



## 2025 Civic Leadership Honoree - Mike Montes Morales

How do you know if someone is born great or if greatness finds them sometime during their life?

It is hard to define when Mike Montes Morales became great. It isn't defined by a single event but a culmination of many, many events. To understand his journey, you have to go back a couple of generations beginning with his grandparents, Ismael and Martina Montes, who brought their family of 11 from Jalisco, Mexico to the hillside mining town of Jerome, Arizona. They came to find a better life. It was a hard life, to be sure. The copper mines were dangerous and the town had the typical roughness of any mining town. His grandfather was an entrepreneur and owned a meat market, his father worked in the mine.

Mike's mother and father, Mary Montes and Roman (Raymond) Morales, met and married in that small town and it was there that they started their family. Mike was the oldest followed by Henry (Lalo), Lena, Roman (Pelon), Pedro (Pete) and Raquel. The youngest, Robert (Bobby), was born in La Verne, California. Both daughters suffered from illness and died as young toddlers. The family suffered tragedy as did many people in the 1920's. However, as the stories have been passed down from generation to generation there is something that was never lacking ... joy!

Joy in living ...

When you grow up in a town that is literally built on the side of a hill, you live in houses built on stilts. So it was for Mike and his brothers. They shared stories of sliding down the hillside on railroad ties, stories of school, stories of bullets flying through the window nearly hitting Mike in his crib, stories of family and friends. The stories are still told but there are only a couple family members remaining who can tell the stories firsthand.

When the Great Depression of 1930 hit the mining industry, the Montes and the Morales family made their way to Southern California to follow work in the walnut and citrus groves. They finally settled in San Dimas and La Verne. While most of the Montes family finally made their homes in San Dimas, Roman and Mary settled in La Verne in 1940. It would take pages and pages to recount all of the events of the Morales family. Suffice it to say, the boys attended Palomares School followed by Bonita High School.

Mike was good natured and had many friends, some who remained so for decades. It was in high school that he met his sweetheart, Alice Rodriguez. The Morales and Rodriguez families were always very close, living in homes just a block apart on Third Street. It was natural that their marriage in 1948 continued to foster the closeness of the two families.

Following graduation, Mike enlisted in the Army as World War II was in full swing. He was stationed in France as a medic. There are many reasons Mike should not have survived. He stepped on a Bouncing Betty that did not explode as it should have. Instead of death, he suffered some shrapnel wounds and a broken foot. He went on to assist other wounded soldiers in spite of his own injuries. It is for those two reasons that he received a Purple Heart, the Bronze and the Silver Star.

Mike and Alice were raised to serve. Alice's parents, Eliseo and Concha Rodriguez, were pillars in the community. Concha was deeply involved in the PTA and the church. She could be found at any given time working in and for these groups. It is no wonder that Mike and Alice were ingrained with those same qualities.

After the war, Mike worked 27 years for Aerojet in Azusa and later for Lockheed and Honeywell. He was always grateful to be employed to provide for his family. However, he always felt like he could be doing more to help his community. That is where it began ...

Mike served 22 years in local government. His journey of service began with the Jr. Chamber of Commerce. He was invited to join the new organization whose mission it was to make a better community. He recognized that he loved working in the community and soon found his way to the Planning Commission. After serving on the Commission he found himself running for the La Verne City Council. It took some time but the city finally adopted a form of government where the Mayor was elected by the citizens of La Verne. Mike became the City of La Verne's first elected Mayor.

Mike's door was always open with people knocking on the front door of his home, day or night. They were never turned away. He loved serving his community ... it was that simple.

There was no part of Mike's life that wasn't supported by his loving wife, Alice. She was the glue that kept the family bonded. She served side-by-side with Mike. She was a cherished member of the community finding herself knee deep in her own projects; PTA, YWCA, church and family. Family always came first. Raising five children was her priority. Their children Victoria, Yvonne, Annette, Michael and Judy were the focus.

Mike loved to play golf. He told anyone who would listen that he shot in the low 70's ... if it got any colder he quit. His humor was infectious and you never knew what the next joke would be. He was an avid camper/fisherman and taught his family to love the forests of Yosemite. He taught his family that if you wanted to be a successful fisherman, follow the truck that planted the fish. If you ran out of bait, cut open the last fish caught and remove the bait. He was an early pioneer in recycling. He was inventive during those trips. He'd start by digging a pit, placing heated rocks in the bottom and covering them with dirt. The family tent was placed on top to keep the everyone warm.

Mike and Alice created a legacy of love that continues to this day. Five generations continue to serve as they were shown by example. During their 49 years of marriage, he was involved in an assortment of activities within the city and city government:

- La Verne City Planning Commission
- Vice Chairman East San Gabriel Valley Planning Committee
- President La Verne Chamber of Commerce
- City Chairman La Verne Community Chest
- La Verne City Council

- La Verne Vice Mayor
- La Verne's First Elected Mayor
- Vice President of Little League
- Boy Scouts of America
- Member Bonita Booster Club
- Member Bonita Light Fund
- Board Member Bonita Scholarship Merit Board

Perhaps the greatest show of love for Mike was the Christmas of 1995. After a three year battle with cancer, he lay in his bedroom, no longer able to participate in the Christmas tradition of standing on the corner of Third and A Street with his entire family. As the fire engine with Santa approached his home, the engine came to a complete stop. With respect, every fireman came to his bedroom window to extend their holiday wishes. It took 10 minutes and many tearful goodbyes to remount the truck and continue their route.

Mike Montes Morales was not a rich man but he was content with what he was doing, not for himself but for others. Mike died January 3rd, just a few days later at peace with his life and his family. He had done it all ...