

JO LONG: 1950-2021

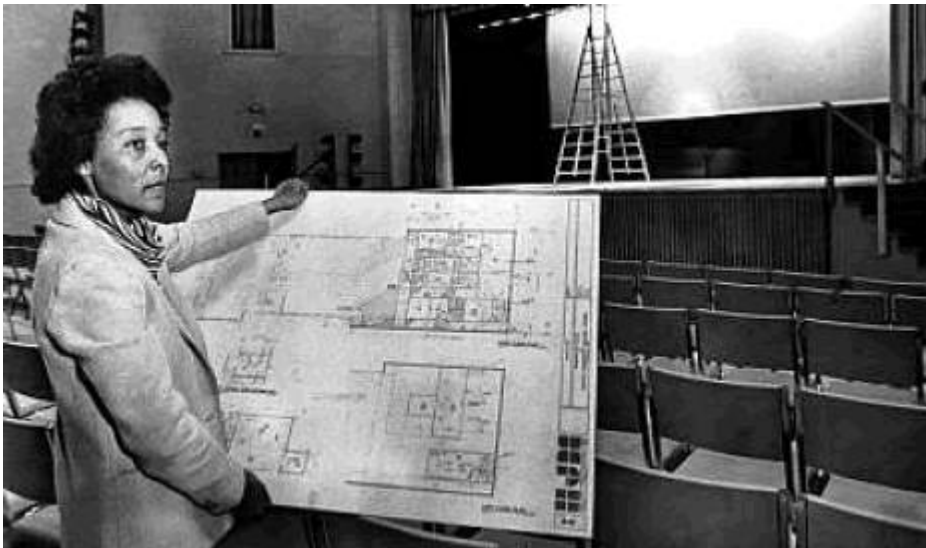
Director made Carver center ‘cultural powerhouse’

BY MEGAN RODRIGUEZ STAFF WRITER



Courtesy Sammye Shelvin

As director, Jo Long presided over the Carver Community Cultural Center’s rebirth.



Staff file photo

Jo Long, former executive director of the Carver Community Cultural Center, is shown with plans for a renovation in 1979.

Jo Long’s resume said her goal was “to help an organization thrive,” and in her 71 years, she more than fulfilled that objective.

For two decades, Long shook up San Antonio's arts scene as executive director of the Carver Community Cultural Center on the East Side, which she transformed into a showcase for multicultural performances and visual arts.

She died Tuesday at her home in San Antonio.

"She was the one who really set the framework for creating spaces for communities of color and other traditionally marginalized communities, whose stories were not told or whose stories were silenced," said Cassandra Parker-Nowicki, the Carver's current executive director.

"She created space for them to tell their stories here at the Carver and she was doing that when there weren't a lot of people doing that, certainly not here in San Antonio," Parker-Nowicki said.

Long's influence makes San Antonio stand out as a place where culture is valued and treasured, said Catherine Cisneros, a co-founder and artistic director of arts organization URBAN-15.

"I don't know if she knew how much we loved her," said Cisneros, a dancer, musician and visual artist. "We're all standing on her shoulders. Every artist in this community is standing on her shoulders, and they may not even know it."

The Carver was built in 1918 as a community center for African Americans. Later, it became the Carver Library and Auditorium. Beginning in the 1940s, it was a performance venue for leading African American entertainers, including Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Louis Armstrong.

The building was set to be demolished in the 1970s when community members rallied to save it. Under city ownership, the Carver was renovated and reopened in 1977 as the Carver Community Cultural Center.

As executive director, Long presided over its rebirth. Turning the Carver into a multicultural performing and visual arts center — a rarity at the time — was wholly her vision, Parker-Nowicki said.

"She paved the way for so much — not just who we are as an organization, but also for a number of other arts organizations that now exist in San Antonio and

certainly other organizations and artists and artist companies around the country,” she said.

Long’s sister Sammye Shelvin, 70, of Houston, called Long a “remarkable person” — a patient and persuasive woman who read from the Bible every day before work.

“She loved people,” Shelvin said. “She loved helping people. She was just passionate about helping people.”

Long was born in Lubbock on July 27, 1950. Growing up there, she learned to play clarinet, oboe, piano and tenor saxophone. She left home to pursue a college education at age 16, according to another sister, June Long, 69.

Jo Long earned a degree in music from Bishop College, a historically black school in Dallas. She went on to obtain a master’s degree in music history from Southern Methodist University.

Soon after, Long served as director of SMU’s Community Center for the Arts and as an administrative adviser for a Christian organization on campus.

When she was tapped to lead the Carver, Long’s original assignment was to “develop a nice little arts and crafts program,” she told Texas Monthly in 1997. Instead, she created what the magazine called “a cultural powerhouse” that drew international stars.

Long’s presence was one reason URBAN-15 settled in San Antonio in 1980 rather than in New York, according to co-founder George Cisneros. He is a composer and multimedia artist who is Catherine Cisneros’ husband and URBAN-15’s music and media director.

The group, a nonprofit that specializes in original performances and innovative arts education programs, was founded in Austin.

When Long brought the likes of dancer Merce Cunningham and New York-based company Dance-Brazil to the Carver, she often included in their contracts a requirement to hold free workshops for the community, George Cisneros said.

Long also brought in representatives from the National Endowment for the Arts to help local artists create their own organizations, he said.

In return for resources and support, Long expected something in return, he said: “She was adamant about excellence.”

Long retired from the Carver in 2000. In 2004, the center’s 650-seat theatre was renamed the Jo Long Theatre for the Performing Arts.

By 2008, Long was back at work, this time as an administrator at Church of Christ Bible Chair and Student Center at San Antonio College, better known as the Christian Student Center.

The center’s director, Mark Forster, said Long was hired to oversee the budget and handle other administrative tasks. But she also shared wisdom with female students and spearheaded efforts to bring in a food pantry that still operates at the center, Forster said.

Kevin Ball, 60, worked with Long at the Carver in the early 1990s. Ball, now a management consultant in Massachusetts, said Long “exposed San Antonio to the world” by bringing in artists from all over.

“She left a huge footprint,” he said. “They don’t make those people anymore. That’s done. God broke the mold on her. She was super-special, super-impactful. She touched a lot of lives from kids to adults, not just in San Antonio but across the country and across the globe.”

Long is survived by her husband, Woodrow Williams; stepson Ryan; siblings Sammye Shelvin (Charles), June Long and Michael Long; niece Adrienne Scales (Brandon); and nephew Samuel Shelvin (Amber).

A memorial service will be held at the Carver Center, 226 N. Hack-berry St., at 11 a.m. Oct. 30.

Arrangements for a memorial service in Lubbock are pending.
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