

Meet Ventura County's 'she-ro,' a 90-year-old whose impact is felt from City Hall to D.C.

Wendy Leung, Ventura County Star, March 16, 2019

Oxnard activist Lupe Anguiano shares some of her life's moments. She is a founding member of the National Women's Political Caucus. Juan Carlo, VC Star

A lot of people wanted to take Lupe Anguiano out for her big day.

Anguiano, who turned 90 on Tuesday, has been celebrating for weeks. That's what happens when you have decades of activism work under your belt and you collect friends along the way, from elected officials to millennial environmentalists.



*To Lupe Anguiano
With appreciation and best wishes,*

Ronald Reagan

President Ronald Reagan shakes hands with Oxnard activist Lupe Anguiano in an undated photo. She also worked with Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter. (Photo: COURTESY OF THE UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER)

On social media, the birthday wishes came in the forms of videos and slide shows. Anguiano, who's very connected, acknowledged them all. The Oxnard resident said she's surprised not more people her age are online.

"It's so much fun," Anguiano said.

Hard work, like the kind that wakes you at 3 a.m. to organize with Cesar Chavez, is what defined Anguiano's career, not fun. Successes and setbacks punctuated her work, whether it was advising a president or helping women get off welfare.

"It was never easy," she said. "That's why I'm 90 and still advocating for Ormond Beach, clean air and a ban on fracking."

On this milestone birthday during Women's History Month, Anguiano reflects on the next chapter of her life. She believes all her work advocating for women, the environment and people of color will continue through

the passion of today's youth. She's an ardent supporter of the Green New Deal and believes renewable energy is absolutely inevitable.

As for herself, she believes the next chapter will be defined by peace.

"I hunger for silence and peace to prepare myself for the next life," said Anguiano, a former nun.

She said she is spending the 40 days of Lent in prayer; that's how she gets her energy. Of course, she plans to document that spiritual journey on Facebook.

As a young woman, Anguiano joined the convent to advocate for the poor.

"The reason why I left is because I couldn't behave," she said.

Despite direct orders to avoid political protests, Anguiano was found at a demonstration calling out the discriminatory practice of redlining.

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Leaving the convent wasn't easy.

"That night, I wrote a letter to the pope for the dispensation of my vows. I cried. I cried because I loved Christ. I loved my religious life," Anguiano said. "I just couldn't live with my conscience. I could never live with hypocrisy."

Anguiano's faith continued to drive her life's work as she crafted policy in Washington and organized farm workers in Detroit. Her faith continues to play a central role in her fight against oil well expansion in Ventura County and a power plant in Oxnard.

Tomás Morales Rebecchi, a senior organizer for Food and Water Watch, said he had always been a religious person growing up but organizing with Anguiano revived that connection of faith and environment.

"She's very vocal about how we need to be good stewards regardless of what your faith is," said Rebecchi, 32.



Oxnard activist Lupe Anguiano talks about her political views. She celebrates 90th birthday this week. *(Photo: JUAN CARLO/THE STAR)*

Rebecchi said anytime he would drive by the ocean with Anguiano, she would give it a blessing. A week after the Refugio oil spill in May 2015, Rebecchi helped organize an interfaith blessing of the ocean.

"She brought back that dimension of faith to the work I do, to appreciate God's creatures," he said.

Young organizers like Rebecchi definitely welcome advice from the woman who once dispensed it to various commanders-in-chief.

Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Anguiano to work on the nation's first bilingual education bill. Anguiano wanted a foreign language taught in every school — whether it was French near the Canadian border, Chinese in San Francisco or Spanish in southwestern United States.

The bilingual education program eventually morphed into an English as a Second Language program and Anguiano resigned to work for Chavez's National Farmworkers Association. But it wouldn't be her last foray in Washington.

Anguiano went to organize a grape boycott in Detroit, where she sought the help of a local bishop to spread the message. Eventually, she got the backing from the mayor and United Auto Workers.

Anguiano, whose demeanor is often quiet and unassuming, said it was Chavez who mentored her and helped her handle her anger. Chavez once stood up for her when a fellow male organizer asked her to cook.

In Detroit, there was a lot of opposition from agricultural growers. Anguiano recalled one scuffle in which she kicked an opponent during a heated exchange. Anguiano described it as tapping her foot against his shin but the man claimed she attacked him. The incident was covered by the local media.

"I did want to show him that he was dealing with an organizer and not a woman," Anguiano said.

Washington would continue to beckon. She would eventually return during the Richard Nixon administration working on bilingual education once again but this time in the Office of Civil Rights. She would be a consultant in the Jimmy Carter administration under the Department of Labor and would receive an award from Ronald Reagan for her work on welfare reform.

Born in Colorado and raised in Ventura County, Anguiano often got homesick working in the nation's capital. Mexican culture and food seemed absent. The only tortillas she could find were those canned and only in specialty stores. When she went to a restaurant that claimed to be Mexican, she ordered beans thinking she would get the refried pinto variety but instead got a bowl of kidney beans.

Anguiano recalled seeing Nixon make the mistake of biting into a tamale without peeling off the husk.

Although the Mexican food was horrible, D.C. was the place to be if you wanted to make a legislative difference. It was in D.C. that Anguiano was tasked to help write the Blueprint for American Women as part of the Equal Rights Amendment. She focused on welfare and developed a model to help women get jobs.

She wanted the welfare and labor departments to work together. Instead of making women jump through bureaucratic hurdles to get food stamps, they should use the money to offer child care and offer them a job or job training.

Some thought that putting mothers of young children into the workforce was crazy.

"Ted Kennedy called me and said, 'What are you doing? Women with children below the age of 6 working?'" Anguiano said.

Thinking about the mood at the time, Anguiano said, "Women were not heard the way they are heard now."

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Once again, Anguiano left Washington and applied her welfare model to start a nonprofit — National Women's Employment and Education. Her work on welfare reform eventually got the support of Reagan and Barbara Bush. CBS "60 Minutes" did a segment on Anguiano's ideas.

As an outspoken leader in women's rights, Anguiano was bound to cross paths with Gloria Steinem. The two helped form the National Women's Political Caucus alongside Shirley Chisholm, Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug and other women. The caucus continues to this day advocating for women's participation in politics.

For most of her life, Anguiano was a Democrat. At one time she was aligned with the Raza Unida Party, working with Maria del Rosario "Rosie" Castro, mother of Julian and Joaquin Castro, to get Mexican Americans elected to office. Their work helped the party get a foothold in Crystal City and other areas of Texas.

Today, she has no political preference. Anguiano grew disillusioned when former Gov. Jerry Brown refused to support a fracking ban.

"How can you say Democrats are better than the Republicans when they are doing the same thing?" Anguiano said.

As if to drive home the point that she thinks independently, Anguiano put her weight behind Oxnard City Council critic Aaron Starr during the mayoral race last year. It raised some eyebrows among Oxnard progressives who frowned on Starr's privatization and small-government ideas.

Anguiano strongly opposed the recall of four members of the City Council, a campaign headed by Starr over wastewater rates. But she still believed that Starr, a controller for Haas Automation, was the right person to lead the city, given his financial background.

“What is keeping Oxnard from moving forward is the financials,” Anguiano said. “He’s a businessman. We need someone from business on the council.”

When she’s not out stumping for political candidates, (she’s a staunch supporter of Councilwoman Carmen Ramirez in her supervisorial bid) Anguiano is getting in touch with millennials. It’s a generation that’s hyper connected and more concerned about climate change than the generations that came before. Anguiano is very optimistic about the future.

Noemi Tungüi, an Oakland organizer who grew up in Oxnard, said Anguiano can walk into a room full of young people and fit right in.



Oxnard activist Lupe Anguiano keeps active on social media. She is a founding member of the National Women’s Political Caucus working alongside Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Jean Stapleton and Coretta Scott King. *(Photo: JUAN CARLO/THE STAR)*

“She’s very approachable and willing to share her wisdom,” Tungüi said. “She really understands the intergenerational movement and the need for intergenerational knowledge.

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... Her energy is so vibrant. She walks into a room and she makes an effort to really see you."

Tungüi, who works on health access issues in Native American and underserved communities, said grassroots organizing is often exhausting.

"A lot of community organizers, we burn out. Sometimes we want to give up. It seems like all odds are against us fighting big corporations," she said. "It's nice to see someone who's been fighting the good fight for so long. It makes you want to go out there and fight yourself."

Tungüi considers Anguiano to be Ventura County's "she-ro."

"She's not really known to the level of Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta but I definitely see her at that level of achievement," Tungüi said. "She's a trailblazer."

Just because Anguiano believes the younger generation is ready to take over, it doesn't mean she'll sit on the sidelines. For the past 30 years she's been talking about younger people taking over and yet Anguiano seems to be everywhere, whether it's an eight-hour county government hearing or a community event featuring classic cars.

The fearless quality that many see in Anguiano doesn't seem to dissipate with age.

Rebecchi recalls being with Anguiano several years ago giving an L.A. reporter a tour of local oil fields. Their car got stuck in the mud and Anguiano, who was using a walker at the time, insisted on helping push the car.

"That's just classic Lupe," Rebecchi said.