

Latino leaders who shaped Silicon Valley



by [Lorraine Gabbert](#) October 7, 2023



A colorful mural brightens up
in East San Jose. File photo.

Hispanic or Latino residents
population and 24.7% of S

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Census data—and the impact of local leaders is visible across the region.

[Activists](#) have worked for decades to give Latino residents equity, representation and access to services. The [School of Arts and Culture at Mexican Heritage Plaza](#) in East San Jose is working to expand its cultural programming and bring family wellness services to the Mayfair community, where it hopes to create a cultural district. It also envisions developing affordable housing and commercial space for local businesses and social service providers.

In celebration of National Hispanic Heritage Month, San José Spotlight is highlighting some of the most influential community leaders in Silicon Valley. While this isn't an exhaustive list, these individuals have broken barriers, shaped history and inspired change.

We also recognized some of the most [influential Black leaders](#) for Black History Month in February, [trailblazing women](#) for Women's History Month in March and [inspiring leaders in the LGBTQ+ community](#) in June for Pride Month.

Here they are in alphabetical order by first name.

Alcario and Carmen Castellano





Alcario (center right) and Carmen Castellano (second from left). Grants and scholarships to nonprofits from the Castellano Family Foundation advanced Latino education, arts and culture, leadership and diversity. Photo courtesy of the Castellano Family Foundation.

Alcario Castellano and his wife Carmen rose from humble beginnings, but after winning a \$141 million California Lottery jackpot in 2001, they created the Castellano Family Foundation to uplift San Jose's Latino community.



Through the years, the foundation—which ceased operation June 30—awarded millions of dollars in grants and scholarships to Silicon Valley nonprofits to advance Latino education, arts and culture, leadership and diversity. Together, the Castellano Family Foundation and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation

created the LatinXCEL Fund, a \$10 million effort to support Latinx leaders and groups in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

Carmen, the inspiration behind the foundation, died in 2020 at age 81.

She and Al were dedicated community advocates and volunteers who made modest contributions to civic organizations like the San Jose GI Forum and to arts and culture organizations like MACLA and The School of Arts and Culture long before winning the lottery. As several grantees have observed, not much changed after they won. They continued their advocacy and support for these and many more nonprofit organizations, but “the checks just got bigger.” Carmen used their newfound wealth to scale-up their philanthropy and invest in the long-term future of their community.

Daughter Carmela Castellano-Garcia recalls her father being passionate about promoting diversity and inclusion and her parents advocating at the local elementary school for diversity among teachers.

The Castellanos were avid art collectors and had a love for music. Carmen, who played piano, grew up in a home filled with opera, classical and Mexican music. Alcario played the trumpet in high school and was in a dance band.

Bernardo Roberto Cruz and David Lopez





Roberto Cruz was a leader in education for 39 years and a pioneer of bilingual education. Photo courtesy of the Foundation of Hispanic Education.



Bernardo Roberto Cruz was a leader in education for 39 years and a pioneer of bilingual education.

Motivated to remove educational barriers for Latino students, Cruz established Bay Area Bilingual Education in 1971, becoming its executive director. In 1981, it became The National Hispanic

University. Through a multicultural educational experience, NHU enabled Hispanics to earn undergraduate degrees or certificates to pursue careers in business, education and technology.

Cruz lobbied in Washington, D.C. for increased funding for bilingual education nationwide. NHU partnered with other institutions including San Jose State University and San Jose/Evergreen Community College District, which enabled students to cross-enroll. NHU also partnered with the East Side Union High School District to boost Latino high school graduation and college placement rates.

After his death in 2002, East Side Union High School District named a charter school after him, the Roberto Cruz Leadership Academy. The Dr. Roberto Cruz Alum Rock Branch Library also carries his name.



David Lopez worked to expand access to affordable, quality education for Latinos and other underserved students while serving as president (2003-2013) and chancellor (2013-2014) of [The National Hispanic University](#) in East San Jose. Under his guidance, the university transformed into an academically comprehensive, accredited four-year institution. It served more

than 850 undergraduate and graduate students in 2013 and closed its doors two years later.

Lopez's teaching career started at the College of Education at New Mexico State University. He earned tenure at California State University, Fresno in the School of Education and Human Development.

After NHU closed, Lopez worked as executive director of the Maestros Accelerator Program, which guides high school and community college students into teaching careers. He later worked as an administrator for the Milpitas extension of San Jose City College, providing low-income at-risk high school students with college courses and professional work experience.

Lopez is a board member of Pivotal, which invests in programs to improve the lives of Silicon Valley foster youth.

Blanca Alvarado





Blanca Alvarado is still advocating for Latino residents at age 92. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

Although she retired from public office in 2009, at age 92 [Blanca Alvarado](#) is still involved in politics and [advocates](#) for the Latino community. She is considered La Madrina—the godmother—of East San Jose.

After being the first Latina elected to the San Jose City Council in 1980, Alvarado became the city's first Latina vice mayor and was elected to the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors in 1991. During her tenure in office, she led the effort to create the first children's health insurance program and fought for Latinos [disproportionally incarcerated](#) in Silicon Valley. She continues her advocacy today, fighting to close the Reid-Hillview Airport in East

San Jose [amid fears that leaded fuel](#) from airplanes is harming residents.

Blanca Alvarado and José Hernández Middle School was named in honor of her advocacy.

Getting people [to vote](#) and engage in politics is her passion. She said if Latinos don't vote, Latinos won't hold office and their needs will go unaddressed.

"We're living through historic times right now where democracy is being threatened," Alvarado told San José Spotlight. "There are so many forces at play that seek to undermine the accomplishments and the achievements of minorities. The forces that are out to undermine the achievements of Latinos in particular ... are so strong today that the absolute necessity of encouraging people to get out to vote and exercise our beliefs and our perspective is lifesaving."

Cindy Chavez





Supervisor Cindy Chavez speaks to supporters at her election night party in Willow Glen for her San Jose mayoral run. File photo.

Equality is the North Star for Cindy Chavez, a Santa Clara County supervisor and former San Jose councilmember. She envisions a future where birthplace and gender aren't limitations. With deep ties to organized labor and working families, the veteran politician has served as head of Working Partnerships USA at the South Bay Labor Council. Despite unsuccessfully running for San Jose mayor twice, losing in 2006 to Chuck Reed and in 2022 to Matt Mahan, Chavez is committed to public service. ^

Chavez championed a \$950 million affordable housing bond in 2016 to expand housing for vulnerable and low-income residents.

She also advocated for the Children's Health Initiative, guaranteeing every child in San Jose access to health insurance.

At her urging, supervisors in 2021 prohibited the sale or use of leaded fuel at Reid-Hillview Airport, [following concerns](#) that the fuel was poisoning residents. Chavez took the issue [to Congress](#), testifying before the Oversight Environmental Subcommittee, which was considering a total ban on leaded aviation fuel.

"You think about all the things that wouldn't have happened if you hadn't chosen to run," she told San José Spotlight. "I look around at what we've been able to accomplish, and I just dig in."

Dolores Alvarado



Dolores Alvarado helps
low-income families
receive health care.
Photo courtesy of



Community Health Partnership.

Fueled by a passion for service and health care rights, Dolores Alvarado pursued a career in health care spanning 46 years—finding work in a neighborhood clinic, family planning center, county hospital emergency room and university-affiliated adolescent clinic. Following her work with the Santa Clara County Public Health Department, she became CEO of Community Health Partnership in 2011, a consortium of 10 organizations with 40 sites from San Mateo to Gilroy.

Community health centers—which offer medical, dental, nutritional and mental health care—serve some of the poorest neighborhoods and are entryways into health care for those who lack access, money or are undocumented. More than half of the families are covered by Medi-Cal and 33% of patients are undocumented immigrants, according to Alvarado.

“We are a safe, trusted entry point,” [Alvarado](#) told San José Spotlight in 2020. “We don’t ask you if you have documents, so there’s that sense of security.”



Tireless
advocate
and social
icon



Esther
Medina is
pictured
in this file
photo.

Esther Medina

Esther Medina was a tireless activist and community leader who fought for social justice and advocated for Latinos, women and the underserved. She died at age 76 in October 2012.

As executive director of the Mexican American Community Services Agency, Medina brought it from the brink of financial ruin to a solvent community resource with a \$7 million operating budget, according to the Mercury News. She worked to create affordable housing for seniors, a senior health center and youth center in the Mayfair neighborhood of East San Jose.

“Esther Medina was a fierce leader, fueled by the combination of love for her culture and the intense pain of growing up in poverty and experiencing firsthand the inequities that existed,” San Jose Deputy City Manager Angel Rios, Jr. told San José Spotlight. “The focus of her life was leveling the playing field and championing the cause of the disenfranchised.”

In her obituary, her niece Elisa Medina recalled being wowed  child by Medina’s glamour, style and powerful presence. Spä Harlan, former CEO of the Bill Wilson Center, said Medina was not only a star for the Latino community but also a hero for the nonprofit community and taught her to never accept “no” for an answer.

Joe Coto



Joe Coto worked to uplift students as a politician and school district superintendent. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

Joe Coto pursued a career in education before jumping into the political ring. After teaching in Oakland and becoming superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District, he served as superintendent of East Side Union High School District in Jose. While helming the district, Coto supported Senate Bill  which provided \$80 million for promoting diversity in San Jose schools. Coto is also responsible for bringing almost half a billion dollars in grant funding and improvement bonds to the district.

As a state assemblymember from 2004 to 2010, Coto sponsored bills providing support to underachieving schools, standards for math instruction for blind students and \$30 million to support English learners. He ran for the state Senate in 2012, but lost his bid to Jim Beall. His platform included balancing the budget and improving education and income inequality. Prior to holding state office, Coto served on the Oakland City Council.

His father, who worked in copper mines for 30 years, pushed him to attend college. Coto took that to heart, earning a bachelor's degree from San Diego State University, an administrative credential from California State University, East Bay and a master's degree in business administration from the University of Phoenix. He also studied at Columbia University.

Lennies Gutierrez





As a woman of color in an executive position for a Fortune 30 company, Lennies Gutierrez serves as a role model for others.
Photo courtesy of Lennies Gutierrez.

For [Lennies Gutierrez](#), honoring her Mexican heritage is essential.

Her father, who didn't own a pair of shoes until he was seven years old, taught her to stand up for herself and remember where she came from. Being authentic to who she is helps Gutierrez stay centered as a director of government affairs for Comcast. Working in the private sector for a Fortune 500 company is not something Gutierrez takes for granted.

“It’s a daily opportunity for me to be a representative in a space that you don’t see a lot of women of color in,” Gutierrez told San José Spotlight. “We live in such interesting times right now and being an ally or a voice is really important to me.”

Gutierrez said early in her career, she learned the value of meeting people, having conversations and building relationships, as well as being open to other perspectives. This openness led to her being invited as the first Latina to serve on the board of the African American Community Service Agency. She is also a board member of Hispanas Organized for Political Equality and board chair of Chamber San Mateo County. She chaired the San Jose Chamber of Commerce in 2017. Gutierrez also enjoys teaching at Latino Leadership Alliance and is interested in working in leadership development there as well.

Nora Campos



Former Assemblywoman Nora Campos announced her run for San Jose City Council's District 5 in October 2021. File photo.

East San Jose matters to former state Assemblymember Nora Campos, who was inspired to get involved in politics by Cesar Chavez and her parents' work with the farmworker rights movement. As a young girl, she marched beside her parents and farmworkers as they protested for better wages and working conditions.

As a San Jose councilmember from 2001 to 2010, Campos worked to keep thousands of jobs in California and make neighborhoods safe. She saw a critical need for housing in San Jose and led an effort to construct 10,000 homes in the city. She also championed East San Jose's Fire Station No. 2, helped transform the neglected Story and King Road shopping area and fought for parks and affordable housing. In the Assembly, Campos fought for equal pay for women, climate change policy, college for [Dreamers](#) and health care for all children.

Campos currently works as a public policy advocate and consultant. Last year, she ran to reclaim her San Jose District 5 [council seat](#), hoping to improve East San Jose's safety and quality of life, but lost to Peter Ortiz.

Norberto Dueñas





Norberto Dueñas worked for San Jose for 33 years. Photo courtesy of Witt O'Brien's.

Norberto Dueñas started public service as an intern to then-Councilmember Jim Beall and went on to serve San Jose for 33 years in various roles including deputy executive director of the San Jose Redevelopment Agency, deputy city manager and city manager. Dueñas was integral to ending a contentious pension reform battle between the city and its police and fire unions in 2015. He also worked to provide services to marginalized communities. He was a founding member of the 1991 [Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force](#).

Dueñas' career took a turn in 2017 when he joined Witt O'Brien's  an [emergency management disaster](#) recovery firm. As associate managing director he helps disaster victims with FEMA reimbursement, continuity of essential services, crisis communication and public health. He first worked with Witt O'Brien's following San Jose's massive [Coyote Creek flood](#) in 2017. Dueñas aided the hurricane-torn Virgin Islands in receiving more

than \$1 billion from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to fund housing, infrastructure and economic revitalization initiatives.

Beall told San José Spotlight in 2019 he was proud of Dueñas' “[strong spirit](#)” and dedication to helping people rebuild their countries.

Robert Sapien, Jr.



IAFF Local 230 President Sean Kaldor and SJFD Fire Chief Robert Sapien (right) commemorate the 100th anniversary of the formation of the IAFF. Photo courtesy of San Jose Fire Museum.

Robert Sapien, Jr. became chief of the San Jose Fire Department in 2018 after serving the department for 30 years and as acting fire chief for 10 months.

He started his career with SJFD as a firefighter and later served as a fire engineer, fire captain, battalion chief, deputy chief and assistant fire chief. He also served as president of its union, SJFF Local 230, from 2011 to 2014.

Sapien's career might have gone in a different direction as he majored in political science at San Jose State University. Instead, he leads SJFD in responding to about 95,000 service calls each year, serving the city and unincorporated areas of Santa Clara County.

"Response times are critical in the successful delivery of emergency medical services and fire suppression efforts," Sapien said last year at the opening of a fire station at San Jose Mineta International Airport.

Ron Gonzales





Former San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales is pictured during the ribbon cutting at the first BART stations in Santa Clara County. Photo by Luke Johnson.

[Ron Gonzales](#) is a visionary leader who broke barriers — in politics and philanthropy — in Silicon Valley.

He was the first Latino councilmember and mayor of Sunnyvale (1979-1987), Santa Clara County supervisor (1989-1996) and [mayor of San Jose](#) (1999-2006). He pushed for decades for BART to San Jose and Silicon Valley to such an extent that local leaders wanted to [name](#) the San Jose station after him. ^

“My business background, my community engagement ... and experience helped overcome any hesitations they might have

had in voting for someone with a last name like Gonzales,” he told San José Spotlight.

Gonzales’ father told him everyone has a responsibility to improve the quality of life of others. Gonzales took that to heart in becoming a public servant. He continues to do that for Latino families today as president and CEO of the [Hispanic Foundation of Silicon Valley](#), which he’s helmed since 2009.

“I’ve been able to focus all of my time and resources on the community that I come from, the Latino community, which has tremendous needs that continue to grow,” Gonzales said.

Salvador Alvarez





Catholic deacon Salvador Alvarez, whose social activism was recognized by the Vatican, died at age 74 in 2015.

Photo courtesy of Central Valley.

Deacon and social justice leader Salvador Alvarez received the prestigious For Church and Pope award by Pope Benedict XVI for his civil rights work. Alvarez worked alongside Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in the farmworker rights movement and advocated on behalf of immigrants and marginalized communities. He died at age 74 in June 2015.

After attending San Jose State University, Alvarez earned a master's degree in social work from UC Berkeley and co-founded the Graduate School of Social Work at SJSU. At 30, he became one of California's youngest college professors. These accomplishments might have seemed impossible when he was a child born with a club foot in Santa Maria in 1940. Seeking treatment for him at Stanford Children's Hospital led his Mexican immigrant parents to move the family to Mountain View.

Alvarez met [Cesar Chavez](#) while working with the Bishops Committee on Farm Labor at the U.S. Catholic Conference. He later became a legislative aide to Huerta. Sent by the United Farm Workers of America to Washington, D.C. to push for immigration reform, he worked with legislators on the Immigration and Reform Act of 1986 to grant a path to citizenship to undocumented immigrants.

He served on the Santa Clara County Human Relations Commission, advising the board of supervisors on issues affecting civil rights, and founded the Institute for Nonviolence to teach conflict resolution to youth.



Tamara Alvardo



As program officer in the Local Grantmaking Program for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Tamara Alvarado leads cultural and civic investments. Photo courtesy of the YWCA.



As program officer in the Local Grantmaking Program for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Tamara Alvarado leads cultural and civic investments—including \$4 million annually to advance creative, environmental and civic organizations that connect people with art, nature and community.

“Tamara’s experience as an artist, nonprofit arts executive, grantmaker, and community advocate makes her ideal for this role,” Irene Wong, director of the [Local Grantmaking Program](#), said in a statement. “Tamara brings a lifelong commitment to the arts, equity, and building communities.”

Alvarado served as executive director of both the Leo M. Shortino Family Foundation, which focused on youth and the arts, and the School of Arts and Culture at the Mexican Heritage Plaza. In addition, she was the director of multicultural leadership for 1stACT Silicon Valley and executive director of MACLA, an inclusive contemporary arts space in San Jose grounded in the Chicano/Latino experience. Alvarado is a traditional Aztec dancer and member of San Jose’s Calpulli Tonalehqueh Aztec drum and dance group.

She served as program director for the Washington United Youth Center, a partnership between Catholic Charities and San Jose, and co-founded the Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute, a leadership development program for people of color working in arts, culture and entertainment.

Victor Garza





As president of La Raza Roundtable, Victor Garza continues to advocate for the Latino community. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

[Victor Garza](#) founded [La Raza Roundtable](#) to give residents a voice in creating positive change and has spent his life fighting for equitable employment and education for Latinos.

In the early 1970s, Garza and other members of the Chicano Employment Committee ensured the San Jose Police Department, Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office and San Jose Unified School District followed anti-discriminatory legal decrees in hiring Latinos. While working for a bus company in Los Angeles, he hired Latino janitors and taught them welding, a skill

he picked up in the U.S. Navy. Then he'd hire them as welders and hire more Latino janitors.

Garza founded a mentorship program at Evergreen Valley College to help Latino students struggling in math and English. As the first Latino elected to the board of the Berryessa School District, he was instrumental in the superintendent hiring Latino principals, vice principals, administrators and teachers, but racism still ran rampant. A teacher was brought to tears when parents said they didn't want a Mexican teaching their child.

"It was hard during those years," Garza told San José Spotlight. "You have a board room full of white people and they mock you. I would get up and go out to the parking lot and come back and sit again."

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