

Loretta Armenta Asks the Hard Questions



Virtually every day, Loretta Armenta gets up, spends some time with her disabled son Andre, walks for thirty minutes on a treadmill, takes Andre out to breakfast, and is home by 10 a.m. when the nurse arrives. Armenta tries to be home by 5 p.m. to spend time with her son and her husband Ray. Everything else she does she tries to squeeze into the hours between 10 and 5. It is difficult to manage even with all her dynamic energy and optimism.

Many people separate their lives into compartments—work, play, family. For Armenta, this would not do. Her life is integrated, her career and community activities spring from who she is—a 48-year-old Hispanic woman and mother of a disabled child. She is effective and successful. Armenta is a Special Agent for The Prudential Financial Services, Chair of the New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women, and board member of Carrie Tingley Hospital, Parents Reaching Out, and the Albuquerque Hispano Chamber of Commerce.

Her life and her activities complement each other. She does not consider herself competitive. Rather, she describes her life as challenging, exciting, and painful. She acts—about issues she cares about. That means something. That reflects her own family's values—and their primary value is caring about each other. Over the years she has realized these issues, that are so personal to her, are also universal: questions of choice, of making the world a better place for women, children, families. Re-defining care-giving: who gets it and who provides it.

The birth of her son, Andre, in 1970 was a mixed blessing; he was born seriously disabled, with two rare syndromes, and was not expected to live past his first year or two. He is retarded, lives with chronic severe pain, and needs constant supervision. Armenta is honest enough to say that her son has provided her family with both joy and pain. While they have been able to provide for Andre's needs at home, with outside help, normal everyday life for the rest of the family is a struggle.

For many years the March of Dimes was Armenta's primary involvement—starting as a volunteer, becoming the paid executive director in 1974, and, later, the state director. Her efforts with the March of Dimes allowed her to cope with her grief over her son in a constructive and valuable way. She was able to interact with other families in difficult situations, and she participated in the re-establishment of the March of Dimes as an organization that would primarily address birth defects and later pre-natal care. She was at the right place at the right time. Armenta's position of power at the March of Dimes became her education; she learned important skills in mediating and negotiating that have served her well.

In 1981 Prudential hired Armenta and she became a Special Agent for them. She received broad training that led to her developing expertise in the areas of insurance and financial planning for both businesses and families. "When you do business planning, you also do family planning. They kind of go together."

Over the years, Armenta has earned awards for her business achievements (sales awards and Million Dollar Roundtable) as well as being honored by Prudential for her community activities.

How do we make things better for women? For children? For families?

In 1983 she co-founded the Medically Fragile Children's Program, and in 1985 became a board member of Parents Reaching Out. Today, Armenta is still involved with Parents Reaching Out and the Association for Care of Children's Health in Washington, D.C. She is also a trustee for the Carrie Tingley Hospital Foundation and a board director of Carrie Tingley Hospital.

Armenta has been working hard for more than five years on passage of the Family Medical Leave Act here in New Mexico. "It's going to be a long haul. There's a lot of work to be done." It is a specific measure that would relieve some of the pressures on the surrounding family. She is aware that there are legitimate cost concerns for small businesses—but she does not believe all the alternatives have been adequately examined. And she always goes back to the personal, the human question—"What do we do when a family member gets sick?"

What information is there on breast cancer, menopause?

Armenta is committed to the Hispanic culture, but believes the issues she works on impact everybody. When working with the March of Dimes, Armenta "rode their case" to ensure that it improved its representation of Hispanics, both in terms of the organization itself and in terms of who it helped. In 1985 she participated in Minority Women at Work and was president of MANA, Mexican American Women's national Association. Armenta co-founded the Hispanic Roundtable in 1986 and was involved for several years. In 1987 she became a board member of the Albuquerque Hispano Chamber of Commerce (AHCC), a resource for small, minority-owned businesses, and was awarded the Medal of Freedom by the Mexican Consulate. After serving as president of the AHCC in 1991, Armenta remains a board member actively pursuing the development of partnerships between New Mexican and Mexican businesses.

What do we do when a loved one is sick?

In 1991 Armenta was appointed to a four-year term as Chair and Commissioner on the New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women. She has been a member of delegations to Mexico and the USSR and has been able to share her experiences dealing with problems that they, also, face.

"I took documentation to both Mexico and the Soviet Union showing how some of the things I've been involved in as an individual have made a difference. How we as women have made life better for women and children."

Armenta is an ardent pro-choice advocate. "Those choices are so critical. Not just abortion. We talked about abortion. But it frightens me to think that down the road someone might make other kinds of choices for us—whether or not you should have that blood transfusion. We have to understand that when we take choice away from one area it makes it a lot easier to take it away from a lot of other areas."



In addition to having served on Bill Clinton's National Women's Advisory Committee, Armenta is an active member of the Democratic Party, but has no desire to run for office. She believes she is more effective outside the political arena than she would be inside it.

As Armenta continues to work for the disabled and their families, for small businesses, for Hispanics, and for women, and to travel and speak on issues important and personal, she is convinced we all face the same essential concerns. How can we make things better for women? For children? For families? What information is there on breast cancer, menopause? What do we do when a loved one is sick?

She cares about people in distress, whether from caring for a sick child, because of divorce, or financial crisis.

"Life is tough ... We want to be survivors ... We're entitled to make money. We're entitled to be successful. We're entitled to want the things that everyone else wants."

Armenta herself has unfilled dreams. In 1991 she sold Snow Goose Gift Baskets, a retail store she and her daughter Monica developed into a successful business. It was a satisfying experience and she would like to pursue a retail venture again.

Surprisingly, she never graduated from high school. In spite of the success she has attained, she wonders about going back to school and whether that's important.

When asked about success, however, she says, "I consider myself successful. I've made a difference in the community... My achievements have not been just my achievements. No one does it alone... My daughters fell good about being women. I feel very good that they will be able to take care of themselves—that tot me is a tremendous success." Monica had her first child in August and is a morning news anchor for KOB-TV. Denise is a drug and AIDS outreach specialist for Youth Development Inc.

In spite of the difficulties and struggles of her life, Armenta describes herself as fortunate. She believes things happen for a reason, and she is glad that she could help, could offer solutions that worked. She is grateful for the opportunities she's been offered and for the love and support of her husband Ray, an investigator for the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Armenta is again at a crossroads; her son Andre is in another major crisis. In October she had thyroid surgery, which raised questions for her about her own health and mortality, about what she wanted to do with the rest of her life, about her own needs.

Like other women in 1992, Armenta is searching for different directions. She is looking for ways to take advantage of previously learned skills, to make her own life more fulfilling. she may become a consultant, using her expertise in finance and business. She may pursue her increasing interest in the national and international arenas. She doesn't know, yet.

What Armenta will do—about Andre's increasing medical demands, about her own renewed sense of caring for herself and following her own dreams—are unknown. But whatever she does, she will care about it and bring her own sensitivity, openness, and pragmatism to it, and we will all be better off because of Loretta Armenta's involvement.

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