

August 15, 2015

Tucson, Arizona

*A transcript of Ernesto Portillo Jr.'s acceptance of recognition by Los Descendientes del Presidio de Tucson at their Annual Gala Event.*

It's wonderful to be among family and friends. On behalf of the Portillo-Bustamante-Torres families, who are present and who are not, and my wonderful and supportive wife, Linda Gonzalez and her family, thank you for the recognition bestowed on my father, my tía Alva Torres and me. I am sincerely humbled to be included with them, along with my compañera Chavela Garcia and the late guerrera, Velia Jimenez who is very much missed.

However, when you honor my father and me, you also honor my mother, Julieta Bustamante. I am who I am, in my personal and professional lives, because of them. It is their individual experiences and histories that have nurtured me as a journalist for more than 30 years, the last 15 in my hometown.

From my Tucson-born mother, the proud Tucson High School Badger, I came to love and appreciate my pueblo and its many older families who labored to make Tucson a special place. Through her life-long friendships, like with the girls from Club Duette and the men from Easy Company, I made connections with families and their long, rich histories.

From my immigrant father, un hijo orgulloso de Chihuahua, I connected to immigrant families, who came here, like all other Tucsonans, to make a better life for themselves and for their families, regardless of their legal status. I came to understand their challenges, successes and vital contributions.

My parents, my tía, mi amiga Chavela, and others, are my inspirations for my columns about Tucson, its people, its history, its culture.

But I need to make one more shout out. It is not a person. It is not a community group. It is the old KXEW.

While many of us fondly remember Radio Fiesta for its music, and I learned my music through KXEW and its locutores, it was in that little building on El Puente Lane, squeezed between a matanza and the milpas, that I learned the power of communication and its nexus with the community.

On Saturdays, Charlas Portillo was the most important and informative radio program to listen to. Through the front door and into the small studio walked activists, union organizers, educators, health professionals, politicos, padres y madres, monjas, students. Anyone and everyone who had a message to share, came to KXEW, como Cesar E. Chavez.

And it was one long, weekend that would set me on my journalism career, although I did not know it at the time.

KXEW teamed up with La Frontera, the mental health agency that served low income families. It's executive director, Nelba Chavez, had a dream of expanding its much needed services in a new building. She came to my father and they created a radio-thon. The event was held where La Frontera wanted to grow, at West 29th Street and the freeway on the site of old stockyard. It was all community with music and bonding and optimism.

KXEW personalities and community leaders waxed endlessly over the Radio Fiesta airwaves, inviting people to come, to help build a new Frontera. And they came. From niños to ancianos, the people joined the festivity, contributing what ever they could. I can still see the viejita walk to the stage and pull a small coin purse from the strap of her bra, and drop her support into the growing donation jar.

It was beautiful. Nuestra gente came and delivered.

The next day I tore through the newspapers, the Daily Star and Citizen, to read about what my community had done. There was nothing, however. I waited another day. And another. Nothing. Our positive contribution remained invisible to the wider community. I guess our story lacked gang bangers, dope dealers and thieves.

In my youthful, naïve fury, I wrote a letter to the editor to the newspaper, blasting it for ignoring the event and, on a larger scale, for dismissing the stories and dreams of our community. It was the first time the words that I wrote were printed in a newspaper.

I am no longer young and naïve. I am older and jaded. But that event remains as my touchstone, my reminder of why I continue to serve as a journalist in my Tucson. It taught me that we have the power to tell our stories. Gracias.

Ernesto 'Neto' Portillo Jr.