



## Alberto G. Bustamante

April 8, 1935 - November 30, 2021

Born to migrant farmworkers in South Texas, Albert Garza Bustamante overcame an early life of hardship to become the first elected Hispanic county judge in Bexar County, and a four term congressman representing one of the largest congressional districts in the nation, stretching from San Antonio to El Paso.

Known for his focus on constituent services, Albert never met a stranger and delighted in daily interactions with people from all walks of life.

As the late San Antonio Express-News columnist Roddy Stinson wrote in 1992, "Sincere. Considerate. Charitable. Unaffected by power and prestige. His office was your office . . . his house, your house. Didn't matter if you were red, yellow, black, white, brown or butterscotch. Albert didn't care if you lived on the West Side, North Side, East Side, South Side or straddled a borderline. If he had a nickel, you had a nickel. If he had a six-pack, you had a six-pack."

Albert Garza Bustamante died in the early morning hours of Nov. 30, 2021 after a long illness. He was 86.

Albert was born April 8, 1935 in Asherton Texas, the first of 11 children born to his parents, Amelia Garza Bustamante and Francisco Bustamante. He spent the first seven years of his life with his father's aunt and uncle, who had raised

Francisco as a son. Eleuteria and Roscendo Bustamante took baby Albert with them to pick cotton in Bishop, Texas, while his parents followed the migrant trail from South Texas to Oregon each year.

With the death of his great uncle, Albert returned to his parents' home, which by then was full of children. He had already begun to work, selling produce door-to-door and later working in the fields alongside his parents and siblings.

Albert first attended public school at age 6, but his father pulled him out in favor of a home school that allowed the children to speak Spanish. For third grade, his father sent him to Catholic School, where he learned to read English. Back in public school the following year, Albert made such strong academic progress that at the end of eighth grade he earned the American Legion Merit Award, inspiring him to “achieve even more in high school,” he told his biographer, Sandra P. Lane, who spent many hours interviewing him for *Viva Boostie!: The story of Texas Congressman Albert G. Bustamante's battle against poverty, discrimination, false accusations, and an unjust legal system.*

He shared with her that he was deeply inspired by his eighth grade history teacher, Theodore Dyer, who would say to him, “Albert, you can be a Congressman. You can make a difference.”

Albert did well in high school, and participated in several sports. He graduated from Asherton High School in 1954. By then his parents and siblings had made Oregon their permanent home, but Albert instead joined the U.S. Army, serving as a paratrooper for two years in the 11th Airborne Division.

After his service, Albert moved to San Antonio to attend San Antonio College. He struggled with academics, but persevered. In 1958, he transferred to Sul Ross State College in Alpine, Texas. At risk of dropping out because he

couldn't afford tuition, a school janitor whom Albert had befriended loaned him \$250, which allowed him to complete his final semester and graduate with a degree in secondary education.

Albert returned to San Antonio, and spent the next seven years teaching at Cooper Junior High School to some of the poorest children in San Antonio. He would later say he became a "social worker, teacher and friend" to many of those students. He coached football and basketball as well.

A chance meeting in late 1967 with U.S. Rep. Henry B. González would change the trajectory of Albert's life. The following year he began working for the Congressman doing constituent services in San Antonio.

One evening not long after, while visiting Hemisfair '68, Albert met Rebecca Pounders, an elementary school teacher who was working as a waitress at the fair for extra spending money. That meeting, too, would change Albert's life. In January of 1971, the pair married at the Little Church in La Villita, with a reception at a hall on the Hemisfair grounds.

After close to three years tending to residents' needs for the congressman, Albert struck out on his own, running against incumbent Bexar County Commissioner for Precinct 1 Albert Peña. Albert campaigned on getting services to his constituents, running to the right of the liberal Democrat. He would occupy that middle ground for his entire political career.

An underdog with a shoestring budget, Albert blockwalked and placed his signs everywhere. A friend and former newspaper reporter, Peter Panfield, created a comic book depicting Albert as the "Abe Lincoln of the West Side," with drawings by one of Albert's former students. Charles Becker, owner of the Handy Andy chain, funded its distribution. Columnist Paul Thompson opined

on Albert's "apparently boundless energy."

Those traits propelled Albert into a runoff with Peña, and he went on to defeat one of the county's most influential Hispanic politicians. Albert took his campaign promises seriously, becoming a full-time commissioner focused on constituent needs, infrastructure and improving the county's hospital district. He won re-election in 1976 with no opposition.

With almost three years left in his second term, Albert decided to run for Bexar County Judge. He told his biographer that the former County Judge, Blair Reeves, said to him, "Albert, a Mexican cannot get elected in a county-wide race.' I told him, 'This Mexican can.'"

Supported by then-Councilman Henry Cisneros and many other local officials, with high name recognition and strong grassroots support from his five years as a county commissioner, not to mention brimming campaign coffers, Albert made history when he became the first Hispanic elected as Bexar County Judge. According to his Congressional biography, Albert was "recognized as one of the leading conservative Democrats in the county. He was known for his ability to connect with people and deliver on his promises to help them."

One of the accomplishments Albert was most proud of during that time was upgrading the county's hospital system, which required a tax increase. He personally called hundreds of constituents back to discuss their concerns with the increase, which passed. By the end of his tenure, the hospital system was operating in the black.

He was also successful implementing a delinquent tax collection system that brought in millions of dollars in increased revenue to the county, a system so successful it was copied by counties, school districts and other local government entities throughout Texas.

After leading commissioners court for five years, Albert decided to take on Rep. Abraham “Chick” Kazen, who had been representing a congressional district that included northwest Bexar County for 18 years.

Just as he did with Albert Peña, Albert Bustamante campaigned on Kazen being out of touch with his constituents. House District 23 included many middle class, primarily white communities outside San Antonio, plus rural, mostly Hispanic and very poor towns near Laredo. With widespread union and establishment support, including from Red McCombs, John Steen and Nelson Wolff, Albert upset Kazen in the primary, winning every county in the district and taking 59% of the vote. He ran unopposed in the general election.

“Less than 12 hours after my victory, my phone started ringing off the wall,” Albert told his biographer. “People were calling to tell me about their problems. They had heard that most of the time, I answered all my calls and talked with my constituents when I was county judge, and intended to do the same as a congressional representative. People always needed help obtaining Social Security, veterans benefits and other problems.”

Albert became the first Hispanic elected president of a Democratic freshman class when he arrived in Washington D.C. in 1985. He was assigned to the Government Operations and Armed Services committees, on which he served during his entire congressional career. He was active in the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, serving as chairman from 1987-89. He was also a member of the Democratic Leadership Council, Democratic Study Group and legislative caucuses concerned with border and human rights issues.

Albert had long understood the value of relationships when attempting to solve problems in government, and he wasted no time connecting with key figures, including then-Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill, Representatives

Charlie Wilson and Jim Wright of Texas, and Rep. Tom Foley, who succeeded O'Neill as speaker. He also "made it a point to surround myself with people who were intellectuals" within the Congress, both Republicans and Democrats. In 1985, U.S. News and World Report listed Albert as one of "Ten Freshman to Watch in the 99th Congress."

An avid athlete, he would frequently use his athleticism to build relationships, whether as a member of the congressional baseball team or on the golf course, where he would frequently play with members of congressional leadership or high-ranking military officers.

Albert's position as a moderate Democrat "often defined his congressional career and he sought to balance the needs of his white and Hispanic constituents," according to his biography in the History, Art and Archives of the U.S. House of Representatives:

Bustamante firmly believed in the [Hispanic] caucus's power to improve the lives of Hispanic Americans, especially those in the impoverished border communities. He brought attention to the colonias, or rural Hispanic neighborhoods, along the U.S.-Mexico border, arguing in favor of more funding for food for the poor and increased economic opportunities. "We ... want to upgrade the economic status of our group because as you enhance that economic status you bring about jobs to that community," Bustamante said. "And hopefully they can identify with our roots and invest within the community." Yet he took an unpopular stance within the Hispanic community by opposing bilingual education in border schools. "I'm for bringing about a system of education that will help a child to live in the business climate we have in this area of the country," he argued. "And that is [in] English."

His moderate stance made Albert a swing vote on important Latin American

issues, such as aid to Nicaraguan rebels and immigration policy during his four terms in Congress.

While in Congress, Albert was able to get a new veterans' clinic built in Laredo, so veterans in the area would no longer have to drive to San Antonio. He also pushed for \$86 million in appropriations for San Antonio's military bases.

Albert won re-election three times, and served a total of eight years in congress.

Following his support of Hispanic FBI agents in a discrimination suit against the Bureau, the FBI launched a years-long investigation that spanned the majority of Albert's congressional career. It spawned dozens of criminal charges against many people connected to Albert, including his wife. Most were thrown out; none of those resulted in convictions.

Hurt by the investigation, Albert lost re-election in 1992. He was charged with numerous criminal counts. The jury initially indicated it was deadlocked, but the judge ordered them to keep deliberating. Albert was ultimately convicted on two counts. He was sentenced to prison and served out his sentence.

Albert always maintained his innocence, and eventually found support in an unlikely place: a unanimous Supreme Court, which found that the gratuity charge was not a crime. Had this been the law at the time of his trial, Albert would not have been convicted.

After prison, Albert returned to San Antonio where he continued to do what he had done his entire life, and what brought him the most satisfaction: help people.

In his later years, nothing brought Albert greater joy than the time he was able to spend with his grandchildren, especially his grandson and namesake Alberto Andres Bustamante, who spent untold hours with his grandfather and took special care of him in the final months of his life. Albert doted on all of his grandchildren, and his love shone through: each of them adored him.

His last few years were marred by increasing dementia, but Albert still found joy in his family and his memories. He loved telling stories.

He leaves behind his wife of 51 years, Rebecca Pounders Bustamante; his children: Sandra DeLeon, Cynthia Wagner, Robert Bustamante, Albert Anthony Bustamante, John Marcus Bustamante and Celina Bustamante Emery.

He also leaves many beloved grandchildren: Brandy Brown, Marc DeLeon, John Gentile, Elizabeth Castle, Rebecca G. Bustamante, Ashley Anne Bell, Brandon Bustamante, Daniel Bustamante, Alberto Andres Bustamante, Daniel Anthony Bustamante, Carolina Sofia Bustamante, Jay Grace Hamilton Garcia, Lucinda Jane Hamilton Bustamante, Charles Francis Emery and Juliet Belén Emery, plus several great grandchildren.

The family would like to thank Grace Place, Good Shepherd Hospice and especially Rebecca Sosa, who made his final years comfortable.

The family requests that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the general scholarship fund at Sul Ross State University at [sulross.edu/giving](http://sulross.edu/giving) with a note in the comment section indicating that the donation is in the memory of Albert G. Bustamante.

He will be greatly missed by all those whose lives he touched and will live on as an example for those who loved him.

A visitation will be held Sunday, December 12, 2021 6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.  
followed with a Rosary at 7:00 p.m. at Mission Park Funeral Chapels North.

Mass of Resurrection will be celebrated on Monday, December 13, 2021 at  
2:00 p.m., at San Fernando Cathedral.

Graveside Service will be held Tuesday, December 14, 2021 at 10:00 a.m., at  
Mission Burial Park North.

# Cemetery Details

## Mission Burial Park North

20900 I.H. 10  
West San Antonio, TX 78230

# Previous Events

## Visitation

DEC 12. 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM (CT)

Mission Park Funeral Chapels North  
3401 Cherry Ridge Drive  
San Antonio, TX 78230

## Rosary

DEC 12. 7:00 PM (CT)

Mission Park Funeral Chapels North  
3401 Cherry Ridge Drive  
San Antonio, TX 78230

## Mass of Resurrection

DEC 13. 2:00 PM (CT)

San Fernando Cathedral  
115 Main Plaza  
San Antonio, TX 78205

## Graveside Service

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DEC **14**. 10:00 AM (CT)

Mission Burial Park North  
20900 I.H. 10  
West San Antonio, TX 78230

# Tribute Wall

IA

“ Spring of 1986, I met with Mr. Bustamante for his opinion on San Antonio

*Latino icons who made a difference in the political arena. Mr. Bustamante's answer clear,*

*to the point.*

*"Para estar bien.*

*True icons in our culture are always parents. Thier sons, daughters, grand children are*

*the recipients de nuestra cultura. I was a migrant worker as a child. Picked cotton. From*

*dawn to dusk. It was then. I decided early on. My path in life - Help as many people as I*

*can alleviate their economic plight. Somos todos comunidad. Pass this message on to*

*others, make a difference."*

*Isidro Aguirre, author, educator, "Dawn of the Golden Matador the Life & Times of Gus. C.*

*Garcia"*

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isidro roberto aguirre - December 06, 2021 at 03:20 PM

AI

“ I am so saddened to hear about Albert's passing. I will always have found memories as a child of him working for my father Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez.  
My prayers are with all members of his family. May God Wrap His Loving Arms Around You.

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**Anna Gonzalez Ihle** - December 05, 2021 at 10:17 PM

JQ

“ Dear Becky and Family,

Please accept our deepest and most sincere condolences. Jo Emma and I are terribly sorry that Albert has passed away. Do find solace in knowing that he will be remembered in our daily prayers and may his soul rest in peace. Loved ones are never forgotten and the pain and grief is no less bearable with the passage of time. All those wonderful memories, and yes, the world was a better place because of Albert, so cherish his memory with kindness and happiness as we know you will. Our thoughts are with you in this time of sorrow and we pray that our loving God will grant you the strength and courage to accept His divine will.



We will always remember him for his charm, his courtesy, and his wit. His affable personality and his indomitable spirit will always be remembered by those of us who were privileged to cross his path. We pray God his spirited soul to keep. May God give you peace and fill you with joyous remembrances of him.

With deepest sympathy,  
J. Gilberto Quezada  
Jo Emma Bravo Quezada

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**J. Gilberto Quezada** - December 03, 2021 at 03:17 PM

AR

*My deepest condolences to Mr.Bustamantes family. This man was my teacher at Cooper middle school long ago. I was his teachers pet as he would call me. He was such a caring person. As I grew older I ran into him at a grocery store and I approached him to say hello. He looked at me and said Amparo I still remember.my pet! I was in disbelief that he still reconized me. May he rest in peace! Thank you sir for being one of my best teachers.*

**Amparo Rodriguez** - December 04, 2021 at 09:24 AM

MN

“ *Mission Park North lit a candle in memory of Alberto G. Bustamante*



**Mission Park North** - December 02, 2021 at 04:47 PM