

BIOGRAPHY - AGUILERA

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Polo Aguilera

'He Was a Real Voice'

LOCAL HISTORY

Community activist
Polo Aguilera dies

By JANE GARGAS

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He was a community bridge, the kind of person who connected people, whether it was in this city, this country or in Mexico.

Polo Aguilera died early Thursday from complications of colon cancer, he was 44.

"He was a giant, full of compassion and vision and opened doors for everyone," said Velma Perez, who succeeded Aguilera as president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Yakima County.

"He was a real voice for the community," agreed John Baule, Yakima Valley Museum director.

"He was very committed to Yakima and backed that up with real skill and energy," said Brooke Creswell, Yakima Symphony Orchestra conductor.

People throughout the community expressed a sense of devastating loss as word spread of Aguilera's sudden death.

"Everybody is in shock," confirmed Luz Bazan Gutierrez, a founding member, along with Aguilera, of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in 1990.

Bazan Gutierrez said Aguilera

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AGUILERA/'We Love and Miss Him'

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era had been hospitalized several days ago after suffering complications from chemotherapy.

He is survived by his wife, Terry Aguilera-Fleming, two daughters and his parents, all of Yakima.

Community activist, business owner, musician and religious leader, Aguilera was well known throughout the Valley. In 1991 his shop, La Petunia, was the first Hispanic-owned bakery to open in the Yakima.

He was president of the Yakima/Morelia Sister City Association, served on the Institute for Mexicans Abroad, was on the board of the Yakima County Development Association and was an officer for Grupo Mexico.

"He was so willing to give of himself to make the community a better place," said Mary Place, Yakima City Council member.

Aguilera came to Yakima in 1987 as a Jesuit Volunteer from his home in Torreon, Mexico.

"He was such a great ambassador for everybody," said Felipe Holbrook, one of Aguilera's many friends in Yakima.

Holbrook met Aguilera when the former was music director at St. Paul Cathedral and the latter served in a similar capacity at St. Joseph Church.

"He was so gregarious, so well spoken and so interested in participating in the community," said Holbrook, vice president of the Yakima Symphony Board.

The symphony turned to Aguilera in an emergency two months ago and "he literally saved the day for us" said Creswell.

Just 13 days before a concert was scheduled to showcase a musical exchange with Morelia, the Michoacán conductor canceled his appearance.

Services Are Pending

Services for community activist and businessman Polo Aguilera, who died Thursday at the age of 44, are pending.

To honor his memory, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce has set up a trust fund at Barner Bank to benefit his two young daughters.

The fund is in the name of Aguilera's wife, Terry Aguilera-Fleming.

Creswell sought out Aguilera, who started working the phones.

The day before the concert, Aguilera called Creswell and said, "Are you ready to rock and roll?"

He had lined up Luis Jaime Cortez, one of Mexico's foremost contemporary composers.

Aguilera contributed to the art world, too. He was instrumental in helping bring the current exhibit of traditional arts of Morelia to the Yakima museum, said Baule.

Aguilera was "loyal, giving, fun and a wonderful person; a lot of people depended on him," said Bazan Gutierrez.

She and Aguilera were working on two projects together, arranging for the transportation of fire trucks to Michoacán and setting up a forum on immigration.

Those projects — and Aguilera's legacy — will persist, predicted Perez.

"He'll live with us every day and in everything we do," she said.

Describing Aguilera as a blend of Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King Jr., Perez added, "We love and miss him dearly."

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