

# The University of Texas at El Paso



ENDOWMENT PROFILE

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## Female Math Pioneer Makes a Difference through Endowed Scholarship

A PIONEER FOR WOMEN in the labor market, Juana Serna proved to be an equally positive force, for both males and females, once she retired.

Hers is the story of a successful woman who strived to make sure those who came afterward had a chance to experience similar success. In an era when women were discouraged from entering professions outside of nursing, teaching or secretarial work, Juana Serna graduated from Bowie High School in South El Paso and attended Texas Western College, now The University of Texas at El Paso, earning a mathematics degree in 1951.

She used her degree to gain a position with special communications at White Sands Missile Range in 1958, entering a traditionally male-dominated arena. Juana Serna was one of only two female scientists employed at the missile range, an occurrence so rare that it was noted in an article in the *El Paso Herald-Post* in July of that year: “Women have invaded the scientific realms at White Sands Missile Range — with the employment of feminine scientists.”

In 1960 — under the headline “Women Work with Men On Missiles at Sands” — the newspaper described Serna as one of the top women mathematicians at the missile range.

It was after her retirement that she decided to help students, especially young women, fulfill their own aspirations.



Juana Serna

*“The scholarship made me feel there were people who cared and believed in students like me.”*

—UTEP ALUMNA  
BRENDA MOTA

In 1996, she became a UTEP donor, establishing the *Juana Serna Endowed Scholarship Fund* for Bowie High School graduates who pursue degrees in math and science.

Serna died in 2009 at age 90, and the endowment she created was enhanced through a deferred gift she arranged through her estate plans. Serna’s contributions to the region live on in the talented students the endowment has benefitted.

Brenda Mota, who received the scholarship in 2006, remembers Serna with a fondness

that has grown through the years. “The scholarship made me feel there were people who cared and believed in students like me,” she said.

After graduating in 2007 with a bachelor’s degree in chemistry, Mota returned to UTEP to earn her master’s degree in mechanical engineering in 2011. She now works as a chemist and supervisor for Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold in Safford, Arizona.

Mota is one of 12 UTEP students who have benefited from the endowment; five have earned bachelor’s degrees, three have earned master’s degrees, and one has gone on to pursue a doctorate.

“Juana Serna was one of those special people who tried to help others achieve the same kind of success she experienced,” said Liz Justice, director of the UTEP Scholarships Office. “Through the generosity that lives through her endowment, she is making a crucial impact in the lives of highly talented and motivated UTEP students.”