

Hector V. Barreto Sr.

Businessman
1935-2004

By José Faus

Hector V. Barreto Sr. led a rich life anchored between his beloved Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco, Mexico—where he was born on August 23, 1935, and where he was to die 68 years later on May 14, 2004—and his adopted home of Kansas City, Missouri.

At age 16, Barreto worked alongside his father as a livestock dealer in Guadalajara. Eager to be on his own, he formed his own business but lost it all. Barreto immigrated to the United States in his early twenties. His first job was digging potatoes on a farm near Corning, Missouri, for 80-cents an hour. He later moved to the Kansas City area where he worked in a packinghouse and as a school custodian before saving enough money to open a small restaurant.

Barreto and his wife, the former Mary Louise Tejeda, opened Mexico Lindo Restaurant in 1966 at the northwest corner of 23rd and Scott streets in Independence. He eventually owned three restaurants: Casa Blanca, La Fiesta, and Chico's, plus a tile company and a construction firm in Kansas City.

Barreto was an imaginative and quiet businessman. Not satisfied with his own success, he took notice of the disadvantages that Hispanic business owners faced in Kansas City. With other local Latino businessmen, he formed the Kansas City Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in 1978. The United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (USHCC) grew out of that effort and was incorporated in New Mexico in 1979. He was the organization's first president. Originally based in Kansas City, the USHCC is now headquartered in Washington, D.C. The organization's goal is to bring the issues and concerns of the nation's Latino-owned businesses to the forefront of the national economic agenda.

Businessman Joe Perez worked with Barreto in those early days. "We didn't have a springboard for Hispanic businesses," he said, adding that there was "nothing until Hector got involved and started promoting the USHCC right here in Kansas City. Through his efforts and sacrifices locally, nationally, and globally, because of



the efforts, the inroads, and the bridges that Hector built between the non-Hispanic community and the Hispanic communities, a lot of businesses today are successful."

Barreto's advocacy took him to a national stage where he gave advice on Latino perspectives to the Carter, Reagan, and first Bush administrations. Dissatisfied with the Democratic Party, he broke ranks with other Latino leaders and supported the campaign of Governor Ronald Reagan in 1980. After Reagan's victory, Barreto was invited to Washington DC.

"When Ronald Reagan won, Hector got the chance to sit at table Number One when they had the first inauguration ball and dinner," recalled Frank Perez a friend of Barreto's. "It was reported on *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the local paper here. Hector was sitting right next to the president of the United States. Because of that ... all of a sudden, Hispanic businesses and the agenda became something to really look at."

During conversations with Reagan, Barreto talked about American assimilation. Barreto told Reagan that he didn't want to be part of the proverbial melting pot. He would much prefer the stew pot, where the carrots, potatoes, and meat all contribute to the total flavor, but still retain their identity. The two men understood each other immediately. Barreto became an advisor to Reagan and a Republican Party stalwart. He became part of Reagan's "kitchen cabinet."

Being a Republican wasn't easy for Barreto. "At the time, he found that being Hispanic and being a Republican was difficult within the Hispanic community," explained Herrera. "However, he was a person with broad shoulders and he could carry that weight." Perez noted, as many others did, that one of Barreto's greatest talents was his ability to pull people in the community together. "Nowadays the young guys don't understand it's a group effort, not a single effort."

Sources

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