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## ***Dr. Carmen Tafolla: Author, Performer, Educator***

*By Robert H. Leos*

**D**r. Carmen Tafolla doesn't take a traditional approach to teaching. After earning a doctorate in education from The University of Texas at Austin, she set her sights on educating a broad citizenry on the need to better understand and appreciate cultural diversity and to more effectively teach a diversity of children. She is passionate in her belief that schools should be developing "creative education" programs that foster children's curiosity and creativity—programs that allow children time to develop and play with ideas and engage in activities not necessarily tied to formal accountability measures. Dr. Tafolla spreads her message with public speaking engagements, artistic performances, and writing, including short stories and poetry for children and adults. Her works are featured in so many publications that she is considered one of the most "anthologized" Latina writers of all time.

Dr. Tafolla took time at her home in San Antonio to discuss her writing and performing, as well as her thoughts on unlocking a child's creativity. She was joined for part of the interview by her husband, Ernesto M. Bernal, Ph.D., a nationally recognized consultant in bilingual and gifted education.



*Dr. Carmen Tafolla*

## Teaching by Performing

I've taken a nonstandard approach to my profession. With my academic training I could go to a university and teach bilingual education, prepare teachers, do standard teacher training, and prepare academic publications. I like to joke that I do academic publications "when I have nothing better to do;" but it's just a joke that I hope helps people consider different routes, different paths to where they would like to go.

Most of my work consists of writing and speaking to audiences. I feel like I make a difference in that way. Since people outside the field of education are influencing education so heavily, we need to reach the people outside of education with some of the basic concepts of education.

What has provided my livelihood for the last 15 years has been performing my one-woman show where I perform characters who, in an academic journal, would be descriptions of case studies. That has less impact on the reader, however, than to hear it in the voice and emotions of that individual.

I perform to groups way outside of education. Yes, I often perform for teachers, administrators, school boards and state departments of education, but I also reach social workers, doctors & health care workers, grandparents raising grandchildren, and professional groups like financial aid advisors—a citizenry not directly connected to the principles of education.

I try to involve the most diverse group of people imaginable who are not directly involved in education. It's important to do that because it's from that base that politicians draw their support and make the decisions that affect education.

## Inspiration For Performing

I was never trained in acting. I'm not an actress; I'm not *acting* these parts, I'm *living* them. When I get on stage, I'm living that character. When you're living a character on stage, things "pop out" in a performance that I'll use in the next performance. I've performed for adult and child protective services and I draw from instances that are highly Latino because I come from a Latino background. I draw on my mother, my grandmother, my tíos (uncles) and the situations of my extended family members.

I multiculturalize and I diversify the professional fields by providing concepts related to Latino culture. You might say I'm a *cultural worker*; not a social worker, but a cultural worker. I'm working on the non-Latino culture to understand and respect Latinos; I'm working on the Latino culture to affirm, strengthen and value their culture.

I write, and the writing inspires me to perform. I perform, and the performance inspires me to write. I'll perform a character and invariably, when I consider myself successful, is when I reach people with something they didn't know but also with something familiar. When someone comes up to me and says, "That character was my mother." Or, when they come up crying and tell me a story about something that's happened in their family that's parallel or related to what I just performed on stage—that's when I feel I've succeeded.

It's my way of trying to humanize our society. If we had a more aware, more humanized population more in tune with minority populations, there would be less bias. And, it would improve the treatment of people in our schools, hospitals, and service institutions.

## On Knowing Alex Haley

I was teaching in the Women's Studies Program in San Bernardino when *Roots* had just been published. Alex Haley was going to be in town for a banquet. At that time he was a roving editor for *Readers Digest*. I bought a ticket to the banquet, then, on the way hurrying out the door, grabbed one of my manuscripts and put it into an envelope. When I got to the banquet hall, Alex Haley was outside with a TV cameraman. When I gave him the envelope and explained that I was a writer hoping that he would take a look at the manuscript, he explained that he had so many of these manuscripts that it would probably take him three or four months to get to it. I had no expectation that he would even read it. The next week he called the office to let me know that he was going to be in Fresno again soon - could we get together? So I invited him over to the house for enchiladas.

As he explained it, he had returned to his hotel room the evening of the banquet and opened the manuscript envelope I had given him. Being Latina, I couldn't just give him the manuscript and ask him to read it without giving him a *cariñito* (gesture of appreciation). *Curandera*, a book of my poetry, was my *cariñito*. Instead of going to the manuscript, he read a poem from the book. He explained that after reading the first poem, he got himself a cup of coffee and read another poem. Then he loosened his tie and read the entire book of poetry and was very impressed by the poems.

He helped me get over a stumble in my poetry writing. I knew that I was a good reader of my own work and I knew that my poetry was very aural; very auditory. At that time, poetry trends in the U.S. were very *visual*; an image wrapped in another image wrapped in

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Head writer for *Sonrisas*, PBS educational television for children.

Dr. Tafolla's book of poetry, *Sonnets to Human Beings*, received First Prize in the Poetry Division of the UCI National Literary Competition.

Awarded the Art of Peace Award by the President's Peace Commission of St. Mary's University for "writing which contributes to peace, justice and human understanding."

#### Selected Works

*Sonnets to Human Beings*; *Sonnets and Salsa*; *Baby Coyote and the Old Woman*, *Five Poets of Aztlan* (includes Tafolla's manuscript *La Isabela de Guadalupe y Otras Chucas*) and *Fantasmas: Supernatural Stories by Mexican American Writers* (includes Tafolla's short story, *Tia*). *To Split a Human: Mitos, Machos y La Mujer Chicana*; *Red Boots and Attitude: The Spirit of Texas Women Writers* (which includes poetry, short story, and essay by Tafolla); *Texas Short Stories* (includes Tafolla's *I Just Can't Bear It*) and *Texas Short Stories II* (which includes Tafolla's *The Pot Has Eyes*). To order contact <http://www.wingspress.com> or call (210) 271-7805.

another image, etc. My poetry was very *theatrical* like a lot of minority, especially minority women's poetry, tends to be. Alex Haley told me that my work reminded him of an African poet whom he met in Paris. His poetry had been criticized by the French for being more auditory than visual. A month or so later I saw an interview with this poet in *Poetry Today*. He

described poetry as song and human voice and story. His poetry too was auditory rather than visual. It was a reaffirmation of the direction I was going with my poetry, So I said, “THIS is why my poetry is auditory—it comes from the voice of the people! This is our whole oral tradition.”

### Unlocking a Child’s Creativity

Children need to be creative thinkers and problem solvers. There has to be a certain level of relaxation because a stressful environment doesn’t foster



*Ernesto M. Bernal, Ph.D.*

creativity. The geniuses throughout history were not coerced. I can’t imagine Picasso being forced. Thomas Edison wasn’t really sure of what he was doing. He had a vision in his mind and he played with the idea. If you talk to creative people you find that they use those terms a lot—“Play with it a while.” “Play with it and see what comes out of it.” “Let me try it and see where it leads.” “Let me write something and see where the characters go.” “Let me get into a piece of music and see where it takes me.” Mozart, as much as he wanted to please his father, was obsessed, filled with joy with what he was creating.

We need a certain sense of freedom; a certain sense of *internal* motivation, not *external* motivation. Grades, in school, are external motivators. For a

person to become their best, to be actualized, they need *internal* motivation. They need to want to create something that maybe no one else understands. We need to develop each child to his or her creative, intellectual, emotional and ethical best.

### A Writer’s Goal

Gabriel García Márquez said that every writer is a revolutionary. When I first read that I’m not sure I understood it. Now I know exactly what he meant. Writers can change the way people perceive the world. If you’re totally content with the way things are, there would be nothing to write. This is where I think I can help. By writing and performing.



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