

Gomez death brings end of legend

By Joe Olvera
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Modesto Gomez had a theory about poor people — "they have to be respected even more than wealthy people because the poor are survivors."

Gomez, a grocer by trade, was neither poor nor rich for many of his 88 years. "As long as there was food on the table, and a nice, clean place to come home to, that was all he needed," said Ofelia Camilli, one of his two daughters.

Police are now saying it was an accident when Gomez, suffering from emphysema, fell from a sixth-story window at Hotel Dieu hospital eight days ago.

His death marked the end of a legend in El Paso.

A city park was named for the man who started the boys club, served as national president of LULAC, launched political careers and advised the famous. But mostly, relatives say, he dealt in understanding and compassion, especially for the poor. "It made him feel good," said Mrs. Camilli.

"He was a totally unselfish man who believed that every person had the potential for being good.

"He spent most of his life ensuring that Hispanic children would succeed in this respect," Mrs. Camilli said.

"My father's heart would turn over when he saw children going hungry, or going barefoot," Mrs. Camilli said. "He had a great love for humanity, and this love was returned to him one thousand times more."

Gomez's life is well-documented in the minds of many longtime El Pasoans.

Baseball pitcher in the Mexican leagues; grocery store owner who started a breakfast program for poor youngsters at Aoy Elementary School; benefactor who bought shoes for underprivileged children; holder of every national office of LULAC — Gomez was all of these.

Jerry Camilli said his grandfather left the family a timeless legacy, "be fair with your fellow man, because to be honest is the most valuable thing we have."

Camilli, 40, is now a successful contractor in Albu-



Modesto Gomez puts his arm around his wife, Maria, in one of his favorite pictures.

querque, and he attributes, as does most of the family, his success to Gomez' philosophies.

"It was tough living up to his standards, because he was a man of high moral principles," said Camilli.

Gomez lived for 30 years at the same location on Alicia Street, in East Central El Paso. His home is not fancy, it is a house filled with warmth and love. His great grandchildren have the run of the place, as their happy laughter fills the empty void.

Raymond Telles, former El Paso mayor and former ambassador to Costa Rica, said he often went to Gomez for advice — something that flowed freely from Gomez.

"Modesto Gomez transcended races and nationalities, he was generous to everyone," said Telles. "He was highly respected by all groups of people.

"He got a lot of heat and criticism for some of his activities in behalf of Mexican Americans (such as starting the first El Paso chapter of LULAC) but he didn't care, so long as his people were helped by his actions."

Gomez was most proud of his athletic achievements, because he believed the body and the mind should both be exercised to their fullest potential.

Known at one time as "Iron Man Gomez," his exploits on the baseball diamond were the stuff from which legends are made.

His wife, Maria de Jesus Gomez, said Modesto could have played major league ball. He played one year for the Aztecs of Mexican baseball league and pitched them to the league championship.

"We were treated like royalty," said Mrs. Gomez. "Not only did they give Modesto a monthly salary, but we were allowed to live in the Mexican vice president's house

while we were there.

"I was never one for that high society living, although we probably could have done that."

Mrs. Gomez, 84, said she and her husband believed in three things. "Our religion teaches us to have Faith, Hope, and Charity. Beyond that, everything else is a luxury, and God doesn't want his children to have luxuries," she said.

"He wants us to show compassion, understanding, and to help one another. My husband and I lived by those rules, and there were times when we struggled too, but it was necessary in order for us to do our work with the poor."

Gomez raised many eyebrows in his public life, especially when he started the El Paso Boys Club, but he always enjoyed behind-the-scenes politicking.

One person who credits Gomez with his political success is Ernie Ponce, city alderman from 1951 through 1957.

"Gomez was the guiding force in my entering the political arena, because I knew nothing about politics," said Ponce. "But he convinced me to run."

Ofelia Camilli said her father had a good reason for being straightforward and honest: "I want to sleep good at night" was his main concern.

"My father was a very humorous man," said Mrs. Camilli. "When people would ask him how he got to be so old, his response was, 'I've grown this old because I haven't died yet.'"

"Well, now he is dead, but the family won't change, because he left us his teachings," said Mrs. Camilli. "He was a fighter; a winner, he always gave it his best shot, he always wanted to win."