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“Becky Villarreal: The Yellow Rose of Texas”

by Karen Karvonen

If someone had warned Becky Villarreal that switching from a career as a secondary school teacher to one as a college teacher would plunge her into a hotbed of activism, she might have had second thoughts.

“Believe it or not, the reason I decided to leave K-12 was that it was too political,” says the 43-year-old, whose recent crusade has made it possible for adjuncts at all Texas community colleges to join the state’s health benefits plan.

What has kept this Austin Community College (ACC) English teacher committed to her cause is her strong desire to improve the lives of her fellow adjuncts. Not only is she pushing the state to pay for their health insurance and expand coverage, she is also advocating for job security, higher salaries, comparable retirement benefits and a greater voice in college governance.

Coupled with her missionary zeal is her growing self-confidence that she can step on some big-sized Texas toes in the state legislature and win. Although Villarreal has lost a number of the battles, she and her supporters have picked up enough ground to encourage them to continue the fight to improve the working conditions of adjuncts at Texas’s 50 public community college districts.

Birth of an Activist

Going back for her master’s degree in English at Angelo State University in San Angelo, Texas in 1994, Becky Villarreal soon found her niche in college teaching. (She is currently studying in a doctoral program at Capella University.)

“When I became a graduate assistant, I realized that I was really good with adult learners,” explains Villarreal. “At the time, I thought I would become a full-time college English professor, but I had no idea then how difficult it [landing a tenure-track job] was going to be.”

When Villarreal graduated in 1996, she ran into her first academic Catch-22; in order to get hired as a professor by the four-year university, she needed a Ph.D., but Angelo State did not offer a doctoral program in English. So Villarreal started teaching at nearby Howard Community College as an adjunct.

“That’s where my adjunct activism ignited,” recalls Villarreal. A popular teacher,

Villarreal had little trouble filling her classes. Teaching went well until one semester another teacher's classes didn't fill, and the Provost decided to give that faculty member Villarreal's classes.

"Of course I objected to that," says Villarreal. "[However,] there was no association for adjunct faculty, and I had heard that when someone had tried to start one up, they were not asked to come back. [The Provost] told me there was nothing I could do about it since I was not on contract. So I contacted an attorney who said that I had been given a verbal agreement that those were my classes, and the college couldn't take them away without due cause."

After the attorney contacted college officials, Villarreal's classes were reinstated.

Second-Class Citizens

In 1998, Villarreal and her family moved to Austin, where she began teaching at Austin Community College. Not only was the pay better, but Austin's adjuncts were better organized and supported by the college's Board of Trustees and President. Villarreal promptly became involved with school's Adjunct Faculty Association (AFA).

Villarreal's quest to improve access to health benefits for her adjunct colleagues didn't begin until she was hired by ACC as a half-time student advisor in 2001. It was then that she discovered she was entitled to benefits for the first time, and wanted to help other adjunct faculty have access to ACC's health insurance program, as well.

"But when I asked the head of benefits at the college, he told me point blank, 'Adjuncts at ACC will never have health benefits.' That lit a fire in me."

Villarreal's struggles with her own health have made her particularly sensitive to others' medical concerns. Several years ago, she weighed more than 360 pounds and was told by her doctor that she might not live to see 50.

"Now that I am healthy [Villarreal had weight loss surgery in 2003], I am on a mission to help other people stay healthy," she says. "I am also concerned about the future of higher education. ...[I]t sets a bad example for our students when they see us being underpaid and denied health and retirement benefits."

As Villarreal investigated further, she teamed up with Charles Zucker, the Executive Director of the Texas Faculty Association (TFA), and other adjunct advocates, including members of the college's local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (ACC-AFT), and the AFA. Led by Villarreal, these brave activists ended up wrangling with the Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS). What they encountered was Kafkaesque. According to an antiquated statute of the Texas Employees Uniform Group Insurance Act, an employee

eligible for state-mandated health benefits had to also be eligible for participation in TRS. However TRS would only provide benefits to part-time employees if they were paid at a rate comparable to their full-time faculty.

“It doesn’t make sense to hold adjuncts up to this standard,” says Zucker. “You have some full-time professors making up to \$90,000 and full-time lecturers, who teach eight courses a year, making \$30,000.” This inequity was further highlighted when the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board reported in 2001 that 69 percent of all community college instructors in the state were adjuncts, many teaching more than half-time.

“We have adjuncts who teach eight to 12 classes a year—basically a full-time load,” says Villarreal. “A lot of them have taught for many years and are on multiple semester term contracts. Some adjuncts have even been asked to fill in as temporary full-time faculty without getting benefits.”

Benefits Battle

At this point, she turned to the legislature to help overturn the outdated TRS regulation. In 2001, she helped write and introduce legislation (Texas House Bill 3510) that stipulated that adjuncts who worked half-time would receive benefits. Villarreal encouraged adjuncts to contact their state congressmen and senators in support of the legislation.

“That bill died in committee,” says Villarreal. It didn’t discourage me though, because we had made a great impression on the legislators, particularly the chair of the Higher Education Committee.”

In early 2003 an opportunity arose to change the law again when Texas House of Representatives Democrat Kevin Bailey filed House Bill 2639 to provide long-term adjuncts with paid health benefits. Unfortunately, that legislation was a victim of the state’s budget deficit—it died in committee, as well.

“That’s when I got a call from Charles to get all the adjuncts to call their legislators. He had been meeting with Republican state Representative Diane Delisi, who chairs a special committee on compensation for state employers, about the adjuncts’ plight,” says Villarreal.

Given the severity of the state’s budget crunch, Delisi felt the best the adjuncts could do was to get an amendment added to a general benefits bill that overrode the comparable pay provision, and made long-term adjuncts (who had taught a certain number of courses) eligible for benefits at their own expense. The proposed legislation, which eventually passed on May 19, 2003 as Senate Bill 1370, extended those benefits to adjuncts who’d taught continuously for three years, and who’d be teaching at least 12 semester credit hours.

“Becky was really instrumental in mobilizing people so that we got a whole bunch of phone calls made to the legislators after [Senate Bill 1370] was amended,” says Zucker. “That was crucial, because the bill went before a conference committee that could have tossed it out. She kept the pressure on the legislators to let them know how important the bill was, and did a lot of hard work to make sure that amendment stuck.”

Another Skirmish

While SB 1370’s passage was a victory for adjuncts state-wide, Villarreal was far from satisfied.

“After SB 1370 became law, I had some adjuncts calling me in tears. One woman, told me, ‘I have been teaching with a college for 15 years and took one semester off to take care of my sick husband, and now human resources is telling me I can’t get benefits.’”

Spurred on by stories such as the one above, Villarreal redoubled her efforts. She garnered support for House Bill 3031, which would have ensured eligibility for health insurance if adjuncts taught a single course in the preceding year and reduced the required credit hours from 12 to 6. On April 21, 2005, Villarreal testified in front of the legislature on the bill’s behalf.

“The bill I sponsored would have allowed many more adjunct faculty members to participate in the health care plans offered by the community colleges that employ them. [The bill would have] lowered the number of credit hours an adjunct faculty member had to teach to become eligible,” says Texas state Representative Democrat Mark Strama. “Unfortunately, the bill was left pending in committee.”

Despite that blow, Becky Villarreal perseveres, keeping her eye on the prize—never forgetting Texas’s tens of thousands of adjuncts whose health, or even lives, may have been jeopardized by the state’s long-standing unwillingness to extend access to health benefits.

“One long-serving adjunct I knew at Austin Community College died shortly after becoming eligible [for health insurance coverage],” says Villarreal. “A lot of us believe that if she would have had insurance five years before, her cancer might have been detected before it spread.”

Someday, Villarreal hopes to have the state underwrite the cost of adjuncts’ health benefits. The \$300 dollar monthly premiums are prohibitive for many part-timers. She politely pressures Austin Community College’s Human Resource office to better inform adjuncts about their health benefits options. She advocates

for the hiring of long-term adjuncts for full-time faculty positions. And when the college unexpectedly announced in August 2003 that they were going to provide long-term adjuncts with paid health benefits, and then reneged one week later, she filed a grievance.

Becky Villarreal regularly hears from upset adjuncts who tell her that they are still being refused health insurance. Villarreal responds by reporting the noncompliant colleges to the media. In addition, she is working to build a state-wide adjunct association, even though she is aware that many adjuncts fear that organizing or participating in such a group could get them fired.

“I wish we had a 100 more people like Becky,” says the TFA’s Charles Zucker. “We’d get a lot further with adjunct rights with more people like her.”

Bills. Bills. And More Bills.

These are the bills introduced in the Texas State legislature on behalf of the state’s part-time faculty thanks to Becky Villarreal’s advocacy:

1. 2001: Texas House Bill 3510. This bill stipulated that adjuncts who worked half-time would receive paid health benefits. The bill died in committee.
2. 2003: Texas House Bill 2639. This bill called for the state to provide long-term adjuncts with paid health benefits. The bill died in committee.
3. 2003: Texas Senate Bill 1370. An amendment to this bill called for access to self-funded health insurance for part-time faculty who’d taught at least 12 credit hours per year for three years. This bill passed.
4. 2005: Texas House Bill 3031: This bill called for access to self-funded health insurance for part-time faculty who taught at least 6 credit hours per year and at least one course in the preceding year. The bill died in committee.