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Longtime Mesa artist, activist strives to make a difference

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By Sarah Edwards, Special to Tribune

Virginia Aguero may be well known in Mesa's art community, but her commitment and dedication to the city of Mesa and its civil rights movements spans a lifetime of hard work.

Aguero, 78, was born in Bacoachi, a small town in the Mexican state of Sonora in 1936. Bacoachi, a mission town that was the birthplace of many expeditions in the 1600s, was home to Aguero for the beginning of her life. Aguero's family was one of the first established in Bacoachi, and her ancestry traces back to Pedro de Peralta, the first governor of New Mexico in 1610.



Sarah Edwards

Virginia Aguero

Her father, Gustavo Rascon, a worker in the mines, spent time traveling back and forth between Mexico and Arizona, and Aguero traveled with him at a young age. The family spent some time in Bisbee, Ariz., where Aguero was baptized, but eventually went back to Sonora because of some discrimination her father faced.

"He was very independent, like I am," Aguero said. "He taught me how to play guitar, piano and use a typewriter, which was pretty hard back then."

Aguero eventually moved to Douglas, Ariz., with her mother and four sisters and attended Catholic school there. The family later moved to Tucson during her junior high years, where Aguero attended Tucson High School and began learning English. While studying, she also worked as a cashier at the school's theater, among many other small jobs.

After high school, Aguero attended cosmetology school and then went on to Mesa Community College to earn her degree in library science. She graduated with honors in the top 20 of her class as a member of Phi Theta Kappa, an international honor society.

During this time, Aguero was also a member of Alianza Hispano-Americana, a mutual aid benefit society for Mexicans in the Arizona territory at the time (it was founded in 1894). The society hosted many different events through their scholarship club that Aguero loved being part of - especially the dances they had. That's where she met her husband, Jesus Aguero.

"He came directly to me and asked for my phone number," Aguero said, laughing. "I was very serious, but you know how the friends are... he asked for my number, and I said zero, zero, zero..." The two went on to be married for 47 years, raising two children, Ana Patricia and Jose de Jesus

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Aguero.

"When you love someone, you work towards getting those things you want," Aguero said. "But it's a good satisfaction when you do."

Moving to Mesa

In 1969, Aguero and her husband came to Mesa, and moved to the Second Street historic district in 1971. Their home, one of 15 on the Mesa historic home tour, is filled with Aguero's artwork, not just hanging, but also painted on the walls themselves. Hundreds of people have toured their home, which has been around since 1948.

Angelica Docog, now the executive director of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures, first met Virginia back in 2004 when she was working at the Mesa Southwest Museum (Now the Arizona Museum of Natural History). Aguero was one of the artists featured in an exhibit called "Chicano Art For Our Millenium," which was the museum's first time displaying Latino art.

"[Aguero] was instrumental in educating the staff, volunteers, and community on why Latino art is indeed true American art and why there should be no delineation between both the two," Docog said. Aguero was often seen interacting with the visitors and encouraging them to ask questions about the art.

"Ms. Aguero is the epitome of passion and purpose for wanting to improve the quality of life for all," Docog said. "This passion and purpose has been beautifully illustrated throughout her amazing life by her art as well as her commitment to civil rights."

While raising their two children, Aguero attended school again at Arizona State University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in sociology. At the time, ASU was the center of many civil rights movements for Mexican-Americans, which Aguero was quick to participate in. She became an activist for equal pay and equal hiring practices for staff at the university.

Aguero became so involved with the movement that Gov. Babbitt appointed her to a civil rights board. She worked with the board for two terms, where she helped not only ASU, but Northern Arizona University and the University of Arizona reach more equal representation and better communication.

Aguero's work at ASU started a lifelong commitment to being involved in the community, something that she values deeply.

"My first political thing was welcoming presidential candidates to Tucson," she said. "John F. Kennedy, all of them... we were very involved."

In 1978, Aguero was the first Mexican-American woman to run for Mesa's City Council. Although she didn't win, she saw the experience as a huge opportunity.

"I'm very happy I did it, because it's not about the running, it's about all the things you learn... I learned who people are, what they wanted," she said. "That was my gratification."

David Luna went on to win the election and became the first Hispanic ever to do so, which Aguero was still proud of. Patricia, her daughter, followed in her mother's footsteps; she later ran for City Council and holds a place on different city boards as well.

Today's achievements

Over the past five years, Aguero's biggest involvement has been with the extension of the Valley Metro light rail into central Mesa. She joined the community advisory board along with other residents and local businesses back in 2010, simply because she wanted to know everything that was going on with the project.

But she had her reservations when it was first brought to her attention.

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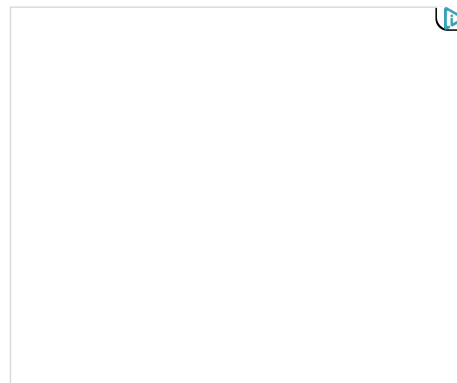
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"I could visualize that the city was growing so fast, and it had so much potential," Aguero said. "At first I thought, 'Why do we need that? We don't need that now...' but I started thinking about how many people were moving to Mesa," she said. "I'm very happy I was wrong and that we are going to have it now."

Aguero also got the chance to bring her art expertise and passion to the project when the mayor and city manager appointed her to the art selection committee. The committee chose the artists that would design the art featured at each light rail platform.

"The art (they have selected), it's so beautiful," Aguero said. "It was very well selected... they needed artists that would represent the city of Mesa."

Aguero's inspiration for her art stems mainly from nature, because it reminds her of her hometown in Mexico, she said. She became interested in art when she was young, and even started a museum display at a festival in Sonora featuring family photos and other historic items that represented her lineage. She has also partnered with the Chandler Center For The Arts each year to put on a Dia De Los Muertos exhibit, which features special altars she has designed.

Eric Faulhaber, the visual arts coordinator for the Chandler Arts Commission, remembers working with Aguero on the exhibit for over 10 years.

"She is a driving force when it comes to the arts and arts advocacy... we are very grateful," Faulhaber said. "She has inspired us on many levels and we always wish her the best."

Now that the light rail extension is nearly over, Aguero is on the hunt for her next project.

"Involvement is the key to participate where you live," Aguero said. "I've seen the city grow, and I haven't stopped. Mesa is very responsive, but don't stay quiet, just keep insisting."

• Sarah Edwards is a sophomore at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University.

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