

Manchester's Eva Castillo to receive First Amendment Award

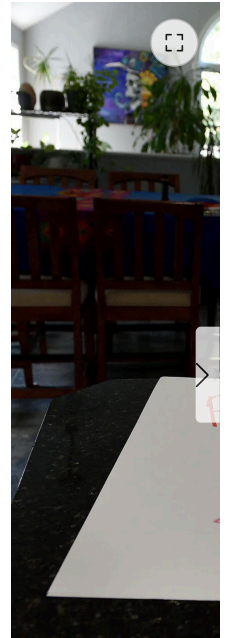
Manchester advocate Eva Castillo will receive the First Amendment Award Monday at Saint Anselm College for decades of civic engagement and immigrant-rights advocacy.



Gabriel Perry
Union Leader Staff



Eva Castillo speaks with a reporter at home. Castillo, the founder and longtime director of the NH Alliance for Immigrants and Refugees, will be honored Monday. DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER



Eva Castillo adds a peace sign to a wall Monday, Castillo will

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Eva Castillo of Manchester has spent decades organizing and fighting for the principles she holds most deeply.

On Monday, she's set to receive the First Amendment Award at the Mackey S. Loeb School of Communications at Saint Anselm College.

The founder and longtime director of the New Hampshire Alliance for Immigrants and Refugees, Castillo is widely recognized as one of the state's leading advocates.

Castillo also sits on Manchester's Police Commission and created New Hampshire's chapter of Welcoming America, which promotes understanding and positive integration between immigrants and their new communities.

The judges for the First Amendment Award lauded Castillo for "her commitment to exercising First Amendment freedoms on behalf of New Hampshire communities whose voices are often underrepresented, as well as her public advocacy for the rights of immigrants."

"Become civically engaged, go talk to the mayor and the alderman, go talk to the police, go talk to the legislators," Castillo said.



She has also led civic engagement and voter education initiatives that help community members better understand their rights, responsibilities and opportunities to participate in the democratic process, according to a statement from Susan Geier, executive director of the Loeb School.

The First Amendment Awards ceremony will be held at 5:30 p.m. at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm on Monday. Howard Brodsky, co-founder of CCA Global Partners, will also be honored with the school's Quill & Ink Award for "his longstanding commitment to advancing First Amendment education in New Hampshire." Former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg is the keynote speaker for the sold-out event.

Coming to America

Castillo came to the United States in 1975, initially moving to Michigan to attend Western Michigan University. But Castillo's story begins in 1956 in Caracas, Venezuela, when social and political conditions in the South American capital city were significantly different than they are today.

"We had a great life, then (Hugo) Chavez won the election," Castillo said.

Later in life, she returned to Venezuela for about a decade before making the decision to live in the United States permanently.

Castillo's father was a businessman who operated shops and textile factories. She attended private Catholic school until graduating in 1974. It was in Michigan that, for the first time, Castillo recognized the privilege of her background and noticed the stratification of race and class in the United States.

Castillo studied business administration, fashion merchandising and French before earning a graduate degree in business administration. While in Kalamazoo, she socialized broadly with other immigrants from all backgrounds.

"It was good. It was very exciting for me to meet people from different parts of the world," she said.

It was also there that she began volunteering in a mental health center serving the Latino population.

"That's how I really learned what the issues were of people who did not speak the language — that they don't have the education or the privilege that I had," Castillo said. "I just took it for granted."

Her connection to New Hampshire began much earlier.

A college friend of her mother's lived in Manchester and during the 1960s, her family visited the state on vacation.

Castillo would return to the Granite State as a resident around 1984 and was married to her husband, Jean, in 1985.

Issues with her visa — she'd since quit attending New Hampshire College — caused the young couple to move to Venezuela around 1989. They remained there until shortly after Chavez won the presidential election in 1998.

"Within a year we were back because Jean said, 'You know, a uniform in power, that's not good, that's kind of fishy,'" she said. "Things started going bad. So, we decided, 'OK, let's go back.'"



After a brief stop in Jacksonville, Florida, they were back in Manchester amid a housing crisis.

Castillo began volunteering in a Latino community center where she'd made connections before.

"I was always doing something," she said. "There was a period of time in 2004, 2005, when we had 287(g) agreements. Hudson, New Hampshire, had the only agreement in the state. Now, we have 28 police departments having it. And there were a few anti-immigrant bills at the State House."

Castillo said she and her colleagues spent considerable energy defeating those bills and advocating on behalf of immigrants with respect to legislation affecting drivers' licenses, rent, racial profiling in policing and other employment concerns.

"First of all, we have to defend the rights of everybody who exists. We need to practice what we preach," she said.

"Learn to communicate and to talk to people and respect one another. The fact that somebody's on the opposite side of the table, see it not as a war, they're not your enemy and don't make them your enemy.

"Social justice is a never-ending story, there's ups and downs," she said. "Sometimes it gets better, but the forces of evil are always lurking."



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