

# Veteran El Paso journali

by **Robbie Myrick Villalobos**  
Business Bridge editor

Longtime journalists, politicians and educators took to the microphone at Vista Ysleta Methodist Church to honor the memory and life's work of Virginia Turner.

The former Herald-Post editor and columnist was 86 years old when she died in a traffic accident May 11. The Austin American Statesman noted her passing because of her special place in journalism as one of the first women to become the city editor of a metropolitan daily newspaper.

Barbara Funkhouser, former editor of The El Paso Times, praised Turner when she spoke at Turner's memorial service on Wednesday, May 15.

"When I came to work in 1960, I was told I was lucky to be one of two women allowed on the staff. But I knew Virginia Turner,

who was one of two women in leadership positions in newspapers in the nation. The other woman was a Los Angeles Times executive and they were both the tops," Funkhouser said.

The Rev. Tom Garmon told Turner's friends and family how the Ysleta High graduate began as a cub reporter at the Herald-Post in 1944. She met the late Col. Harold R. Turner, U.S. Army, while covering V-2 missile flights at White Sands Missile Range where he was commander in 1945. They married in 1947 and they moved to the Long Range Proving Ground, the old Banana River Naval Base, Melbourne, Fla. The installation is now Patrick Air Force Base at Cape Kennedy.

Col. Turner was involved with early missile work there before a health problem prompted his early retirement. They returned to El Paso where Virginia Turner accepted temporary assignments at the Herald-Post in 1952 and



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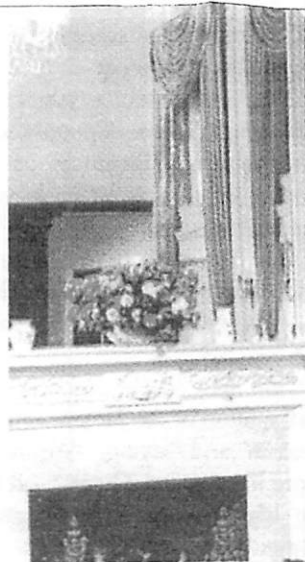
photo courtesy Turner family

1953.

Her position became permanent in 1954. She was promoted to city editor in 1959 and held that position until her retirement in 1976. Then she continued her weekly column about El Paso and El Pasoans.

Kay Reid, founder and superintendent of El Paso Academy charter schools, was a reporter under Turner. She recalled how City Editor Turner would assign stories and protect staff members.

"There was going to be a pilgrimage up Cristo Rey and she told me to go up and see if I get mugged. But then she worried and provided an escort from the Sheriff's Department, an escort named Daniel Boone," Reid told



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those gathered at the memorial service.

El Paso Inc. arts columnist Betty Ligon said former Herald-Post editor Pete Lee offered to hire her in the late '60s, if it was okay with City Editor Turner.

"We hit it off right away and I appreciated that she was always calm and never got riled or carried on like some other journalists do. Her understanding of the common man and common story is something we've lost in journalism," Ligon said.

Nancy Hamilton worked at the Herald-Post with Turner in the '70s. She, Reid, Ligon and a number of other former Herald-Post employees would gather every other month or so for lunch.

"She had a real sense of news value as well as a love of people. And in her retirement she kept us coming together. I don't know how we'll keep that up now," Hamilton said.

Neighbors near her longtime Lower Valley home recalled being surprised that Turner wasn't in the mold of a crusty journalist, but was a down-to-earth, caring woman.

"I remember her irrigating her property and one day she slipped and fell in the mud and just laughed and laughed," Linda Lemmoets Russell said.

At a reception after the memorial service, former Mayor Don Henderson said he had many Virginia stories." He explained that when he campaigned for mayor in the '70s, the newspapers printed front-page editorials.

"Six months after election I

answered questions after speaking to a retirement group and explained that some days you wonder why you're doing this and just want to quit until the next day after a good night's sleep," Henderson said. "Well the Times headline the next day read, 'Mayor threatens to quit.' The first call I got that morning was from my dad and the second was from Virginia Turner, saying I better not waste those front-page editorials."

Joan Quarm, a retired UTEP faculty member and Herald-Post columnist for 20 years, said simply: "Virginia is probably the best person I have ever known."


The Rev. Gorman praised Turner as being "Rosie the Writer," who turned out copy in the middle of a man's domain while building a home and completing what friends called her greatest accomplishment: her son Gary.

Now a longtime teacher, Gary said his mother didn't just dream about writing, but continued that pursuit from girlhood.

"She combined a talent for writing with a love of people, and that's what she loved. So as we mourn her passing, let's celebrate her life," he said.

Gorman said the headlines of her death should focus on her reassignment rather than her passing.

"I'm sure she's proofing the final edition of the Heavenly Post Gazette and saying, 'We need more local copy.' Thank God for the life and legacy of Virginia Turner," he said.



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