

Andy Sarabia, COPS' First President, Dies at 79

ROBERT RIVARD MAY 4, 2019

Andy Sarabia, a quiet, self-effacing grassroots organizer whose name is synonymous with [Communities Organized for Public Service \(COPS\)](#), founded in San Antonio in 1974, died Friday after a long illness.

Sarabia's work with COPS in its infancy came at a time in San Antonio when inner-city neighborhoods that were home to the city's Mexican-Americans still featured unpaved streets without sidewalks or shade trees, a lack of sanitary sewer service, adequate police protection, and other basics. Storm runoff and poor drainage routinely led to flooding and hazardous standing water.



Andy Sarabia always described himself as community organizer and never saw himself as a civil rights activist.
COURTESY / NOWCASTSA

The Anglo-controlled Good Government League, which held power at City Hall, openly ignored such inequities and failed to allocate bond funding to address the lack of infrastructure, branch libraries, or parks with youth recreational amenities. Mexican-Americans, even those who had served in World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War, were regarded as second-class citizens.

Sarabia, 79, like many Mexican-Americans of his generation, was advised by a high school teacher that he lacked the intelligence to attend college and should instead pursue a trade. Sarabia went on to enjoy a civil service career at Kelly Air Force Base as an early computer programmer and at the same time became a central figure in the human and civil rights struggles waged by Mexican-Americans in the decades after World War II.

For Sarabia, it all began with the arrival back in San Antonio of field organizer Ernesto Cortes, who continues today as the national co-chair of the [Industrial Areas Foundation](#) (IAF) and executive director of the West/Southwest Region. The IAF was founded by Saul Alinsky in Chicago in 1940 to give ordinary families a voice in local government through the power of community organizing. The organization's reach soon extended well beyond the city and state as Alinsky and his best-known book, *Rules for Radicals*, attracted more and more practitioners.

Cortes, a protégé of Alinsky, returned to his hometown with the specific goal of creating a community organization, which became COPS, initially a coalition of 26 Catholic parishes on the West Side and South Side. Two other IAF organizations were formed in San Antonio in the 1980s: the East Side Alliance, a coalition of African-American and Hispanic churches in working-class neighborhoods, and the Metropolitan Congregational Alliance, a coalition of both Anglo and Protestant churches in Anglo-dominant working-class neighborhoods.

The Metro Alliance formed in 1989 through a merger of the East Side Alliance and the Metropolitan Congregational Alliance and since then has been allied with COPS, the two organizations working hand-in-hand. The history of these groups is being collected now at the [University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections](#).

“I arrived in San Antonio and went to see the pastor at Holy Family, and he gave me the name of the last 5-6 parish council presidents, and Andy was one of them,” Cortes recalled Saturday. “I went to his house and we met. He was hesitant, but I was persistent. He was young and smart, reliable and willing to do stuff, generous with his time and spirit, always eager to learn. For Andy and a lot of other Mexican-Americans of his generation, COPS was their university, their graduate school.”

Sarabia became the first president of COPS in 1974.

Sarabia always described himself as a community organizer and never saw himself as a civil rights activist. He distanced himself from more outspoken figures and preferred achieving progress through patient negotiation and using protest as a last resort.

“Andy was quiet and methodical, the master of checklists with an ability to systematically organize,” Cortes said. “He had a natural talent as a negotiator, to make trade-offs, to reach a deal.”

“The most important thing for people to know is that none of the work was ever about him, it was about the betterment of the community, *siempre para la gente*,” said Linda

Ledesma, Sarabia's widow. "He was compassionate, he was caring, and he wanted justice, but he went about things his way, quietly."

Today's Latino political leaders express no doubt about Sarabia's role as a social justice pioneer who made life better for the city's Mexican-American population.

"I had a chance to visit with him briefly on Wednesday afternoon," said Julián Castro, who broke away from the campaign trail and his bid to win the Democratic Party's nomination for president when he heard Sarabia was in hospice and failing. "He knew that I was there, and I was able to express my appreciation for everything he did for people over the years. I told him people of my generation would never have achieved so much if it hadn't been for him."

Walker Moore, the current lead organizer for COPS/Metro Alliance, said Sarabia never stopped working for justice.

"Andy is an example of what people of his generation did, despite being told they would never accomplish much," Moore said. "He lived at a time when Mexican-American families couldn't even get a home mortgage loan from a bank. Today's generations owe him so much."

Days before Sarabia died, Moore said, he cast his vote in Saturday's municipal elections by mail-in ballot from his hospice bed.

Marching on Frost Bank

Perhaps the most famous confrontation generated by COPS was its highly staged march on Frost Bank in downtown San Antonio in 1975 to protest the lack of City Council and establishment interest in addressing flooding that often led to the loss of lives and property in the inner city neighborhoods.

The lasting after-effects of such racially and ethnically exclusionary public policies still reverberate today as San Antonio struggles as a sprawling city where the suburbs have received far greater public investment than the historic inner city neighborhoods.

Back in 1975, COPS members formed long lines at teller windows, demanding to exchange pennies for dollars and then reforming in line to exchange the dollars for pennies, bringing bank business to a halt.

Tom Frost IV, an establishment scion and the great-grandson of the bank's founder, met with Sarabia and other COPS leaders and eventually lent his support to a bond issue to relieve flooding. It was a breakthrough moment in San Antonio politics and history.

As San Antonio journalist and writer Ken Rodriguez wrote in [a 2017 profile of Frost](#) that the *Rivard Report* published one year before the prominent banker's death, out of that meeting came an unlikely alliance between a silk-stocking banker and barrio activists. While other power brokers rebuffed COPS, Frost became an advocate on education and job training issues for the families represented by COPS.

“Our relationship started out confrontational and evolved into one of collaboration,” Sarabia told Rodriguez. “When we were planning to do something, he would give us advice on how to go about it.”

Frost understood that forging community consensus is critical to building the city and raising its profile. When Toyota expressed interest in opening a plant in San Antonio, Frost met with COPS/Metro Alliance. He shared the groups' concerns with Toyota and, in the end, secured the support of COPS/Metro.

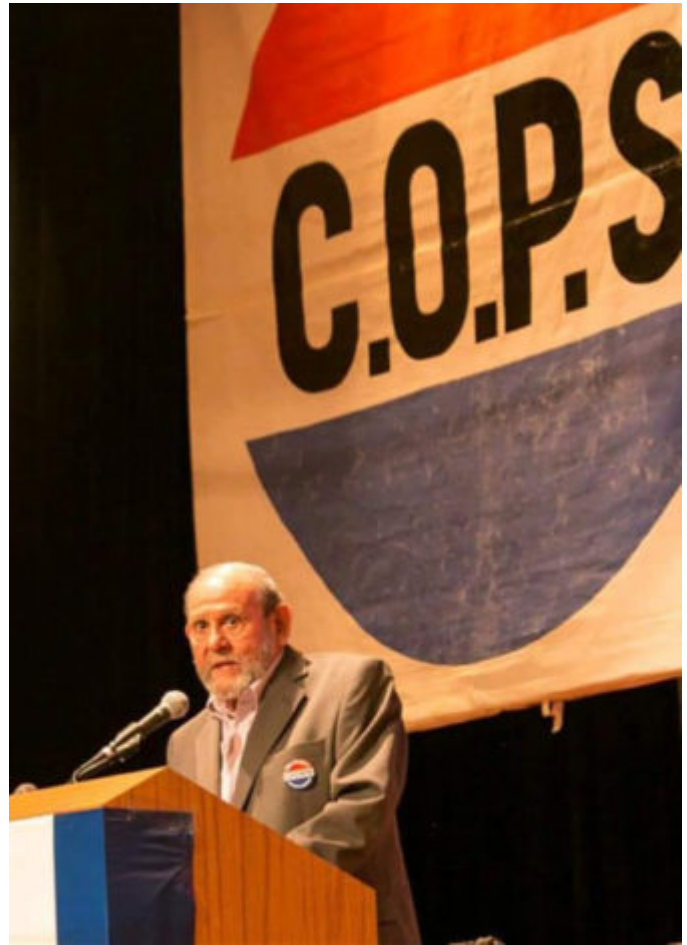
“It shows that when you bring everybody together,” Frost told Rodriguez, “there's no telling what can get done.”

In a long conversation years earlier, I asked Frost for his personal views of Sarabia.

“We didn't start out as friends, that's for sure, and most of my colleagues at the bank and certainly my social friends thought I was crazy to sit down with him,” Frost said, “but the issues COPS had were legitimate, their cause was legitimate, and so we talked and we found common ground and built trust. I'd even say we became friends. We certainly respected one another, and we certainly found ways to work together. The truth is we were from the same city but different worlds. We tried to bridge that.”

The power of COPS could be traced to its roots in the Catholic parishes of the city's inner city, although COPS ignored the traditionally conservative, nonconfrontational approaches of the Church hierarchy, planning some of its own events and protests for maximum media effect.

Forty years ago, Sarabia initiated annual "accountability sessions" with candidates for local elected office, particularly those seeking to be mayor and serve on City Council. It was a rite of passage loathed and feared by candidates who struggled in the boisterous parish hall environment of St. Henry's Catholic Church on the near South Side to hit their talking points without being cornered by COPS members, often neighborhood residents, into taking specific stances on issues they wished to avoid.



Sarabia was born in Chicago after his parents left Texas to work up north as migrant laborers and at other jobs. They moved to San Antonio when Andy was 8.

"My dad was born premature, and he was born on the kitchen table, so they put him in a shoebox and then they opened the oven door and turned it on low so he would stay warm like he was in an incubator," his oldest son, Mike, recalled on Saturday.

Andy Sarabia. COURTESY / COPS - METRO

"For eight years, I was an only child and my dad was really involved in the Holy Family parish, and as a kid I went everywhere he went," Mike added. "My dad was my hero. He was a Yankee fan and a Mickey Mantle fan, so I taught myself to bat left and catch right just like Mickey Mantle."

Mike was a preteen "when Ernie Cortez came along and he and my dad started having lots of meetings and started to organize COPS. I wanted to be in those meetings because I wanted to learn. All the other kids were outside playing, but I was inside listening, hoping to grow up and be like my dad."

Cortez called Mike on Friday from Los Angeles after learning of Andy's death.

"I told him, 'I used to hate you, Ernie, because you took my dad away so much, but thanks to you my dad achieved so much in his life and for the community.' What I learned from my dad was service to community."

Andres "Andy" D. Sarabia is survived by his wife, Linda Ledesma; her three sons and his stepsons, Frank, Michael and Christopher Ledesma, all of San Antonio; his sons, Mike Sarabia, of Monterrey, Nuevo León, and Paul Sarabia of San Antonio from his first marriage; Petra Sarabia, his first wife; an older brother, Raul Sarabia of Waco; two older sisters, Olimpia Tijerina and Beatriz Torres, both of San Antonio; and a number of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Services will be held May 13-14 at [Holy Family Church](#) at 152 Florencia Ave. on the West Side. A 5 p.m. viewing Monday will be followed by a Rosary at 7 p.m. Funeral Mass will be celebrated at 11 a.m. Tuesday, followed by a reception in the parish hall.