

# Eddie Canales, Rest in Power!

By José Angel Gutierrez

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Eddie Canales, 76, labor advocate and co-founder, along with María Jiménez, of the South Texas Human Rights Center in Falfurrias, died on July 31, 2024. A lifelong Chicano and civil rights activist, Canales had also recently been involved in environmental justice campaigns against the desalination of Corpus Christi Bay. The Esperanza Peace & Justice Center extends heartfelt condolences to his family and fellow activists. ¡Eddie Canales, presente!*

This eulogy on the passing of Eduardo "Eddie" Canales is the sound of the tolling bell of Chicano militants and activists everywhere. It is the coming to an end of the Chicano Movement generation of the late 1950s and decade of the 60s. Ours. We will be next. Before us, was the generation of wanne-be "Americanos"



Eddie Canales founded the South Texas Human Rights Center in Brooks County, Texas. (photo by: Sandra Sanchez/Border Report, 2022)

of the 1940s-50s, plus some 2.5 million more as *Braceros*—under a contracted *rent-a-slave* program that served US agricultural, railroad, fisheries and forestry interests from 1942 to 1964. Those who fled this indentured servitude were labeled "illegal aliens." They were subject to periodic massive police-state roundups, murders, detentions and deportations. In the 1950s, President Eisenhower called this, *Operation Wetback*. And before that generation came the first one, some 1.4 million Mexicans fleeing the Mexican Revolution of 1910 that did not normalize until about 1930. These political refugees had a choice: stay, and probably die from bullets or hunger; or, cross into occupied Mexico and live unwelcomed in a racist Anglo society. Segregation, inequality, poverty, police violence, and hunger was the way of life for these returning Mexicans.

Some 60 years earlier, Mexicans in what is now the US Southwest, when borders moved, thousands were killed and others forcibly removed from their lands. The US invaded Mexico in 1846. Earlier, in what became The Republic of Texas of 1825, Mexicans were also killed and forcibly removed from their lands. Their livestock and furnishings also taken. Altogether, half of Mexico was taken between 1825-1848. It is our stolen homeland, *Aztlán*. Still is. Eddie believed that.

Like many before him, *Eduardo's* name was changed to Eddie in the Anglo schools. He was forced to learn English or be pushed out of school. He had to accept the Anglo version of history, not his. And he did, but quietly, prudently, and always smiling, he resisted total immersion body and soul. That was the Eddie we met and saw at Chicano

walkouts, protests, demonstrations, marches and meetings. He made a life of advocacy and involvement in labor unionizing and Chicano militancy. He was ubiquitous, everywhere it seemed. Eddie was always there, quiet, prudent, and always smiling. He was the perfect Chicano diplomat. In recent decades, Eddie began a new labor, a most unselfish and giving life for his brothers and sisters coming into the US while being hunted by the Border Patrol and racist white militias. Befriended by a deputy Sheriff, now Sheriff, in Brooks County, Texas, the duo would enter private ranches in search of lost and near-death migrants from Mexico and other countries. Risking life and limb before rattlesnakes, *javalines*, *coyotes* (animal and human), and armed white militias, Eddie would leave water jugs

on trails in the brush used by these desperate people. Usually, he found more dead bodies than live thirsty ones. For a brief period, a nun volunteered to help him in this mission. Another volunteer, an Anglo woman academic, volunteered with her detection equipment to find bodies in shallow makeshift graves. Countless grieving families found closure given his work for a missing relative who had gone "*pa el norte*," but for Eddie were now found. Who among us will continue this type of work? Eddie was a most unique Chicano and a life-saver for many. Always the smiling diplomat, brave, fearless, persistent, and committed, Eddie worked year after year, often alone, taking water and marking spots in the brush. Let's pledge, each of us, to keep his memory and legacy alive by telling his story. *Viva La Raza! Viva La Raza Unida! Viva Eduardo "Eddie" Canales! Que En Paz Descanse.*

BIO: José Ángel Gutiérrez, an attorney and professor at UT-Arlington was a founding member of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) and of the Raza Unida Party. A key figure in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, Gutiérrez is also 1962 graduate of Crystal City High School in Crystal City, Texas.

