

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE1825

Cruz, Elba

(1945 -)

Born 19451209, Chepica Colchagua Province Chile

Occupation Union activist, Women's Refuge Worker

Summary

Elba was born into a strongly socialist working-class family in Chile, which became closely associated with the government of Salvador Allende and was forced to flee Chile following his assassination. On settling in Canberra she instigated a strike of workers at the Health Services Supply Services laundry at Mitchell in 1987. In 1991 she joined the staff of the Beryl Women's Refuge, where she is still employed. She has assisted many Chilean refugees settle in Canberra and has been involved in a number of community organizations.

Details

Elba Cruz was born in 1945 in Chepica, Chile, daughter of Leopoldo Cruz-Soto and Maria Magdalena Zavalla-Jimenes. Her father, a self-employed sharecropper and community leader, imbued her and her six siblings with strong sense of social justice and socialist and communist values.

Dyslexia impeded Elba's education and she left school at about 14 to help her mother in the home. At 18 she went to Santiago where she worked in a men's clothing factory, participated in union activities, and in 1969 married Leonardo Valenzuela Ramirez, a carpenter.

Elba and her husband worked to promote community development centres in suburbs and country towns under the Allende government, and two of her brothers became Allende's unofficial bodyguards. One of her brothers was at the Presidential Palace (Moneda) in November 1973 when Allende was assassinated. The other brother was at the Intendencia (the Santiago administration office). This brother was arrested and executed three days after the coup. The other brother who was at the Moneda in the morning of the coup was imprisoned, tortured, and released after four months.

Her husband was granted refuge in Argentina and Elba followed him with her three small children in November 1974. They lived there for three years under UN protection and another child was born, before the family was accepted as refugees by Australia in 1977. They settled initially in Adelaide, then came to Canberra, where her husband worked as a carpenter and she studied English.

In the early 1980s Elba worked as cook, a cleaner in a hotel and hospital, and as a casual worker at the Health Services Supply Services laundry at Mitchell. In 1987 she initiated a successful three week strike over employment conditions at the laundry, and subsequently became the union representative there. After six years she developed RSI and was forced to seek less physically demanding work.

In 1991 she joined the staff of the Beryl Women's Refuge, where she is still employed. She has assisted many Chilean refugees settle in Canberra and has been involved in a number of community organizations such as the Chilean Solidarity Committee, a support organization for Argentinean refugees, the Chilean broadcasting program on 2XX and ANESBWA (Association of Non-English-Speaking Background Women of Australia).

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Sound recording

Migrant women in the workforce [sound recording] : an oral history series documenting the working lives of migrant women in Australia, National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcaster's Council, 2001

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Elba Cruz-Zavalla interviewed by Ann-Mari Jordens \[sound recording\]](#)

Author Details

Ann-Mari Jordens

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