

José Angel Gutiérrez: From the Beginning



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Photograph by Al-Fin

JOSÉ ANGEL GUTIÉRREZ

...the

FIRE

still BURNS

by Raul Herrera

The sharp rhetorical plow of Jose Angel Gutierrez cut deep into the rich and powerful South Texas political soil during the late '60s and '70s. His dialogue was almost always brash, but accurate. He joined other fearless activists across the nation and together raised their angry voices against the long standing injustices and prejudices that Mexican-Americans had endured over countless years. His boundless energy was powered by a heart filled with a burning desire to recapture his people's dignity, pillaged for decades by the ruthless racist political machinery of South Texas.

San Antonio, Texas - May 4, 1970... "They accuse me and other Mexicanos in Cristal (Crystal City), Cotulla and Carrizo Springs of being unfair. One gringo lady put it very well. She was being interviewed on April 6, immediately after the school board elections and before the city council elections. A reporter from Newsweek asked her to explain the strange phenomena that was occurring in those towns...a tremendous voter turnout and a significant number in bloc voting. She said, 'Well, this is just horrible! Horrible! A few days ago we elected a bunch of bum Mexicans to the school board.' And the reporter remarked, 'Well, they are 85 percent of this county.' She replied, 'That's what I mean! They think they ought to run this place!'" (Excerpt from a speech presented by José Angel Gutiérrez following Crystal City elections in 1970.)

The impact Gutierrez made along the way, beginning in the late '60s is now a critical segment of U.S. history.

The effects of his leadership are still very much alive today in the people he touched during those turbulent years. Gutiérrez' story has been the subject of both biographies and documentaries, in particular, a PBS Special - "The History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement." Episode 4 of the film features dramatic footage of the political unrest which occurred in Crystal City. For years, Crystal City has been known as the "Spinach Capital of the World." Adding to that notoriety is the fact that it is also the birthplace of Gutierrez, the founder of La Raza Unida (The United People) Party.



On October 25, 1944, Angel and Concepcion Fuentes Gutiérrez increased the population of Crystal City by one. Their son, José Angel, was born on that day in the small Zavala County farming community, approximately 97 miles southwest of San Antonio. His arrival was met with only limited family fanfare. Bells, whistles and sirens would herald his presence much later in life.

“My mother was born in San Antonio and was 26 years-old when she had me,” Gutiérrez explains. “My father was 60 years old when I was born.” José Angel regrets that he never had the opportunity to learn from his father about the details surrounding the adventurous life he led in Mexico. He knows of his father’s exploits only by the stories his mother told him and some he had overheard his father

share with acquaintances. “My father was a political exile three times. Once he fled to New Orleans, another to Nogales and the third to the Rio Grande Valley.” Angel Gutiérrez, along with other medical students and interns at the time, was swept up by Pancho Villa’s revolution a decade into this century, and pressed into service with the first known mobile medical corps. ▶

Right: Gutiérrez sits with family members, L-R, wife, Gloria; daughter, Tozi; aunt, Susan Barker; and son, Adrian.

Bottom: Gutiérrez as Zavala County Judge, 1976.





Jose Angel gets sworn in to the State Bar of Texas, 1990.

In time, he received a degree in medicine from Torreon Medical School and climbed the ranks in Villa's Army to that of colonel. "When Villa took Torreon and established martial law, he placed my father in charge," Dr. Gutiérrez says matter-of-factly. "When elections took place, my father became mayor of Torreon. After Villa was assassinated in 1923, Plutarco Elías Calles, Mexican soldier and statesman, began organizing what is today known as the "PRI" (Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party), corralling all former military enemies."

"That's when my father exiled to the Valley and eventually found his way to Crystal City. There he befriended my grandfather, Ignacio Fuentes, a Zavala County constable whose territory was in an area just outside of Cristal known as El Swiche. My mother was the oldest of 14 children - actually, there were 17, but three died," Gutiérrez explains. In 1934, Ignacio Fuentes, in exchange for his family's financial well-being, literally gave his 16 year-old daughter's hand in marriage to José Angel's father. Angel Gutiérrez, the physician, was already board certified in Texas and had a moderate medical practice in Crystal City by that time. "Mom

held out, she wanted no part of it," Gutiérrez humorously recalls. "It took ten years before she gave in to my father and the marriage, then I was born," he adds.

Concepcion was forced to drop out of school to help raise her siblings and see after her husband, who was 34 years her senior. "To her credit," Jose Angel notes, "she continued her education via busi-

ness and correspondence courses and eventually became, what was known then, a practical nurse. She assisted my father in his medical practice."

José Angel attributes his bilingual literacy to his parents. "My mother taught me English and my father taught me Spanish...to read, to write, to speak," he recalls. "My father had a rule - at home we spoke Spanish. We would listen to Spanish language radio programs, attend movies that were in Spanish and read political newspapers and magazines printed in Spanish. I was required to interpret the stories to my father. I repeated the same activities with my mother, in English."

Gutiérrez' scholastic career began at the storefront private kindergarten facility known as La Esquelita de Suse Salazar in Crystal City. Twenty-five days is all it took for the young tot to advance to the second grade at Zavala Elementary, the Mexican school. His parents protested his enrollment at Zavala and soon he was attending Grammar School, the official name of the building.

Segregation at these facilities was based on the biased belief that inclusion of Mexican-American students would impede the progress and success of the Anglo students. This institutionalized segregation was not unique to Crystal City, but rather the norm at most schools throughout South Texas including those school districts in larger cities such as San Antonio, Austin, and Corpus Christi.

Segregated education in Cristal continued into junior high school. Anglo students attended Sterling Fly Junior High, while the Mexican-American children attended Airport which was part of the World War II Internment Camp managed by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and used to house German, Japanese, and Latin American immigrant detainees suspected of being subversives in this country. The rationale given for segregated schools during that period was that the Mexican-American students, as part of the migrant work force, caused disruption in the educational process. "My mother raised hell with the administrators and I was transferred to Fly," José Angel relates.

Dr. Gutiérrez ascribes his early scholastic progress to childhood education as well as bilingual education. He recalls his parents insistence on education. "College was never an option, it was always a given," he points out.

"They both told me that I was going to be a physician, just like my father. I remember helping my father and mother in a number of medical procedures, including the delivery of babies, and I knew then that I didn't want to do that. Through my parents' associations with the community I learned that there was something called a lawyer. From then on, I told everyone I was going to be a lawyer." Gutiérrez recollects. ►





José Angel was required by his father to participate in social events sponsored by private Mexican organizations in town. He took part in plays, gave declamations, sang songs and presented orations. As for religion, his father would question the message given by visiting missionary priests at Sacred Heart Church and engage them in serious debate. Gutiérrez recalls how segregation also reared its ugly head in the church. "The Masses were segregated too," he notes. "We had mostly Irish priests. In the early '40s, they were Spaniards. Back then, mass was offered in Latin. The Masses

I live that lesson to this day. I do know that I am free to express my emotions, mostly in private, but I also can truthfully say that I never back down from any situation." The latter helped him stand up to the injustice he personally experienced while a student at Crystal City High School.

"Crystal City High was also segregated, but only inside," Gutiérrez says. "I remember, grades 9-1 and 9-2 were all Anglo classes, 9-3 was mixed, and then 9-4 and 9-5 pues, ya era pura raza (all Mexican-American). My first two years were difficult for me. I was

ject. Nonetheless, he struggled in English class but not for academic reasons. "They would tell me and other Mexicanos that we were dumb; that we should sit in the back of the classroom because we were holding everyone back; that we couldn't spell; that we couldn't write; that we spoke with an accent. One teacher told me that I would never amount to anything and that I should join the Army," he recounts with contempt.

Ironically, John B. Lair, Crystal City High School Principal, was the person José Angel admired as a role model. "He was huge, six-three, 240 pounds, ex-marine, a real rough and tough kind of guy...he was my hero. I knew that I was going to grow up to be just like him," Gutiérrez recalls. Lair threw José Angel an eye-opening racial message during his junior year. A list of sophomore class prom servers Gutiérrez prepared was rejected by Mr. Lair. "He looked at it, tore it up and trashed it. He said, 'No, that's not it. We can't have Mexican boys and girls with Anglo kids,'" Gutiérrez adds. The principal made up another list...all Anglo students. The young junior class president met the principal's action with immediate objection. He recalls telling the principal, "That's not right. What you've done is illegal."

"It's very earth shattering when you discover that an idol or a hero is found to have major flaws; your whole world comes tumbling down," José Angel recounts. He waited a year to confront the man he once wanted to emulate. At the graduation ceremony, Mr. Lair applauded Gutiérrez, noting what a fine young man he turned out to be and wishing him well. "I said to him, 'Thank you very much. I'm going to come back one day and fire you,'" he says. It didn't quite work out that way in the end, however. Lair died of a heart attack in 1970 while Gutiérrez was board president of the Crystal City Independent School District.

National Raza Unida Party Convention, El Paso, (L-R) Gutiérrez, Reyes Lopez Tijerina, and Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzalez, 1972.



were segregated by hours. The 9 o'clock Mass was for Anglos, and if Mexicans chose to attend, they had to sit separate from them and in the back. I never questioned it. You were taught to never question the Church," he adds.

In 1958, José Angel's father died. "It was a great loss for me and I had great difficulty handling it emotionally," he informs. "I remember my mother teaching me that the myth about real men don't cry was just that, a myth. She said to me, 'Los hombres si lloran, pero lo que los hombres no hacen, es que no se hacen para tras.'

without a father. My mother tried desperately to contain me. I eventually realized that you needed good grades, honors and more to go on in the future. So, I shaped up and made the National Honor Society, Junior Class President, Student Body President, Public Speaking State Champion and more." José Angel recalls that as a freshman, he was part of the minority. By his junior year, the Mexican-American students comprised the majority. "The Mexicanos were staying in (school) longer, they were doing better, and of course, there were more enrollments."

Gutiérrez always liked school. As a result, he didn't have a favorite sub-

Such was life for the majority of Mexican-Americans living in South Texas in the early '60s, especially in Crystal City, Texas. The need to eliminate social injustice was beginning to burn deep in Gutierrez' heart. José Angel, at 18, was ready for politics. The attorney pays tribute to two women as his political mentors. "I was Virginia Muzquiz' campaign manager when she ran for State Representative," he notes. "The other person was Enriqueta Palacios. That lady had determination, absolute energy and aggressiveness - she just had no quit to her. She was a true believer, a zealot."

After graduation and while attending the junior college in Uvalde, José Angel actively began organizing and making political speeches in an effort to rally support for their cause. Often Texas Rangers were called in to intervene and help put down the rallies. "The Mexican people had been accustomed to being extremely fearful of the Texas Rangers," Gutiérrez remembers. "They were known to be killers, had statewide jurisdiction, and most of them were psychopaths," he adds with deep conviction. Crystal

City, Texas made national headlines in April 1963. Los Cinco (five Mexican-American politicians) were voted into the city council. The months of planning and hard work had paid off. The reins of power had been legally taken away from the controlling white minority and placed into the hands of elected Mayor Juan Cornejo and council members Mario Hernández, Antonio Cardenas, Manuel Maldonado and Reynaldo Mendoza. The shock was too much for some members of the elite minority. "Texas Ranger, Alfred Y. Allee, took the city hall keys from out-going Mayor Bruce Holsomback and declared martial law," Gutiérrez recalls. It would take a call from Governor Connally to finally convince Allee to turn the keys of government over to the new council.

Through conniving moves that Dr. Gutiérrez labels 'underhanded gringo tricks,' the power of Los Cinco began to deteriorate. Disillusioned and frustrated by what he witnessed, José Angel fled to Los Angeles. He returned to Texas after seven months of denial. There was work to be done back home. Upon his return, he en-

rolled at Texas A&I in Kingsville. His political fire rekindled, Gutiérrez attempted to start a PASSO (Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations) Chapter on campus. Through his efforts, PASSO reduced the membership age limit from 21 to 18. His group at Texas A&I managed to force charter revisions for campus organizations and consequently a PASSO Chapter was officially started on the campus. Gutiérrez graduated from Texas A&I in 1966 with a bachelor's degree in government.

José Angel's failed first attempt at law school was self inflicted. He recalls being one of only three Mexican-Americans, no blacks or women, who attended Bates College of Law in Houston. He aggressively challenged almost everything being taught. "I just couldn't sit still in class," Dr. Gutiérrez points out, "when something either derogatory or discriminatory was said. Even Gene Garcia from Kingsville stopped talking to me. He said I was a troublemaker - and I was," he admits. He found his niche at St. Mary's University in San Antonio where he enrolled in a master's program in government. ▶



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Gutiérrez, along with Willie Velasquez, Juan Patlán, Mario Compeán, and Ignacio "Nacho" Perez, started MAYO (Mexican-American Youth Organization) while at St. Mary's University in 1967. "I was convinced that we didn't need LULAC, or PASSO, or the GI Forum," he says firmly. "We had to create an organization of organizers." The group became notorious for spearheading high school walkouts. The list of grievances was extensive and included the segregation issues, the NO Spanish rule, corporal punishment, name calling, abusive superintendents, principals, teachers, and counselors - all aimed at Mexican-American students.

In 1968, José Angel received his master's degree in government from St. Mary's. While enrolled in a PhD program at the University of Texas at Austin, Uncle Sam paid him a visit, he'd been drafted. "My Selective Service Board was out of Uvalde. I filed three types of deferments and appeals: student, marital, and children, but Ruth Webb from that office prevailed. She had always been trying to get me since high school," he says moving his head in the negative. "So, in order to avoid the draft, I joined the 277th Combat Engineers National Guard Unit in San Antonio.

By late 1968, Gutiérrez had personally organized 38 high school walkouts. The movement was reaching its peak. MAYO creates the Winter Garden Project. "By that time we had learned that a walkout wasn't enough, you had to organize the entire community and follow through," he responds. It was common knowledge that agreements reached through protest would often be violated. "We said, 'We're going to take over the whole damn town,' and I was the one selected to do it in Cristal." The project's objective was to take over the governments and boards in Zavala, La Salle and Dimmitt Counties - city

councils, school boards and county positions.

Gutiérrez felt the timing was ripe for the next step in his dream of creating a new political party...a third party. The support was there, and most importantly, the media was there to cover it all. On January 17, 1970 the La Raza Unida Party was born. "Immediately after the walkout in '69, I became a candidate for the school board," he states. Jose Angel was victorious in that April 1970 election and was voted by the elected group as its president.

In the aforementioned speech of May, 1970, Gutiérrez also noted that, "In 1960, there were 26 Texas counties in which Chicanos were a majority, yet none of those counties was in the control of Chicanos. If you want to stand there and take it, you can. You can be perfectly content, just like your father and grandfather were, con sombrero en la mano (with hat in hand)." His leadership and provoking campaign rhetoric fanned the flames of La Raza Unida Party.

The expected 'underhanded gringo tricks' surfaced almost immediately. The slate of Raza Unida candidates, throughout the Winter Garden area, was removed from the ballot on the false accusation that it was in violation of the election code. "We had Texas Attorney General Crawford Martin's opinion that said, 'No, they did everything right; nobody has ever done this before; but what they did is correct,'" Gutiérrez informs. "So, it went to Federal Court where it was overturned. I think that opinion said that there was no denial of equal opportunity, that we could vote for or against the candidates of the Democratic Party and that there was no need for us to have a separate alternative party."

"In '74, I ran for county judge and got elected and then re-elected in '78," he states. The Raza Unida Party continued its growth, placing new faces

on city councils, school boards and county offices all across America. "Also in '72 we went regional and national. We reached into 17 states plus the District of Columbia where Frank Scheafer Corona was elected to the school board."

José Angel received his doctorate degree in government from the University of Texas at Austin in 1976. He received his degree in jurisprudence in December of 1989 from the University of Houston Law School. Although his political career has not gone without controversy, Dr. Gutiérrez continues to encourage the pursuit of equal representation in government and he gives credit to the many mentors he has had along the way, including Virginia Muzquiz, Enriqueta Palacios, Albert Peña, Jr., and Albert Fuéntes. He is proud to note that his children, Adrian, Tozi, Olin, Avina, stepdaughter, Lina, Andrea and Claver, are all academic achievers and on their way to successful careers.

Dr. Gutiérrez is currently teaching Public Policy and the Mexican-American Community at the University of Houston under a visiting scholar program. As required by the program, he is authoring a book that will be about the leadership of local elected officials in the Mexican-American community from 1950 to the present. Gutiérrez calls on our youth to, "get committed to your community, be of service, be a leader, learn to govern, give us our destiny." He hopes that future generations will read about José Angel Gutiérrez and learn that "...I never quit trying." To that end he adds, "This is a life long commitment. We must prevail. We must return our homeland to our control."

