

**Manuel "Meme" Benavidez, Jr.**

La Grulla, Texas - Manuel Benavidez, Jr., a life time resident and proponent of Starr County, entered into eternal rest at his home in La Grulla, Texas, March 28, after a two-year battle with Merkel Cell Cancer. He was 57. A former migrant farm worker, he was driven by his personal trials and experiences to improve the quality of life for his community by providing access to higher education and enhancing local services.

He began his advocacy by facilitating numerous presentations and taking an active leadership role in the local, state, and national Migrant Council Conferences. In 1993, Texas Governor Ann Richards appointed him as a founding member of the South Texas College (STC) Board of Trustees to represent Starr County in the development of a new community college district, legislatively created to serve the needs of over 600,000 people in Hidalgo and Starr counties previously not served by a community college. He was elected to a six-year term in May 2000 and re-elected in May 2006. As a Trustee, he served as Chair, Vice Chair and Secretary of the Board of Trustees.

Benavidez was instrumental in helping galvanize a successful campaign to encourage voters to approve a taxing district and authorization to issue \$20 million in bonds for the initial construction of five campuses/centers for STC. During his term as Chair, he played a critical role in helping the College pass a \$98.7 million bond election for the construction and expansion of the College's five campuses/centers and an additional tax increase to fund the operating costs of the College.

His community work and efforts in bringing higher education to the region were recognized when the Starr County Commissioners' Court declared November 2002 as "Manuel Benavidez, Jr. Month" in Starr County. State representatives and local officials joined the college in honoring him by recognizing his many contributions to increase access to higher education and a better quality of life in Starr County.

Benavidez was a passionate advocate for community colleges and maintained close communication with members of the Texas Legislature to promote for expanded access to higher education and additional higher education funding for STC and the communities it serves.

He was always on the forefront of championing many innovative programs for STC and the deep South Texas region of the state. His testimony before the Texas Legislature was instrumental to passing House Bill 415 (HB 415), which allows eligible high school students to dually enroll in college level technical courses while attending high school. Through the dual enrollment program, students receive both high school and college credit for their coursework. This opportunity was not previously available to Texas high school students prior to the passage of HB 415. Texas families have benefited significantly and saved millions in tuition because the tuition costs are waived for students in dual enrollment programs.

Because of his leadership in the passage of HB 415, STC was able to implement a Dual Enrollment Medical Science Academy (DEMSA) in Fall 2005 to serve high school students in Starr County and which was expanded to include a Dual Enrollment Engineering Academy (DEEA) for high school students in McAllen and Weslaco. Students in these programs will earn both a high school diploma and an Associate of Science degree.

Benavidez was involved since the genesis and was an articulate advocate before the Texas Legislature to represent STC in its successful bid to become one of three Texas community colleges selected by the Texas Legislature to pilot offering the bachelor's of applied technology.

His vision of a Rural Technology Center for Starr County became a reality with the passage of HB 2235 authored by Representative Ryan Guillen. The grant program under the office of Rural Community Affairs funded the \$3.5 million construction and equipping of a state-of-the-art rural technology center for the residents of Starr County, a project he championed throughout the preceding three legislative sessions before it became a reality. Last week, South Texas College, paid tribute to his commitment by naming the facility in his honor.

Additionally during a recent special legislative session, he was successful in helping the Legislature appropriate \$6 million in funding for the University of Texas-Pan American to construct an upper level university center in Starr County. This new facility will open the door for numerous partnerships between the community college and the university.

Mr. Benavidez's leadership for community colleges extended to the state, regional and national levels. In 2005, he was recognized at the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) Annual Congress as the recipient of the Lifetime Membership Award for his exemplary leadership and strong support in the areas of diversity and equal opportunity. His service to the nation's community colleges extends well beyond serving the citizens of Starr County and the students of STC. He served on the ACCT Board of Directors from 2003 to 2005 and served as the chair of the ACCT Diversity Committee from 2003 to 2005. He was also the Western Region representative for the Association of Latino Community College Trustees. His efforts on behalf of STC received national acclaim and in 2006 he earned the Western Region Trustee Leadership Award, given by the ACCT. He was one of five regional award winners selected from nominees located across three countries, including the United States, Canada and England.

Benavidez had a long tenure as an active participant in local and state public education and community service. He had served on the board of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Workforce Development Board and also served as President of the Association of Texas Professional Educators in Rio Grande City; as area V Director for the Texas Association of Pupil Transportation and President for the South Texas Association for Pupil Transportation. He served as the Board Chair of the Starr County Housing Authority and continued to be actively involved making affordable housing available in the community. He also served as the past Chair for the Starr County Democratic Party.

Born in La Grulla in 1952, Benavidez graduated from high school in Rio Grande City, he received a bachelor's degree from Pan American University in 1986, completing a major in bilingual education. After beginning as an educator, in 1994 he was named Transportation Director for the RGCCISD, where he remained for the rest of his professional life.

In addition to his wife, Rosario, he is survived by five children, including Rosie, Manuel IV, Sofia, Ande and Ben and two grand children, Dominique Marie and Manuel V.

**The funeral arrangements are as follows:**

**Location: Sanchez Funeral Home, 301 E. 2nd St., Rio Grande City, TX 78582  
(956) 487-2525**

**Viewing: Tuesday, March 31, 2009 at 12:00 p.m. followed by a rosary at 7:00 p.m. Viewing will also be available on Wednesday, April 1, 2009 from 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.**

**Funeral Mass: Wednesday, April 1, 2009, 2:00 p.m. at Holy Family Catholic Church  
107 W. Private Lazaro Solis St., La Grulla, TX, (956) 487-3365 c**

**Memorial Service: A memorial service celebrating the life of Mr. Benavidez will follow the mass service at the Golden Hill Ballroom (Rd. 2360 & Hwy. 83), Alto Bonito, TX , (956) 487-4273, at approximately 4:00 p.m.†**

**In lieu of flowers, the family has requested that donations be made to the Manuel Benavidez, Jr.**

**Migrant Student Memorial Scholarship that will be available for Starr County students**