



OBITUARIES

Henry C. Gonzalez, former South Gate mayor who survived a gunshot to the head, dies at 84



South Gate Mayor Henry Gonzalez is shown before he retired from public office in 2015. Gonzalez, who survived a gunshot wound to the head in 1999 at the height of a corruption scandal at City Hall, served in public office for nearly three decades. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

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Henry C. Gonzalez often told the story of how he survived a shooting while serving as mayor of South Gate. It's a tale he continued to tell from his hospital bed during his final

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It was 1999, the height of a corruption scandal that would cost the town more than \$20 million. Gonzalez was one of the good guys and one night, after a long day at City Hall, he stepped out of his car and was [shot in the head](#).

The bullet miraculously bounced off his skull and as he lay on his driveway, pretending to be a dead, his wife ran after the shooter, falling in the middle of the street. The assailant was never caught.

But the shooting [did not stop Gonzalez](#) from serving nearly three decades as the first Latino elected to office in South Gate. On Sunday, after a colorful life, Gonzalez died from natural causes at a Whittier hospital. He was 84.



South Gate Mayor Henry Gonzalez sits in his office at City Hall. His negotiating skills for the United Auto Workers International Union earned him the nickname “Hammerin’ Hank.” (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

“He went peacefully,” said Regina Estrada, his daughter. “He wasn’t taken out like that

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Hector De La Torre, former assemblyman who served on the City Council with Gonzalez, said his former colleague loved serving the city and would defend it to the hilt.

“People not from the area who hear about him getting shot when he was a City Council member and going back to City Hall after being shot can’t believe it,” he said. “That shows how tough he was and how committed he was.”

For years, politics in Southeast Los Angeles County was known as a breeding ground for [corruption](#), a place where millions of dollars were looted from municipal coffers, sometimes through play-to-pay schemes or mismanagement. In some instances, [threats](#) and acts of [violence](#) were used to intimidate or deter people from running for office.

No other place seems to exemplify it better than South Gate.

Gonzalez was born on May 3, 1935, in Los Angeles. His father, an immigrant from the Mexican state of Sinaloa, and his mother’s family were all involved in the unions. Growing up in Watts, Gonzalez was only 9 when he started to attend union meetings with his father and sometimes stood alongside him on the picket lines.

In 1955, Gonzalez began working as a paint sprayer for General Motors in South Gate, joining the United Auto Workers International Union. The following year, he married his wife, Theresa.

In 1961, he and his wife moved to South Gate as he scaled the union ranks, serving 11 years as assistant director of UAW Region 6. His union negotiating skills won him the nickname “Hammerin’ Hank.”

In 1982, Gonzalez was elected to the South Gate City Council and the following year became mayor.

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demographics shifted from 80% white to 80% Latino.

“That was the time of turmoil, social turmoil and economic turmoil,” De La Torre said. Gonzalez “was part of having to rebuilt South Gate.”

In 1988, Gonzalez was voted out of office after he tried and failed to municipalize South Gate’s electricity by taking over a Southern California Edison plant.

But he was reelected to the council in 1994 and mentored a young councilman, Albert T. Robles, who had graduated from UCLA and seemed full of promise. But it was a deception.

Robles, who eventually became mayor, treasurer and then deputy city manager, was indicted on federal corruption charges, accused of money laundering, bribery and awarding million-dollar contracts to friends and business associates. When he was found guilty on 30 felony charges, he was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison.

“Once elected city treasurer in 1997, Robles’ seemed determined to rule the city — purely to his own benefit. He even proclaimed himself ‘King of South Gate’ ... and referred to the city as his ‘fiefdom,’” federal authorities wrote in a summary of the case.

De La Torre said he and Gonzalez had their differences but were united in their fight against municipal corruption and had identified Robles as a corrupt figure.

“That’s how he and I became strong allies, good friends,” he said. “Henry and I did the best we could with what we had, which was our voices and access to documents.”

He said the latter helped federal investigators with their investigation into Robles.

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Estrada said that after her father was shot, the family tried to convince him to get out of politics. But he refused.

“He wasn’t going to let anyone chase him away from his beloved South Gate,” she said.

Gonzalez continued to serve the city until 2015, when he stepped down and officially retired.



Henry C. Gonzalez was South Gate's first Latino City Council member and mayor. “I’m glad that he left a great legacy in South Gate where he was part of the effort to root out the corruption,” a former South Gate official said. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

News of his death sent a wave of sadness over Southeast L.A.

“He was a personal friend who I will miss,” Los Angeles County Supervisor Hilda Solis said in a statement. “Henry’s legacy of public service will live on forever among the vibrancy of South Gate’s neighborhoods.”

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“He was a role model and my mentor,” he said. “I’m glad that he left a great legacy in South Gate where he was part of the effort to root out the corruption.”

Gonzalez is survived by his wife, two children, seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

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Ruben Vives is a general assignment reporter for the Los Angeles Times. A native of Guatemala, he got his start in journalism by writing for The Times’ Homicide Report in 2007. He helped uncover the financial corruption in the city of Bell that led to criminal charges against eight city officials. The 2010 investigative series won the Pulitzer Prize for public service and other prestigious awards.

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