



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Bill Perkins

Marta Moreno Vega

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Women of
DISTINCTION
HONORING WOMEN IN NEW YORK

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Award: HONORING WOMEN IN NEW YORK

Year: 2015

As founder of the Frank H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute and a professor, author and filmmaker, Marta Moreno Vega has been a driving force for three decades. She has been committed to bring the issues of identity, culture and matters of the spirit into the public consciousness.

Ms. Vega was born in 1942 in New York City and grew up in East Harlem, a predominantly Latino and Caribbean section of the City known as Spanish Harlem. Both her parents were from Puerto Rico, and her father's dark skin reflected his African heritage. Ms. Vega was teased for her skin color as she grew up, yet as she grew older, she came to embrace her African lineage.

As she grew, Ms. Vega worked to preserve and nurture the artistic expression of her childhood. She earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in Education from New York University, and founded the Visual Arts Research and Resource Center Relating to the Caribbean, which later became known as the Frank H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute. She also helped found the Association of Hispanic Arts, an important New York based arts advocacy and public education organization.

Along the way, Ms. Vega experienced something of a spiritual awakening, and she traveled to Havana, Cuba, to be formally initiated into the Santeria religion. She learned to live in balance with the forces of nature that surrounded her, and through the years, she continued to try and understand her culture and spirituality through her work and projects.

In 2000, Ms. Vega Co-Founded the Global Afro-Latino and Caribbean Initiative, a collaborative project of Hunter College's Latin American and Caribbean Studies Department

and the Caribbean Cultural Center. The year 2000 also marked the publication of her first book, *The Altar of My Soul: The Living Traditions of Santeria*, which traces the roots, practices and themes of the Santeria religion, as well as Ms. Vega's own experiences.

In 2004, Ms. Vega published another book, *When the Spirits Dance Mambo: Growing Up Nuyorican*. It is Ms. Vega's personal memoir, covering the range of issues that have shaped her professional as well as her personal lives – her Afro-Caribbean-American identity, the influence of African culture in Hispanic America and the spirituality of Santeria – linking them all together into a vibrant portrait of her own experience as a woman of color growing up in Spanish Harlem.

Through her writing, public speaking engagements and other projects, Ms. Vega has helped spread an understanding of her unique experience to an ever-growing audience.