

San Antonio Express-News

Andy Sarabia, 79, Fought for San Antonio's Forsaken and Forgotten

By Elaine Ayala
May 7, 2019

One of the last tasks on Andy Sarabia's checklist was to vote in San Antonio's municipal election. From his hospital bed, he cast a ballot and encouraged others via Facebook to go to the polls.

He mustered enough strength to receive a visit from Democratic presidential candidate Julian Castro, who went to Sarabia's bedside to pay his respects to a legendary leader and his four decades of community service.

Sarabia, 79, extended his hand, saying "I'm proud of you," his wife Linda Sarabia recalled.

It was a fitting conclusion to a life devoted to social justice, to serving one's neighbors, to seeing life's struggles from their perspectives. Sarabia, who died Friday, was the first president of Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and its elder statesman.

With his walker or in a wheelchair, he remained an active citizen. He came from modest beginnings and rose to prominence in the 1970s, challenging the status quo and defying the odds at City Hall.

A high school guidance counselor once told Sarabia he wasn't college material.

Sarabia never went to college, working at Kelly AFB instead, but he fought for the creation of Palo Alto College, which later awarded him an honorary degree.

Ernesto Cortés, the first lead organizer for COPS, is now national co-director of the Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation, the famed network of faith-based and community organizations. Cortés said COPS was Sarabia's university. His stewardship of COPS spanned 45 years and included a merger with Metro Alliance.

"Andy was always diligent," Cortés said, "always systematic and a master of checklists."



*Communities Organized for Public Service founding member Andy Sarabia, center, at a COPS/Metro Alliance 2017 Accountability Session at St. Henry's Catholic Church, Sunday, April 24, 2017. Sarabia died Friday.
Photo: JERRY LARA / San Antonio Express-News*

In 1974, Sarabia helped lead COPS as it confronted city leaders in bold new ways. Though he was soft-spoken, the organization's members were loud and fired-up. COPS had empowered them from the parish level up and trained them to advocate for themselves to improve their communities.

Its first order of business was doing something about drainage infrastructure on the city's West Side. Homes were being flooded, and children were drowning in creeks. COPS won significant improvements.

Many other victories followed, although they didn't always grab headlines. For Sarabia, it wasn't about glory. He was the polite strategist, the good cop, the guy figuring out the levers of power.

Throughout his public life, Sarabia coaxed leadership out of ordinary people — parishioners, housewives and blue-collar workers, some of whom never imagined themselves on the other side of a microphone or across the table from an elected official.

With Sarabia as a guide, they learned to hold public officials accountable.

One of them was Beatrice Cortez, the fourth president of COPS. She was with Sarabia during the last week of his life. She recalled that as recently as April, he watched a livestream of an election-season COPS "accountability session" that put mayoral and council candidates on the defensive.

Like other COPS leaders, Sarabia asked a lot of questions. "They always unsettled you," Cortez recalled. "They put you out of your comfort zone. They went after who you are and what makes you angry."

He'd listen and pose new questions. "He'd never do the comfortable stuff," Cortez said. "You learned something about the issues but, more importantly, about yourself."

When her turn came to lead COPS, Sarabia had some advice for Cortez that she continues to share. "Your first term in office, you are learning to be president," he told her. "In the second term, you're teaching someone else to be president."

Father Mike DeGerolami, a retired priest and longtime COPS/Metro leader, said of Sarabia: "He walked with the organization totally and completely over all these years."

DeGerolami couldn't help but recall Pope Francis' famous description of a good shepherd: He must smell like his sheep.

That was Andy Sarabia. He never stopped. "He bled COPS Metro," the priest said.

Throughout his life, Sarabia worked for the poor and the vulnerable. "That's what punched his ticket into heaven."

Elaine Ayala is a columnist covering San Antonio and Bexar County.