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Lasting Legacy: Local activist Jose Villa was a driver for positive, lasting change

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SILICON ALLEYS



CAUSE CELEBRE Local activist Jose Villa greets President Jimmy Carter upon his visit to San Jose in September 1980.

LASTING LEGACY

Local activist Jose Villa was a driver for positive, lasting change

BY GARY SINGH

WHEN JOSE D. VILLA retired from San Jose State University in 1992, a gala party unfolded at the Le Baron Hotel on North First Street. Local legends from the Mexican-American community spoke of Villa's 23 years of leadership, diplomacy and community organizing, both in and out of academia.

Even then, he had already left a formidable legacy of activism and heroics on behalf of Mexican-

Americans, Latinos, Chicanos and other underrepresented communities in San Jose.

Among numerous other achievements, Villa was the first faculty member of SJSU's School of Social Work in 1969, where he also started the first graduate level program in Mexican-American Studies. Villa's mentor was Dr. Ernesto Galarza, whose legacy is honored by the "Man of Fire" table sculpture in Paseo de San Antonio outside the Fairmont, and through their friendship, Villa was part of the first group to make a serious attempt at bilingual education at San Jose

Unified in the early '70s. Out on the streets, Villa also spent time directing the Mexican-American Community Services Agency (MACSA) and played a serious leadership role during the mess following the Danny Trevino shooting of 1976.

When Villa passed away five weeks ago at the age of 87, I was quite bummed out because I'd been meaning for years to visit his home in New Mexico and interview him about his entire story and decades of building bridges across ethnic, political and administrative boundaries. No matter what ethnicity one claims, vibrations from Jose Villa's life can be used to harmonize the predicaments of the current day, for sure. His contributions to the struggle for civil rights, not just in the Chicano community but for all local disenfranchised groups, could fill an entire issue of *Metro*.

Luckily, since I am only a few Kevin Bacon degrees of separation from one of Villa's offspring, Angela, we recently spoke about Jose's legacy. During a period of grief, she

mustered up some industrial-grade strength in recalling the dynamics of the Trevino shooting.

On Jan. 22, 1976, two San Jose policemen gunned down an unarmed young Chicano kid, Danny Trevino, resulting in huge but nonviolent protests. The issue took over 15 weeks' worth of City Council agendas.

Thanks to Villa's leadership, a broad coalition of community pressure led to a grand jury investigation. Police Chief Robert Murphy was eventually fired and reforms were implemented. Potential riots were quelled and emotions were somehow managed.

"It could have been Ferguson," Angela said. "It could have really brought an uprising. My dad was central in not having that happen, and having everyone keep their heads cool, so that positive change could happen."

Thanks to Jose's deft handling of the situation, he was invited to be one of 40 movers and shakers to greet President Jimmy Carter upon his visit to San Jose in September 1980. (See photo.)

"When he greeted Jimmy Carter, he gave him a huge *abrazo*, a big hug, because in the Chicano community that is what you do to fellow people of the cause," Angela said. "So he greeted him from the Chicano community, as Chicanos would greet each other."

President Carter immediately wrote Villa a thank-you letter. "I enjoyed seeing you today in San Jose, and appreciated the warm welcome I received," Carter wrote. "Your friendship and support will be very valuable to me this year."

Villa was a devout Catholic, and one particular anecdote exemplifies his legacy in terms of how he wanted people to relate to each other. Reflecting on childhood memories from an adobe house his family built at 115 Jones St. in Clovis, New Mexico, Villa wrote an essay titled, "115 Jones Street: Lessons Learned In A Mexican Home." The essay included this passage about his father:

"Once, when I was five or six, I had the temerity to ask my dad why he didn't go to mass. His simple answer was, *La vida es las religión* (Life is religion). And while I was trying to figure out what he meant he added, *Y cada persona que es parte de tu vida es parte de tu religión*. (And each person who is part of your life is part of your religion.)"

Villa embodied those words for the rest of his years. 