED WITH HARD HATS AS FAR AS YOU COULD SEE— IN THE CAPITAL! IT GAVE ME CHILLS TO SEE THAT THAT’S HOW FAR THAT WE WERE.”



LINDA GRIEGO, IN DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES.

Griego recalls, "That gave me a level of comfort where I thought, 'I don't have to be scared. I just have to know why this is happening.'"

In light of recent similar civil unrests that have happened or nearly occurred—think last year's Ferguson incident and others—Griego believes that her experiences in some of the most seminal violent, mass events in recent American history are noteworthy. So she continues with her tale about the riots after Dr. King's assassination.

"There was no bus service and I was walking to the Rayburn House Office where I worked and seeing all these tanks—military tanks surrounding the capital and Pennsylvania Avenue lined with hard hats as far as you could see—in the capital! It gave me chills to see that that's how far that we were. And I remember walking in the building—it was deserted! A lone

tor. There's a sense of you rally to the challenge—not throwing your hands up, not hiding in a corner. It's sort of what do we have to do, what legislation must we enact—protection of elected officials and a whole bunch of things began to happen. It was a very difficult time."

Some twenty-four years, later Griego experienced déjà vu with the LA Riots after the Rodney King trial verdict [acquitting the four officers who severely beat King, an African-American motorist]; 53 people died, 3,600 fires were set, 1,100 buildings were destroyed, damages came in at between 800 million and 1 billion.

Griego: "In 1992. I was with Mayor Bradley in his office I was deputy. Mayor my charge was economic development working with small businesses. We were in a deep recession. LA County had lost about 200,000 jobs and we had a high unemployment rate everywhere and in high poverty neighborhoods even higher. It was a powder keg. All of it was coming kind of to a head. I was with Tom Bradley when we heard the verdict. And all the color in his face went out—he just turned ashen—I will never forget that, probably as close to fainting as I'd ever seen someone strong like him. He just sat down and it was like he shrank. He knew what was coming."

She continues: "We were watching the television and he said immediately, 'Get all the ministers on the line! We need to get with the police, the fire dept everyone who is going to be impacted needs to get on board.'"

Linda lived right in the middle of the area surrounded by the riots at the time.

"I lived in the Baldwin Hills area. I couldn't get home, the fires were basically all around! A friend of mine called saying, 'Do not come around in your city car—it looks like a cop car—drive your own car.'"

"So there was a lot happening in personal terms. It was a hard, hard time because neighborhoods were calling us and saying, 'we're protecting our grocery stores. A lot of neighbors got trashcans and they held hands and stood out front and they were asking, 'When is the National Guard coming?'"

"It wasn't coming. It didn't come. It went to Orange County. And they mobilized in Anaheim. Part of it was Daryl Gates [Chief of Police and Mayor Bradley's nemesis], who said we didn't need it. And he wasn't in

town when it happened and neither were his top deputies. They were all at some conference in Simi Valley—they were not here, so the police were mobilized with no command; they were at the coliseum without radios, they didn't have a way to communicate with the Sheriff. It was like Keystone Cops. Everybody was going every which way but nobody knew why. The fire department was at terrible risk—it was really hard for them to put out the fires because there were snipers. Some buildings were left to burn. Buildings were left to burn in my neighborhood. Finally, it calmed down."

### NO STINKIN' BADGES NECESSARY

"When he called I thought someone was playing a joke—he said, 'this is Tom Bradley, I'd like you to come work for me'."

She summed up her relationship with LA's five-term mayor Tom Bradley in one word: "Fabulous. A man of few words but unbelievable doer." Linda laughs. "I remember one time I had to fill in for him to make a speech—he couldn't make it so he asked

if I would do it—and I said, 'what should I say?'" and he says, 'Make it short.'

When she ran for office, she had his support.

"It was the gamble I took, and Bradley said, 'You have nothing to lose by trying.' He was great." After losing her bid for mayor, Griego typically saw the bright side.

"So I lost but you actually come out a winner anyway because you get to meet so many people. And right after that is when I went to Rebuild IA after the election in '93," she says. "I could still do what I set out to do—just not through elected office."

### THE LAST TEN MILLION ARE ALWAYS THE HARDEST: MLK COMMUNITY HOSPITAL

"The last five years I've spent working to reopen a new Martin Luther King Community Hospital."

Sometimes even Linda Griego gets frustrated. The 'underfunded' but badly needed hospital is just about to open its' doors again thanks to the tenacity of the foundation's board—Griego's brainchild.

"It became clear that this hospital needed a foundation for the things that the county was not going to put into the hospital. So... example: the OB center the county plan had 5 beds. But it became very clear to us that we would need a properly sized OB center of 17 beds. A maternity ward—the whole thing."

"Something like 95 percent of women who had births at the old MLK came through the emergency room. So the need was great. It was going to cost around ten million dollars and it's hard to raise 10 million with the legacy of the old hospital. People were like, 'Wait 'til you open then come see us—because we don't believe it's even going to get open.'"

"So there was a lot of negativity getting the funds in the beginning quite a task. But! We set out to do it. Foundation, great board members. We were determined to raise this money. The dilemma was the construction crews were on site, so we needed the money—now. We did we raised the 10 million—in fact we raised more than that cause they needed an MRI machine, and we had two sold out luncheons last year and this year on MLK's birthday and this brought in an additional one million eight hundred thousand from 650 people at each lunch. It established the hospital as a real thing—the hospital is done."

### THE BUCKET LIST OF A DO-ER, NOT A DIVA

Tall, lean and fit, with a calm, confident, magnetic spirit; Linda Griego is a happy collision of genetics, sturdy New Mexican stock and the glow that a lifetime of good work and fulfilled dreams gives a person.

Her survival skills honed from an early age, Griego was guided by her adored *abuela*, Aurora Griego, who raised her. Linda's love of learning and wisdom came therefore from a reliable and worthy source of life, tried and tested by fire. As result, there is something regal, yet low key about Linda Griego.



MLK COMMUNITY HOSPITAL. LINDA GRIEGO AND THE BOARD HELPED RAISE FUNDS FOR THE EMBATTLED HOSPITAL.

congressman from Illinois was there; he asked us 'What are you doing here?' We answered, 'we're here because the congressman's in New Mexico. We have to work.' He said, 'No. You have to leave. You close down the office and go.'"

"It was a good five days of rioting. In Washington! It doesn't feel like we've done a good job. Like, why did this have to happen? And then you start seeing the unemployment rate is high, the access to good jobs is not there, all of a sudden it brings up all issues that cause people to take matters into their own hands."

"And at the same time I also saw that these are small business people just trying to make a living and then, not long after we have the assassination of Bobby Kennedy! Yet you're working for a congressman or a sena-



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Years of power and responsibility rest lightly on her strong shoulders; she has been there and done that—and *that* too—time and again, but there is no world-weariness about her to spoil the effect.

She stays energized with Pilates, fresh, light food, and big goals. Like a career monarch born to the throne, she accepts the price of her accomplishments without complaint—and is willing to fail—if it means that she can try again. It is an appetite for service and life that keeps her shining.

Her 14<sup>th</sup> floor condo's view of Downtown LA's skyline is a tribute to the rebirth of the area many wrote off as uninhabitable. A spacious, modern comfort prevails with an earthy color scheme of tans and blues; natural materials and warm functionality. It is casually elegant; no laurel-resting monument, no walls full of plaques or dusty awards she must have accumulated in her 66 years.

There is zero pretention. It's a streamlined approach to life filled to the brim with fresh goals and meticulous strategy.

Griego has taken good care of her family in New Mexico and become the matriarch after the death of her beloved *abuela*, Aurora, at age 93. Married 45 years, She explains "We were never blessed with children, but we practically raised nieces and nephews, we've been though the parenting experience—the car wrecks and things burning."

Very connected to the history of her people, Linda has one foot in the past; her heritage; raising the bar of engagement, and one in the future. Her family has 400 years in New Mexico and her attachment to the land is absolute. She has a ranch and an even big dream.

She's going to build a *town*.

## BUILD IT AND THEY WILL STAY

Griego knows that not everyone has a magic flying carpet waiting to transport them to DC, L.A., or even Albuquerque. On her bucket list is rebuilding Chama, a small New Mexican town, as a picturesque, prosperous place where artists and locals can own businesses and thrive, not just survive. Her idea of retirement is to build a village for Latinos to own, to share.

"I'd like to bring businesses there, train people to open businesses, to put my money there. And I will."

"There are these beautiful little villages, but none of the young stay there. The high dropout rate and health is really, really bad—they're just a lot of needs. It's like the opposite of LA in terms of size, the town I'm speaking of, Chama is population of 1200 people. Compare that to ten million in LA but the systemic impoverished neighborhoods are no different. They are just more rural—but the needs of kids staying in school are the same. The community would incorporate a lot of the arts. A lot of artists live there. Chama, when you're driving in, has two dilapidated, abandoned, buildings on either side of the highway. Maybe I can create micro lending to allow people to fix up their cafés and shops... that's a dream, I've always had, and I will do. You give back more than you get."

## BOARD SURFING

"I remember an interview I went to with an LA trustee for a foundation and the topic was about rebuilding. He asked, 'well, do the gangs let you rebuild?' I said it never occurred to me to ask them. The question was so off

**"MY GRANDMOTHER WOULD ALWAYS SAY . . . 'WALK THROUGH THAT DOOR . . . AND LEAVE THAT DOOR OPEN. NEVER CLOSE IT BEHIND YOU. THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEONE THAT NEEDS YOUR HELP JUST BECAUSE YOU'VE MADE YOUR MONEY OR BECAUSE YOU'VE ACHIEVED A LOT—IT'S NOT OVER.'"**



base it took me aback! That question got me interested in getting on that board because it told me how out of touch someone could be that wields a lot of power through philanthropy. This was the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation."

Griego joined and worked on that board for 12 years. Her City Hall experience and mayoral run opened the vaults.

"Because of the visibility you get; First Interstate Bank asked me to join their board of directors. I had never even thought of something like that—I mean I couldn't even get a loan when I was getting my start so to be asked to go on a bank board was pretty amazing."

"I was the first woman to go on their board. Great bank, great executives and then there was a Wells Fargo hostile takeover three years later. So for ten years I was serving on bank boards. That one went away then I went on the Tokai Bank and then Tokai was merged with San Juan and that was sold too... there were bank mergers—a lot of bank mergers at the time. A lot of consolidation."

"Board service is extremely rewarding but you have to be prepared for good times and bad times," Griego says. "My grandmother would always say... 'Walk through that door...and leave that door open. Never close it behind you. There is always someone that needs your help. Just because you've made your money or because you've achieved a lot—it's not over.'"