

Al Gallegos and a runner's story

Legendary political boss Emilio Naranjo, New Mexico's version of Richard Daley, recently passed from the scene.

Naranjo held sway for 36 years in Rio Arriba County, holding office and advancing his slates of candidates. Every reporter in Northern New Mexico had a Naranjo story.

Here's one you probably haven't heard.

In 1972, Española merchant Al Gallegos ran for state senate against Naranjo's chosen candidate. Al ran as "an independent Democrat." Naranjo, then county sheriff, knew Al slightly. A political novice, Al would show up at his opponent's rallies and ask to speak. Naranjo allowed it. (Disclosure: I've been helping Al with his autobiography.)

"I ran a good campaign," Al recalls. "It helped me in a number of ways. I was always afraid of getting in front of people and speaking. I gave speeches in Spanish and English. Spanish isn't my native tongue, but I was able to pull it off without people laughing at me an awful lot."

Al's ancestors had lived for generations in southern Colorado. "My parents didn't teach us Spanish because

they wanted us to compete in English," he says. It's a familiar story to many.

His campaign had a salutary effect in Española: "I think it kind of helped people in the community realize that you don't have to be a politician to run for public office. It's important that we all get involved."

In 1976, Al ran again for senate, this time as a registered Independent, against Naranjo's candidate.

His opponent asked Al to step aside so he could run without opposition and promised to back Al in the next election.

"I said, 'Any time I play basketball or football, I like to compete against the best players. You're the best competition in the county.' I ran and lost, but I stayed friendly with my opponent. Even your worst enemies, there's no reason not to talk to them because you can soften them up. You can do more talking to your enemies than you can in threatening them."

Wise words.

Al also remained friendly with Naranjo. "He was always fair with me. He accepted me. He never bulldogged me. I sat next to him at a state convention."

As it turned out, life had other plans for Al Gallegos.

Four years after the election, he lost his wife Marcella, the love of his life; their eight children lost their mother. Friends and family offered to take a child or two, but Al insisted that the family remain together. He never remarried.

Al had been a runner for years. To cope with his grief and the strain of parent-ing eight children alone while running his businesses, he ran more, ran longer, often late at night. On one midnight run, he had an idea: He wished his athletic shoes had springs. He could fly down the road and avoid the runner's injuries that plagued him. His idea became an obsession.

After years of tinkering with prototypes, of hearing experts say he shouldn't

waste his time, Al and his son Andres poured every dime they had into a crazy looking shoe with a big spring in the heel.

Z-Coil Footwear was born.

The anticipated athletic customers didn't materialize, but an unexpected market mushroomed: Warehouse workers standing on concrete floors, nurses on their feet all night in hospitals, people of all kinds with injuries and chronic conditions.

Within a few years, Z-Coil shoes generated 4,000 unsolicited testimonials. Customers hug Al and shake his hand.

"I wanted to get into politics because I thought I had some good ideas about ways to help people, but I think I'm reaching more people with the footwear," he says. "I think we are on the leading edge of something that can change a lot of lives."

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