

Tireless ICAN founder Henry Salinas dies at 66

BY PAUL MARYNIAK
Executive Editor

Henry Diaz Salinas, whose tireless efforts to save Chandler's at-risk youth produced a signature program to keep them from gang and other delinquent behavior, passed away last month after a 20-year battle with a debilitating illness that almost cost his life in 1997.

Mr. Salinas, 66, founded ICAN in 1991 out of concern for the increasing gang violence on the streets of the city he called home since he was 5, when he and his family moved to Chandler from Lubbock, Texas.

Even with four children and two jobs, Mr. Salinas found time nearly every day to pound the streets of Chandler to talk to teens hanging out on street corners and organize pickup basketball games and other activities, recalled his son, Fernando. "He'd say, 'What is going on here? It wasn't like this when I was growing up.' So he'd walk the streets and go up to gang members, and take them to the park and play basketball," Fernando said.

Mr. Salinas was involved in helping at-risk youth long before he founded ICAN.

He volunteered with the Boys and Girls Club but became discouraged by staffers turning away teens who violated its dress code or whose parents could not afford the monthly membership dues.

He said, "These are the ones who need it. They're getting kicked out of these clubs. We need to help them," his son



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Henry Salinas devoted his life to helping at-risk teens in Chandler.

said. Mr. Salinas gave little thought to his personal safety when approaching youths hanging on corners or near convenience stores to look for older teen gang leaders because he knew they had influence over kids 13 or 14 years old who were attracted to their lifestyle.

"He just did not stop," Fernando said. "They eventually came to respect him."

Gradually, he got other parents involved and found a little building at Alma School Road and Chandler Boulevard he could use for basketball games.

Mr. Salinas also approached staff at Willis Junior High School, persuading them to open their gym to his growing following of juveniles.

Those games led to more, as Mr. Salinas instituted mentoring time after play so that the young people knew adults cared for them and their future.

His devotion to his cause was seemingly limitless, Fernando said, recalling, "The phone would ring at 4 in the morning and some kid would be saying, 'I'm stranded in Phoenix,' and he'd go and bring him home."

And he frequently would do the same with teens in Chandler who had no way of getting to ICAN or a school gym. "He'd just go pick them up and take them home," said Fernando, a Marine stationed in Africa who came home to help care for his father in his final months.

"He was like a rock star to them," said Fernando.

Mr. Salinas' vision continues and ICAN remains a free program serving over 150 youth daily. The new ICAN Lon E. Hoeye Youth Center provides prevention programs to 55 percent more young people than it did five years ago.

Mr. Salinas was remembered for doing far more than helping at-risk youth.

At home, he was a devoted father and husband who "loved playing the guitar and singing," Fernando said.

His father also was "an amazing chef and would prepare you a delicious meal before you left his home," he added. "He fed everybody to include the cable guy, honestly. He learned the Tex-Mex recipes from his mother and grandmother. He worked as a chef at a rehab center

in Watsonville, California, and also at Williams Air Force Base. In fact, the Army Colonel he cooked for worked hard to keep my dad from being sent to Vietnam. That's how good his food was."

An Army veteran, Mr. Salinas created Thanksgiving meals that were "like dining at a fine restaurant," his son said, adding:

"He always took the time to slice fruits and vegetables into fun shapes. He displayed the finished meals as if he were competing for a Michelin star. For years, he volunteered at the Boys and Girls Club and took the lead in preparing Thanksgiving meals for low-income families."

He also volunteered as an interpreter at the Chandler Justice Center, read and mentored Head Start children and helped with programs aimed at curbing hunger.

He did all this despite a two-decade battle with an illness that created non-cancerous tumors on his brain and spine.

Once, in 1997, he was in a coma and he later recalled being able to listen helplessly as a doctor suggested to his wife that he be taken off life support.

"She simply said, 'No,'" Fernando said, recalling how his father frequently brought up the incident and relating how helpless he felt that he could not talk or even move.

Fernando said his father ended almost any conversation by saying, "Have a wonderful, beautiful, fantastic, lovely, blessed day."

He added that people almost always

BY SALINAS PHOTOS

SALINAS REMAINS

could see "it was so genuine and not just something he said."

Since spring, Mr. Salinas' illness finally began getting the better of him, forcing

him to remain largely bedridden.

He received numerous awards for his public service. He was inducted into Chandler's Celebration Plaza in 2007, and received the Hon Kachina Award in 2003 and the Chandler Cup in 1997.

"But the one he cherished mostly were the beautiful smiles on joyous ICAN kids," Fernando said.

He is survived by his wife of 46 years, Yolanda Salinas; sons Henry and Fernando; daughters Araceli and Yolanda; and 13

grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Interment was at Valley of the Sun Mortuary, 10940 E. Chandler Heights Road, Chandler. The family requested that memorials be made to ICAN at icanaz.org/get-involved/donate. ☐