

Compassionate 'Shoe Santa' Ray Villarreal dies at age 84

By Alex Hinojosa
EL PASO TIMES

Raymond "Ray" Villarreal, El Paso's own Shoe Santa who provided thousands of handicapped children with shoes, died Tuesday.

Villarreal, 84, died at his home in San Antonio.

The cause of death is unknown, but he was diagnosed in March with non-Hodgkins lymphoma — a cancer of the lymph nodes and immune system.

Villarreal, former owner of Footfit Shoe Store that opened in 1966 in El Paso, was known for his advertisement: "If you know of a crippled child, send them to me."

He helped more than 100,000 handicapped and needy children in El Paso and Juárez —



Villarreal

some of whom took their first steps because of Villareal.

According to El Paso Times archives, Villarreal would provide ortho-

pedic services without charge.

"He shared his kindness and generosity to those in need," members of the Villarreal family wrote in a statement. "He was deeply loved and will be missed by all those he touched."

Villarreal's compassion began closer to home when his brother Gil Villarreal enlisted in World War II. When he heard that his brother was missing in action, Villarreal enlisted when

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he was only 15.

Too young to serve, he used his brother's name and birth date to join the Marine Corps.

On VJ-Day (Victory over Japan), he was in Japan. There, a soldier came up to him and told him there was another man with the same name.

Villarreal went to meet him and found it was his brother.

After the war, he finished high school and became a professional boxer in Hawaii.

His interest in podiatry began a few years later, and he studied orthopedics at the Los Angeles Hospital.

In 1963, he moved to El Paso and began working as a podiatrist. At the time, he was one of only 13 to practice in the state.

His philanthropy work began by accident in 1966 when a child at his store mentioned that he had a brother with clubfoot. Villarreal offered to go to Juárez and take a look.

"After visiting with the boy, he said he would come back next week to check on his progress," said his daughter, Cynthia Rivera. "And when he went back, there were several more children waiting for him, and that's how it grew."

From then on, Villarreal would spend the week with his wife, Dolores, and his three chil-



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dren at the store, where he would sell prescription shoes, artificial limbs and orthopedic braces.

And each Sunday, he would make the trip to Juárez and offer free services. He continued this for 18 years.

Children and adults who had never walked were able to take their first step thanks to Villarreal.

His services in Juárez expanded beyond podiatry.

"He would meet kids with severe burns," said his son, Gus Villarreal.

"They would explain that in a desperate attempt to stay warm they would light their carson tanks with gasoline, and the lamps would explode. So from time to time, my dad would volunteer to drive them to the Galveston Burn Center where they would be helped. He was a humanitarian and a compassionate person."

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, he worked with the Police Department, the El Paso Times and the city to give shoes to handicapped children.

His favorite time of the year was Christmas, when he would host the Christmas Shoe Give-away for underprivileged

children.

His work did not go unrecognized.

In 1984, President Ronald Reagan honored him at the White House with the Volunteer Action Award. He was one of only 10 who received the award. It was one of many recognitions Villarreal received through the years.

Despite the countless awards he received, Ray Villarreal continued to say the most rewarding was the smile on the children's faces.

"Hell, the children's happy faces can make your heart burst," he said in a 1987 interview with the El Paso Times. "It's a great feeling."

In 1998, Ray Villarreal closed his store and moved to San Antonio to be closer to his family.

His legacy continues through the family's Footpain Relief stores in San Antonio and Austin.

Villarreal will be buried in San Antonio, where the former El Paso resident was born in 1927.

The memorial service will be at 10 a.m. Monday at Cornerstone Church, 18755 Stone Oak, San Antonio.

Burial will be on Oct. 6, Villarreal's birthday, at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery.

He is survived by his wife of 60 years, Dolores, and children Gus Villarreal, Cynthia Rivera and Leticia Hicks.

Alex Hinojosa may be reached at ahinojosa@elpasotimes.com; 546-6137.