

Leonela Relys, Cuba's tireless educator

by Candelaria Viva, January 18, 2015

Source: <http://www.mujerfariana.org/index.php/heroinas/241-leonela-relys-la-incansable-educadora>

- *Translated by Tom Whitney*

“Death is not true when one has fulfilled life's work in all respects.”

-- José Martí

Leonela Relys died on January 17, 2015. She created the Cuban method of literacy teaching known as “Yes I can” (*Yo, si puedo*). It's the means by which millions of people in various parts of the world keep on learning how to read and write. Letters have allowed men and women to understand their rights as citizens, or simply – but no less important – to read a story, a poem, or know how to sign something. With pencils they see those names bursting forth that other people use to identify us.

She was born in Camagüey on April 20 1947 and lived many years in Havana where she did much of her work as a teacher. A militant of the Communist Party of Cuba, she was tireless in defending the achievements of the Cuban revolution. As either teacher or professor, one of her ways to do it was to pass on her academic knowledge and her moral and revolutionary principles to each compatriot, to each Latin American.

At 14 years of age she became a [volunteer] literacy teacher in the campaign asked for by Fidel to fill various corners of Cuba's geography with letters, learning, and knowledge. Responding much later to another call from Fidel, she went to the land of Petión to coordinate literacy teaching for the Haitian people. Haitians received not only Leonela's wisdom but also her friendship and love. After this experience, Fidel sent her to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and later to Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua, Panama, Dominican Republic, Guinea Bissau, and Seville in Spain. In all these places, she set up her program.

She received many awards and decorations at the national and international level ... [including] UNESCO's Rey Seijong Prize. Along the way she published more than 20 books on education and literacy. She never let up on her hard work of inventing new and better ways for sharing her knowledge. She was never satisfied with the achievements of the “Yes I can” method and was continually making adaptations for the sake of efficiency. She published new primers making use of

cellular telephones for places lacking access to radio and television (which her literacy program relied upon). She used whatever would work so that people might learn how to read and write.

Leonela was one of those persons who exercised heroism every day, the ones Che spoke about. During her entire life, she gave herself to working for the homeland and her people, with love and passion, and without any feeling of sacrifice but rather one of revolutionary duty. She was and will always be one of those heroes. As a revolutionary, she was in solidarity with the causes of the peoples, and so I never doubted her support for us in our task of building a worthy future for the new Colombia.

The author is a member of Colombia's FARC – EP insurgency.

Translator's note: The “Yes I can” program is for adults. According to TeleSur news service, “The method starts with known figures, like numbers, and is based on acquired experience. The method involves three key stages: drilling, learning to read and write, and consolidation. It can help people become literate in one to three months. Over 8 million people in the world have learned how to read and speak via [Relys'] [innovative method](#).” Thirty countries have adopted the program.

Having graduated from the University of Havana in 1968, Leonea Relys worked at the Education Ministry and in pedagogical schools. She dedicated herself to Spanish language learning and to adult education. Relys actually lived and worked in the countries noted above while introducing her “Yes I can” program.”

Cuba's Granma newspaper published a profile of Leonela Relys on the 50th anniversary of the 1961 literacy campaign. According to the reporter: Relys in Haiti was “forced by circumstances to learn Creole and gain basic knowledge of the nature of the Haitian people, their socio-cultural characteristics, their roots, [interests, and motivations](#).” Relys recalled the literacy campaign as “one of the most beautiful and epic achievements of our country in the educational and cultural terrain.”