

## **Raymond L. Telles, El Paso's 1st Mexican-American elected mayor, dies at 97**

By Ramón Rentería / El Paso Times El Paso Times

Posted:

ElpasoTimes.com

- [» Archive photos: El Paso Mayor Raymond Telles](#)
- [» Guestbook: Offer condolences to friends and family](#)

Raymond L. Telles, a pioneer in El Paso politics, a friend and close adviser of President John F. Kennedy, a former ambassador to Costa Rica, and the first Mexican-American elected mayor of El Paso, died Friday in Sherman Oaks, Calif. He was 97.

Telles had been in failing health in recent years. Family members said he died at the home of one of his daughters.

Telles was best known as the first Mexican-American mayor of a major city in the Southwest, long before Henry Cisneros in San Antonio and Federico Pena in Denver.

Over the years, Telles was widely applauded for challenging the political circles dominated by whites in El Paso in the 1940s and 1950s and for disproving the notion that Mexican-Americans could not be elected to public office or effectively run a city.

Telles devoted his life to public service, serving four times as El Paso County clerk and twice as El Paso mayor (1957-1961). He also devoted more than 30 years of service in the military and as a civilian troubleshooter and adviser for the federal government.

Ever modest about his El Paso legacy, Telles said in a 2005 interview: "I attempted to unite the people of El Paso. It didn't make any difference whether you were Hispanic or Anglo or Chinese or whatever."

His biographer, Mario T. Garcia, once described Telles' election as the first Mexican-American mayor of El Paso in 1957 as a groundbreaking event in the history of El Paso and in the history of Mexican-American and Latino politics in the United States. An El Paso native, Garcia is a professor of history and Chicano studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

"As the Hispanic population of this country continues to grow, Ambassador Telles will surely be recognized as one of the founding fathers of contemporary Latino politics in the United States," Garcia said in a 2005 interview.

Nestor Valencia, an artist and former El Paso city planner, worked many years with Telles. He once painted Telles' portrait at the family's request.

Valencia said Telles is credited with helping to obtain what is now described as the priceless Kress art collection housed in the El Paso Art Museum.

"The collection has some of the finest art the world has ever known," Valencia said. "He did a terrific job as mayor of El Paso. His whole life has been an example for everyone."

Bert Williams, who was hired by Telles as the city attorney in the 1960s and was mayor during 1971-73, called the death "tragic."

"I can't tell you how shaken I am," Williams said. "He was a great citizen and a wonderful man. Era un hombre buen hecho ."

Williams said he not only learned a lot about politics and government from Telles, but also learned what it meant to be a good man.

"As a person and as politician, he always took time to listen. He was very polite and very friendly and always was willing to help others," he said.

Telles was El Paso's outstanding elder statesman. He always looked like a diplomat, well-dressed in a business suit with a trademark American flag in his lapel. A symbol of dignity, Telles has been most applauded as the leader who gave Mexican-Americans a voice in El Paso politics.

Telles' tenacity to challenge the status quo in El Paso politics later inspired others like Alicia Chacon, who served as a county clerk, on the Ysleta school board and as county judge and city representative.

"He was the model for a whole generation, the one who absolutely proved that it could be done, that you could win elections and that you could break the mold," Chacon once said in an interview.

Chacon applauded Telles for running his campaigns with dignity, even when his opponents and El Paso newspapers questioned his qualifications for holding public office.

Telles was one of the highest-ranking Mexican-Americans in the federal government in the 1960s. He became a close friend of President Kennedy and part of the president's inner circle of advisers.

Telles once accompanied Kennedy to El Paso and had been scheduled to travel in 1963 to Dallas with Kennedy, who was about to appoint him ambassador to Mexico. Telles remained ambassador to Costa Rica in the Lyndon Baines Johnson administration after Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.

Telles never bragged about his achievements. He preferred instead to talk about his experiences with men in power, locking horns with Johnson and Richard Nixon, the tremendous loss he felt when Kennedy died, and the big disappointment when he lost his only race, against U.S. Rep. Richard White.

He usually credited the men who ran on his People's Ticket as aldermen -- Ted Bender, Ernest Craigo, Jack White and Ralph Seitsinger -- for helping him accomplish everything he proposed. Telles insisted that the fire and police departments hire more Hispanics.

Telles was born Sept. 5, 1915, in El Paso to Ramon and Angela Telles, who he said taught him to value service, loyalty, patriotism and community. His father always emphasized the importance of electing honest leaders in government.

Telles was preceded in death by his wife, Delfina, who was married to him for more than 65 years. He is survived by two daughters, Cynthia A. Telles and Patricia Telles-Irvin, both working professionals in academics, and various grandchildren.

Telles received numerous recognitions in his lifetime, including recognition in 2006 as Mayor Emeritus of El Paso.

At that time, then 34th District Court Judge William E. Moody described Telles as "a true pioneer, a true leader, one of the brightest lights that El Paso has ever produced." Moody originated the idea of honoring Telles in a special way.

In 2008, the El Paso-based Hispanos Triunfadores Awards program presented Telles its lifetime achievement recognition.

Telles' family had moved him to California in recent years for medical care.

In one of the last interviews that he granted, Telles reminisced about growing up in El Paso and his various experiences as a public servant.

"You never know how long you're going to live," he said. "But I've tried to live a clean life. I never smoked. I never drank."

Funeral arrangements are pending.

Ramón Rentería may be reached at [rrenteria@elpasotimes.com](mailto:rrenteria@elpasotimes.com); 546-6146. Follow him on