



Pura Belpré

HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

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Pura Belpré was a magnificent librarian, storyteller, writer, and puppeteer, and the very first Puerto Rican librarian hired by the New York Public Library.

Ms. Belpré was born in Cidra, Puerto Rico. The date of her birth is not exactly known...People have said she was born on February 2, 1899, December 2, 1901 and February 2, 1903. She grew up loving and telling stories. It was an important part of her life from a very young age.

When she went to college, she originally planned to become a teacher, but her path completely changed when she decided to stay in New York City after visiting for her sister's wedding.

Ms. Belpré was recruited by the **New York Public Library** - a public library system in New York City that is home to 53 million items and has 92 official locations (which are called library branches).

Ms. Belpré was living in Harlem, and the city had a growing Puerto Rican population. She was recruited as part of an initiative to connect the local community with the library. She began as an assistant at the 135th Street branch in Harlem. In 1925, she studied at the Library School of the New York Public Library, and was transferred to the 115th Street branch to continue her outreach in the growing Puerto Rican community.

Ms. Belpré traveled all over the city, from the Bronx to the Lower East Side, telling stories using handmade puppets, and speaking in Spanish and in English. Nobody else was doing **bilingual** storytelling at the time. Additionally, during her story hours, she would place a lit candle next to her. At the end of her time reading aloud, she allowed the children to make wishes on the candle before it was blown out.

Beyond her time telling stories, she became an advocate for the Spanish-speaking community by 1) establishing more bilingual story hours; 2) buying Spanish language books for the library; and, 3) putting together programs that allowed her community to celebrate their traditional holidays.

When Pura Belpré found there were no books for children in the Spanish language or that depicted Puerto Rican culture, she decided to write them herself. The first story she wrote and published was Pérez and Martina, a love story between a cockroach and a mouse, to show





children two characters coming together across different cultures. She wanted to help children who immigrated to the United States feel welcome and see themselves reflected in stories. Ms. Belpré also translated many Puerto Rican folktales for exactly this purpose. In fact, her book of Puerto Rican folktales was the first of its kind to be published in the United States.

Ms. Belpré's work turned the 115th Street branch into a very important cultural center for Latino, Latina, and Hispanic New Yorkers. She used her role in the library to show her community that their stories matter. Her story hours were groundbreaking, and the programs she created are still being offered today.

Her legacy is also carried on in new generations of authors with the establishment of The Pura Belpré Award. The award is especially important because it recognizes and gives opportunities to Latino and Latina writers. Its purpose is to make sure more diverse authors and stories are represented in children's literature.

Glossary

New York City Library – A public library system in New York City that has 53 million items and 92 official locations. The library locations are called branches. It's the second largest public library in the United States and the fourth largest in the world.

Bilingual – Speaking two languages fluently. In this story about Pura Belpré, it means that she advocated for having children's books and story hours at the library in two languages, Spanish and English.

Give it Some Thought

In your opinion, what is Pura Belpré's most important achievement?

Why do you think it's so important that all children can see themselves in the characters they read about in stories?

Is there a book you've read that has a character in it that's like you? Share the title and describe the character.

Use Your Imagination

These activities are inspired by Pura Belpré's life! They will help you to explore your creativity as a storywriter and storyteller.

Part One

Grab your favorite journal and pens, and find a cozy, creative corner - it's time to set off on your own storytelling adventure! Here are some tips on how you can put your own tales on the page and bring them to life. Write your ideas down in your journal:

The Initial Spark: Take a moment to dream up what you want your story to be about. Do you want to write about a dragon hidden in a secret cave? Or maybe you like superheroes or pirates hunting for treasure. Brainstorm about the things that excite you most until you land on your favorite idea.

The Character Creation: Once you have your idea, think about your main characters - are they kids or adults? Are they spacefaring humans or crime-fighting dogs? Who do you want your audience to root for or learn more about?

The Beginning & the Middle: Now that you have the 'who' of your story (your main characters), you need to decide what it is they want to achieve and what obstacles stand in the way! Maybe your main character is a kid who just wants to enjoy a laidback Saturday afternoon, but wakes up to find their favorite bike has mysteriously disappeared. Giving your character obstacles to overcome always makes for a story full of twists, turns, and adventures.

The Turning Point: A climax of a story is where your main character's problems are at their highest point. This is an important moment that often comes just before your solution is revealed. What is the turning point of your story that will lead to your characters either overcoming their obstacles or not, and launch them into the thrilling conclusion of their narrative?

The End: Time to wrap it up! What outcome do you hope for with your characters? Maybe the pirates find the treasure or maybe they sail on having found something different than expected. Maybe the kid has had a Saturday they will never forget, filled with a mysterious quest that ended with triumphantly finding their favorite bike. Think about what final scene you hope to leave with your readers.

Now that you have brainstormed and landed on the setting, characters, and structure, it's time to write your story. When you have finished, you are ready to prepare for your next step: becoming a storyteller!

Part Two

Pura Belpré made puppets to help her tell stories to the children who visited the branches of the New York City Public Library. In this Hidden Hero of History episode, Mr. Redge and Isabella the Bear help to tell the story of Ms. Belpré. Make one or both of these puppets to help you tell your story.

Puppet Choices:

Mr. Redge – Easiest with only 3 pieces

Isabella the Bear – requires more advanced cutting skills

Gather Your Supplies:

- Template printed out on white paper
- Brown paper bags
- Crayons, markers, or colored pencils
- Scissors
- Glue

Directions:

Step 1: Color all of the puppet pieces.

Step 2: Follow guides on each template to cut out each piece.

Step 3: Use the diagrams below to see where to attach and glue your pieces.

Step 4: Once dry, gather your friends, family or classmates for your very own puppet story time!

Glue Quills on
back of bag

Mr. Redge

Glue head on bottom
flap of bag

Glue body on main
part of bag so it
lines up with head

Use pipecleaners or cut
strip of black paper
for hands

Cut bag at
dotted line

Draw legs
on bag



Isabella the Bear

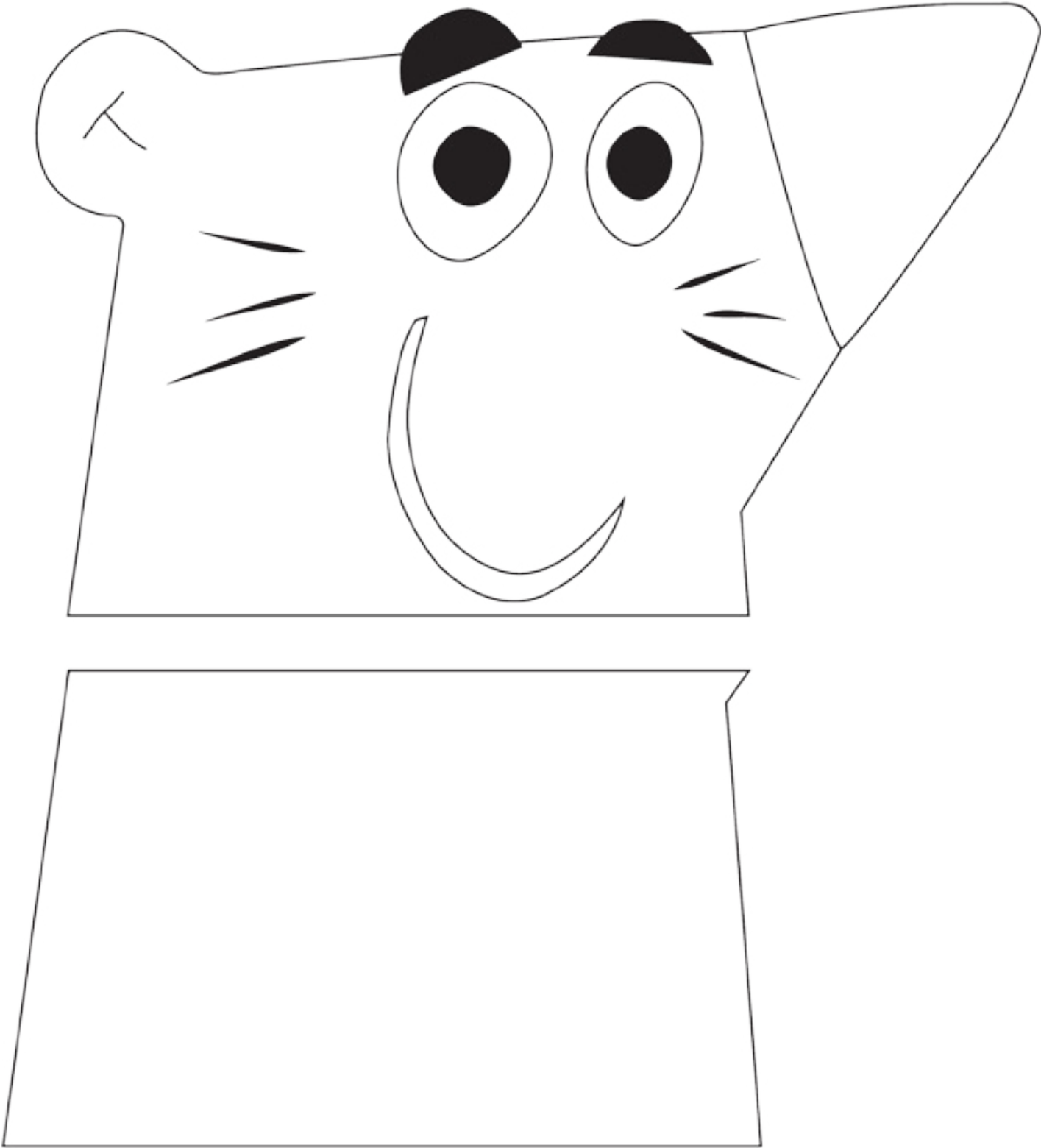
Put a dab of glue on the center of the bow and attach underneath one of the ears.

Glue eyes and top part of muzzle on the bottom flap of bag

Put glue on the tabs on each ear to glue to the back of the bag

Put glue on the top part of each paw and attach to front flap

Put glue on the top part of each leg and attach to inside front of bag



Mr. Redge Template

