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Obituary: Longtime Congressman Esteban Torres dies at 91 after life devoted to public service

Torres, of West Covina, died of natural causes two days before his 92nd birthday on Tuesday on Jan. 25, according to his family.



Esteban Torres and President Jimmy Carter talk next to Marine One, the presidential helicopter in 1980. Photo: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

By **MIKE SPRAGUE** | msprague@scng.com | Whittier Daily News

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Jose Martinez, 18, of Schurr High School, David Hess, 17, of Saint Paul High, Rep. Esteban Torres, and William Blake, 17 of Wilson High. Torres appointed these students to attend military academies next fall. 5-27-97 (Photo by Greg Andersen)

Former Rep. Esteban Torres, a union leader who helped found the East Los Angeles Community Union, worked for President Jimmy Carter and represented the San Gabriel Valley and Whittier area in Congress from 1983-99, has died.

Torres, of West Covina, died of natural causes two days before his 92nd birthday on Tuesday on Jan. 25, according to his family.

“Esteban is a man really dedicated to service,” John Echeveste, chief executive officer for La Plaza de Cultura y Artes, a Los Angeles historical museum that Torres helped found after leaving office.

“And whatever he did, whether it was as a community organizer, labor leader or a White House assistant, he was really ready to help people,” Echeveste said.

In an emailed statement, U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla called Torres a path-forging public servant and a lifelong fighter for the common good.

“Torres’ pride in his working-class, immigrant roots and his belief in the American dream drove his dedication to labor activism and community organizing,” Padilla wrote.

Born in Miami, Arizona, Torres’ father, a copper miner, was deported to Mexico in 1935. He never saw his father again and later, mother, Rena Gomez, moved the family to East Los Angeles where Torres graduated from Garfield High School in 1949.

He enlisted in the U.S. Army and served from 1949 to 1953. After leaving the Army he married Arcy Sánchez.

In the late 1950s, Torres began working as an assembly line worker at the Chrysler plant in Maywood and became active in the United Auto Workers.

Torres rose through the ranks of the UAW, serving as an organizer for the western region of the United States, as the union's international representative in Washington, D.C., and from 1964 to 1968 he was the UAW's Inter-American Bureau for Caribbean and Latin American Affairs.

In 1968, Torres founded TELACU, a community development corporation, serving as its executive director until 1974 when he decided to run for the House of Representatives but lost.

In 1977 President Carter appointed Torres as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Paris, France and later served as White House Special Assistant for Hispanic Affairs.

Then in 1992, he was elected to the House of Representatives in the newly drawn 34th Congressional District that included the cities of Artesia, Baldwin Park, Industry, La Puente, Norwalk, Santa Fe Springs, Pico Rivera, South El Monte, West Covina and Whittier.

While in Congress, Torres focused on environmental challenges, including the BKK Landfill contamination, water systems in the San Gabriel Valley and reclaimed wastewater, said Jamie Casso, Torres' son-in-law and chief-of-staff.

Torres, a veteran himself, also helped folkd who served in the armed forces in getting benefits they were owed and medals they were due, Casso said.

"He was a wonderful person and a consummate gentleman," Casso said. "He served with passion, dignity and duty."

Pete Ramirez, now president of the Pico Water District but formerly an El Rancho school board member and Pico Rivera City Council member, remembers Torres fondly.

"We used to go out to dinner at the Dal Rae," said Ramirez, also a cousin of Torres' wife.

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“He would always ask how things are and how he could help Pico Rivera,” he said. “He was a wonderful person who was down to earth. He never asked for anything other than what he could do to help the community.”

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In retirement from elective office, Torres served on the California Transportation Commission, the Board of Directors for Fannie Mae, as chair of the East Valley Development Authority for the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, the Board of Directors for Entravision Communications, the Oversight Board for Industry’s Successor Agency and he was a visiting professor at Whittier College and UCLA.

In 2006, the Los Angeles Unified School District named a high school in East Los Angeles after Torres. The Esteban E. Torres High School, home of the Toros, opened on Sept. 13, 2010.

Torres is survived by his wife Arcy and their children Carmen, Rena, Camille, Selina, and Steve; grandchildren Tanya, Kati, Bianca, Koby, Xavier, Nazaria, Diego, Steven, Carina Tobias, Heidi, Amber; and seven great grandchildren.

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