

Finding a way to honor an influential activist

Street named for late Rutgers-Newark prof

By Kelly Heyboer

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

When Rutgers University and the city of Newark decided to name a street after fiery professor Hilda Hidalgo, they considered calling it an avenue or a boulevard.

But in the end, only one name seemed appropriate for the outspoken pioneer of gay and Hispanic rights.

"Hilda always got her way," said Olga Wagenheim, a former Rutgers-Newark history professor. "So, instead of street or avenue, we thought to call it a way."

City and university officials unveiled Dr. Hilda Hidalgo Way during an emotional

ceremony yesterday at New Street and University Avenue on the Rutgers-Newark campus where the professor spent decades agitating, organizing, mentoring and teaching.

Friends said Hidalgo — who died last year at age 81 — would have been amused to see city and university leaders giving speeches in her honor in the center of a campus where she was often viewed as a troublemaker.

"I'd think she'd be laughing out loud. The irony," said Maria Canino, a Rutgers professor emeritus of public administration. "This was a place of struggle for her. It was a struggle

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Hilda Hidalgo's sister Elia Christensen Hidalgo, from left, partner Cheryl LaMay and another sister, Zaida Berrios, attend the ceremony to rename a Newark intersection in Hilda Hidalgo's honor.



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Family and friends of Hilda Hidalgo react as a new street sign is unveiled in her honor at a ceremony held on the Rutgers University campus in Newark she loved.

Hidalgo

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that never ended."

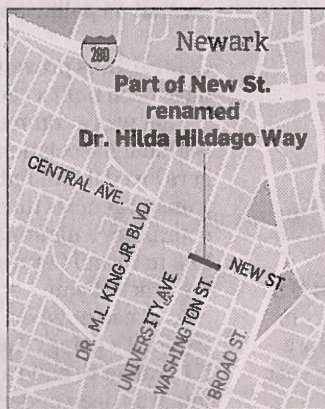
Born in Puerto Rico, Hidalgo moved to Newark in 1960. She eventually got a job teaching at Rutgers' School of Social Work in New Brunswick before moving to the Newark campus to teach in the public administration department.

At Rutgers-Newark, she was coordinator of Puerto Rican Studies and director of several master's degree programs. She was also active in politics, fighting to give the state's growing Hispanic population a voice in local and state government.

PROMOTING DIVERSITY

On the Rutgers-Newark campus, Hidalgo fought to open the largely white state university to more minority students in the 1970s. Colleagues said the openly gay professor also served as a mentor to students struggling with their sexuality.

Hidalgo helped found several community organizations, including Aspira, La Casa de Don Pedro, the Puerto Rican Congress, the Newark Urban League and the United Community Corporation. Ladies Home Journal named her as one of its "50 American Heroines."



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Rutgers-Newark, which now ranks as the most racially diverse public university in the nation, decided to honor Hidalgo by dedicating its busiest intersection to her memory. Newark Councilman Luis Quintana, who had known Hidalgo since he was 12, helped arrange the renaming of part of New Street.

After retiring from Rutgers, Hidalgo took a job as a state assistant commissioner of education. In 1993, she was arrested by Newark police while inspecting the Morton Street School in preparation for a proposed state takeover of the troubled school district.

The then-65-year-old Hidalgo's wrist was broken in the struggle, which also resulted in the arrest of a Star-

Ledger reporter and two photographers.

"I'm a strong woman, from the generation that was tough, that said you take the pain and don't complain. But I'm not strong enough to fight 10 policemen," Hidalgo said at the time.

Hidalgo was found guilty of resisting arrest, but the court ruling was eventually overturned. She sued the city in civil court, reaching an undisclosed settlement in 1999.

After retiring to Florida, Hidalgo continued campaigning for gay rights as an active member of Equality Florida and Friends of Wild Iris. She also met Cheryl LaMay, a physician who was Hidalgo's partner for the last seven years of her life.

LaMay and Hidalgo's sisters, Elia and Zaida, were by her side when she died of pancreatic cancer last November at home in Gainesville, Fla.

The three women stood beneath the Dr. Hilda Hidalgo Way sign yesterday, proud that Hidalgo will not be forgotten.

"I'm not going to be humble — because she deserves it," said Elia Christensen Hidalgo, her younger sister. "She made it."

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