

COLD ANGER

A STORY OF FAITH AND POWER POLITICS

MARY BETH ROGERS

With an Introduction by
BILL MOYERS

FEATURED
ON BILL MOYERS'
"WORLD OF IDEAS"

ROGERS

COLD ANGER

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You Feel Like Your Work Is a Ministry

San Antonio, 1986

I drive for almost an hour through the suburbs and shopping centers in the rolling hills of northwest San Antonio before I find Mary and Jesse Moreno's home near the University of Texas Medical School. Jesse has worked for almost four years to remodel the white brick and frame house with bright blue shutters that sits on two acres in the tree-filled neighborhood. The house is spacious and comfortable for Mary and Jesse and their four children who range in age from 6 to 11. Wide windows bring in the pastoral scenes from the backyard where the children's pony grazes peacefully. While the kids watch Saturday morning cartoons in the den, Mary heats coffee in her microwave and we sit at a huge pine table in the dining room, where books and newspapers are stacked alongside children's art, school papers, and comfortable family clutter. The washing machine is humming in another room, and we hear Jesse hammering away, making repairs on the carport he recently added. Mary is telling me about her children with an enthusiasm that makes her seem younger than her 38 years. Her jet-black hair is cut stylishly short and she wears a diamond drop around her neck.

Mary Moreno has the confidence and grace of a seasoned politician, which is how her friends regarded her when she

became an officer in the Metropolitan Congregational Alliance.¹ Trained by Ernesto Cortes and the Industrial Areas Foundation, Mary Moreno joined hundreds of new people moving into urban politics, disregarding the cynicism of media handlers and packaged candidates, and deciding to bring their own values to hardball political decision-making.

"My parents were victims," Mary tells me in her staccato voice only slightly tinged with a Spanish accent.² "We children were aware of the social injustices. We were migrant workers so we saw it all over. I remember the cotton pickings and everything. We went mostly to the Rio Grande Valley. We went to California and Michigan. But we always tried to get back so we kids could go to school. Sometimes we would have to stay until the crops were in and then we had to start school late. But we couldn't come home without any money. My mother had two years of school. My father had none."

Mary Moreno reminisces about the times in elementary school when there was neither food nor money in her house and she ate chewing gum for lunch, hoping the sugar would quell her stomach rumbles. She talks about the sweet sadness she saw in her father as he came home in despair with whiskey on his breath after being turned down for day labor, all day, every day for weeks. She talks about her older brothers and sisters dropping out of school to help support the family, and of her own determination to make something of herself, to finish high school, maybe even to go on to college after raising her own family.

"With all of this, two things stayed with me," she says. "One was the voting. Everyone was poor, but we were the poorest of the poor. One time my father came home, and he was very happy because he was able to get a dollar because a dollar was a lot of money. The way he got that dollar was that some patrón gave it to him for his vote. I didn't know about things like that at the time. I was only a little girl and we were just glad he could buy bread or flour or something. But it stayed with me. You know, who pays you for a vote? Every time there was an election, it was tamales and beer. Votes for the Mexicans. It always bothered me. I didn't know exactly why."

The other thing that stayed with Mary was her father's death.

"I had to fight the city and county, and I realized that things are not done because of right or wrong," she says. "It made me wake up."

In 1971, when she was 23 years old, Mary Moreno was a patients' representative at the Robert B. Green Hospital—San Antonio's charity facility. Her job included everything from helping police officers get information on stabbing victims to helping patients fill out forms to get a free shot for a baby with croup, or even translating into Spanish a doctor's explanation of an emergency surgical procedure that could save, or end, an old grandmother's life. Most of the patients at the Robert B. Green Hospital were Mexican-Americans, like Mary, who lived on the west side of Interstate 10. The highway split Anglo and Hispanic San Antonio into pieces almost as schizophrenic as geographic, making it difficult for anyone to conceive of the city as a whole. San Antonio was a divided culture, a divided economy, a divided people. Most men and women of Mexican ancestry lived west of the dividing line—the West Side. The old charity hospital, too, was on the West Side. And when the cultures of San Antonio met there, the mix was no less tense than in the city itself.

One of Mary Moreno's regular jobs at the hospital was to handle the paperwork for the bodies brought to the hospital's morgue over the weekend. It was routine: helping with identification, calling relatives, notifying priests. But Mary recalls that the morning of December 21 began differently. First, on her way to the morgue, she overheard a hospital orderly joking with a police guard about how they had "killed another Mexican" at the jail over the weekend. Then when she looked at the police report of the man brought in from the jail, she felt uneasy. "Latin male . . . about 60 . . . no identification . . . dead in cell . . . bruises. . . ."

Mary Moreno recalls placing her clipboard at the head of the stretcher, pulling back the sheet, and being startled by her own screams, which filled the morgue and spurted into the hospital halls like blood from a wound. The man under the sheet was her father!

Later, when her hysteria subsided, Mary was filled with questions. Why had her father been in jail? What had he done?

What had been done to him? Why were there bruises on his body? It was weeks before she began to get answers. And then, Mary did not like what she got.

The county medical examiner, a friend of hers, told Mary that her father had died from an attack of sclerosis of the liver. He had not been drunk when picked up on a West Side San Antonio street only three blocks from his home. But he had been semiconscious and disoriented from the concentration of liver bile building up in his system.

"The medical examiner told me, 'Mary, your dad was in the jail five hours before he died. He could have lived.' All that had to be done would have been to bring him to a hospital and pump him out and do a blood transfusion," she says. "Because of the way he was dressed—very simple with no shoes or socks—the police officer who found him thought he was drunk. Instead of taking him to the hospital, they took him to jail and put him in the drunk tank. I knew a lot of police officers and after I got hold of myself, I started finding out what happened."

A jail guard told Mary that one of the prisoners in the cell with her father was a mentally disturbed patient who had escaped from the state hospital. Police had picked him up and decided to leave him in jail overnight because they didn't want to drive across town to the state mental facility. The mental patient apparently assaulted Mary's father. As soon as the jail guards found Mary's father dead in the cell, the mental patient was whisked away to the hospital in the middle of the night. And the section of the police report detailing the injuries received by Mary's father was deleted after Mary had seen the initial report.

"Finding that out, I went crazy, screaming crazy again," Mary says. "I knew there was a cover-up and I had to stop them."

Mary confronted a police lieutenant who had been a friend of hers. "I told him there were procedures that should have been followed. Anytime you pick up someone who is hurt or unconscious, you are supposed to take them to the hospital first and then bring them to the jail. You even have a doctor in the jail and he examines them—but not even that happened to my father."

"Then the lieutenant told me, 'Well, Mary, if we had to take

every disoriented bum we picked up to the Robert B. Green, we'd have to build at least three more charity hospitals just to hold them."

Mary Moreno was furious, and her anger spilled over like a boiling cauldron, burning everyone who got close. She saw lawyers, she badgered police officials, she called city council members and members of Congress. She harangued her friends. She became obsessive. She wanted an investigation, answers to her questions, justice for her father. But even though Mary persisted, she got nothing.

"I did everything wrong," she says. "The only thing I did right was to bother people about it. But I didn't know what I was doing. I just acted out of my anger."

After a while, previously friendly police officers began to shun her. Elected officials never returned her calls. Bureaucrats gave her the runaround. Lawyers told her to drop the matter. Her friends said she had done enough. And Mary and her family were exhausted by the ordeal.

"We were working alone. We had no strength, no power, nothing to help us. We were just one family," Mary says.

Mary Moreno's fury began to smolder when she realized she could do nothing to break the official silence that shrouded her father's death. "I didn't have the strength to see it through," she says. "Emotionally, I had to let it go. I went to visit my dad's grave and I let it go."

Then almost exactly 10 years later, it all came back to her.

In 1981, Mary Moreno's priest asked her to attend a meeting with representatives of other Catholic and Protestant churches on San Antonio's North Side, where a more prosperous Mary now lived with her husband and children. The church people wanted to organize themselves politically to improve neighborhoods whose main problem was the slow response time to their calls for police and fire protection. The organization was to be patterned after COOPS, which was a church coalition of West Side Hispanic Catholics who had turned San Antonio politics upside down in the mid-1970s. Mary had always admired and laughed at the confrontational antics of COOPS, as its members disrupted city council meetings with stinging satirical skits and pokes at unresponsive public officials. Because the organization could turn out as many as 50,000 West Side votes on election

day, it generated fear among city officials who endured its infamous accountability sessions. But working-class families looked at COPS with awe because for the first time in the history of the city, they had access to its decision-making structure. COPS became the dominant force in city politics, its members proudly wearing their red, white, and blue COPS lapel buttons, even instructing relatives to make sure they would be buried with them when the time came. COPS dramatically changed San Antonio, making it more open, more fun, and more responsive to the needs of people who lived on the West Side. Now, even some North Side churches seemed to be infected with the COPS spirit.

"I don't even remember the specific discussion, only that there were about 15 people from each parish who came together at this meeting of delegates," Mary tells me. "The leaders were stressing the importance of getting together the laypeople in each church and developing them to work together for justice. At the meeting something happened to me . . . all of my memories just came back to me at once: my father, being poor, the frustration, my helplessness. Here was something I didn't know how to do, and they were offering me the chance to learn."

Mary Moreno jumped at the chance. That it was offered to her in her neighborhood parish, the prosperous St. Brigid's Catholic Church on the North Side of San Antonio, was a reflection of how far-reaching the effect of COPS had been—not only on poor people on the West Side of San Antonio, but on both Catholic and Protestant churches all over the country that believed that their mission had to include a commitment to God and neighbor. COPS seemed to Mary to offer that commitment. If MCA could be like COPS, then she would sign on.

About 17 people from Mary's parish began attending the training sessions that would show them how to develop political skills. Mary learned how to get public information about issues and problems, how to prepare for a public meeting, how to plot strategy, how to confront a public official, how to get the news media interested—all of the skills that would have helped her 10 years earlier. She was excited by the possibilities.

"I would take people from the church to the meetings and then go back to educate those who couldn't go," Mary says. "We

found that there was a lot of interest. But a big question kept coming up: Why is the church getting involved in things like this?"

Mary Moreno says she thought about it a lot. She remembered how her Catholic faith had grasped and comforted her through the hard times in her life. Now that her life was full—a home, a family, a hope for the future—that faith seemed to require her to act for others whose lives did not seem so full. She began to look on MCA as her own very special kind of service to people like her father and mother, like her old neighbors on the West Side.

"What is the church if it is not helping people?" she asks. "I see it as hypocrisy if you go pray for an hour on Sunday, then come home and watch television and say 'to hell with my neighbor.'"

"I guess I have a lot to learn," Mary laughs to break the seriousness of the mood and cool the anger that has crept into her tone. "But I care too much about the followers, the nobodies," she continues, letting her passion build once again. "When I see someone alone in a group, someone nobody's talking to, I go up and talk to them. That's who we should be working for. What you go through when you're a nobody and don't have any status or money made me realize that you need to be together with other people to have some kind of power."

"I am still angry," Mary says reflectively as we sip our coffee amid the hum of her domestic life. And then she smiles as if to let me in on a secret, and with the arch of an eyebrow she says, "But I'm learning to use my anger."

For Mary Moreno, that meant learning how to turn her hot burning anger down a notch or two and make it cold, controlled, and careful, guiding it like some swift, sure missile homing in on its target—the school board that lets a neighborhood school deteriorate, the industrial polluter that is ruining the water supply, the police department that looks the other way when teenage gangs terrorize the neighborhood. With her new cold anger, Mary Moreno says, "You don't feel like you're a radical. You really feel like your work is a ministry."³⁵