

3/19/2010

BIO - AGUILAR ERNEST

Influential Latino leader in Valley dies

LOCAL HISTORY

Ernest Aguilar dies of cancer at the age of 90

By JOSEPH TREVIÑO
FOR THE YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

Ernest I. J. Aguilar, one of the first Latinos to ever run for political office in the Yakima Valley, died Monday after a long battle with cancer at his Sumner, Wash., home. He was 90.

Veteran Latino leaders from the Yakima Valley remembered Aguilar on Thursday for founding the first State Hispanic Chamber, for being on the board of the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic and for running in the late 1960s against then-incumbent Angus McDonald for the county commissioner's seat.

"In those days there were no Latino candidates," recalled Ricardo García, a longtime Valley

activist and former director of Granger's KDNA radio station. Aguilar spent two years living with García in his Wapato home in the late 1960s.

García and other Valley Latino leaders first met Aguilar in Tacoma when he was a police officer. The eloquent, handsome, lean, clean-cut and charismatic former war hero impressed them.

Aguilar had recently retired from the Army after having served in combat during three wars: World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Somehow, the Valley's Latino leaders persuaded Aguilar to move to Yakima and run against McDonald, who would go on to become the longest running commissioner in Yakima's history.

Aguilar lost, but he managed to gain many votes and with it the

respect of the Democratic Party. García would also become a "Compadre" of Aguilar when he became a godfather to one of Aguilar's children.

Aguilar returned to the Seattle area, but not before he fell in love with Clementina (Tina), the daughter of the restaurant owner of Toppenish's old El Paso Cafe, García said. They married and later had six children.

Described by García and other Valley Latinos as a human dynamo, Aguilar, who was born in Mexico, would go on to work as a civil rights leader and promote trade to Washington state, especially with Mexico.

In return, Mexico awarded Aguilar with the Ohtli Medal, the highest honor that country

BIO 00003

SEE AGUILAR PAGE 3B

AGUILAR

Continued from Page 1B

bestows on civilians who live abroad.

He is survived by his wife, children, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren, said Cris Guillén, president of the Association of Washington State Chambers of Commerce.

A requiem Mass is scheduled for Aguilar at Sumner's

St. Andrew's Catholic Church today at 11 a.m.

Guillén said that Aguilar's death was a tremendous loss.

"But we are forever enriched for the time we spent in his company," Guillén said. "His legacy will live on in many ways and in the Hispanic Chamber he created so many years ago."

• Joseph Trevino is the editor of *El Sol de Yakima*, the Yakima Herald-Republic's Spanish-language newspaper.

BIO.00003 - May be subject to copyright restrictions.

Originally published by the Yakima Herald-Republic
on March 19, 2010.