**Biography of Peter Chacon 6/10/25 – 12/14/14**

**California State Assemblyman 1970-92**

Peter Chacon served in the California State Legislature from 1970 until his retirement in 1992 representing the 79th Assembly District which includes the urban core of San Diego. Upon his election, he became only the second Latino legislator elected to State of California public office in over (100) years. Together with Alex Garcia, they formed the California Latino Legislative Caucus with a membership of just two which has grown to the current membership of (22).

Peter was born in Phoenix, Arizona on June 10, 1925 to Severita and Petronilo Chacon. His father had served as a commander in Poncho Villa’s revolutionary army and he passed on to his family the passion and determination to fight for what they believe in and to defend the rights of those who couldn’t defend themselves. He was raised with three older sisters and three younger brothers as they grew up in relative poverty during the Great Depression. As a child, he used to gather cardboard boxes and loose wood for his mother to use for cooking in their wood burning stove. As a teenager, he shined shoes and parked cars in downtown Phoenix to help support his large family.

In 1943, at the age of (18), he enlisted in the US Air Force and served his country as a Ball Turret Gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress. While serving in the European theatre, he flew (35) successful missions over Germany. On one such flight, his plane was hit and forced to crash land on a small island off the Italian coast where they were subsequently rescued. After two years of wartime service, he was honorably discharged and returned home to a hero’s welcome.

Upon his return to San Diego, Peter served as President of the local Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) where he met the group Secretary, Jean Picone. The two were married in 1953 and served in leadership roles for numerous church and Latino organizations throughout San Diego.

As a result of the GI Bill, Peter was able to qualify and pay for a college education, becoming the first in his family to attend college. He enrolled in San Diego City College and ultimately San Diego State University where he earned his BA degree in education with a teaching credential in 1954 and an MA degree in school administration in 1960. He is a lifelong member of Phi Delta Kappa, an honorary education fraternity.

He accepted his first teaching assignment in Vista, CA. where he soon discovered Spanish speaking children were not taught to speak English but simply relegated to mentally retarded classes and shunned from the general school population. The injustice in the manner these Spanish speaking children were treated led to many years of frustration with the educational system, until he decided in 1969 to run for the office of State Assemblyman with the goal to change the education system from the inside out.

Peter took a leave of absence from teaching in order to devote an entire year to campaign for the position. He cashed in his teachers retirement and sold his home, the only property he had ever owned and spent every nickel he had on that first campaign. By the grace of God and much hard work by an army of empowered volunteers throughout 1970, he won his first attempt at public office in a surprise upset over a popular incumbent. At that time, the population of the 79th Assembly District was only (8%) Latino. Despite these odds, he not only won once, but he continued to campaign and run for reelection every two years thereafter. Throughout his entire (22) year career in public office, he never lost an election and retired undefeated.

Chacon is best known for his authorship of legislation creating the California Housing Finance Agency, the Rural Housing Development Program and the landmark Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program for the State’s more than 230,000 limited English speaking students. He is often called the **“Father of Bilingual Education”** for his monumental and innovative work in the field while several states with large concentrations of limited English speaking students have passed their own Bilingual Education legislation patterned after his California model.

1968 was a tumultuous year for the minority community in San Diego and Peter saw the need for the Latino community to be organized as one voice so their voice was clearly heard. Along with two others, he founded the Chicano Federation and served as its first Chairman and Executive Director. One of the first accomplishments of the federation was the creation of Chicano Park in the Barrio Logan community.

Upon his retirement from politics in 1992, Peter and his wife Jean were living in Placerville, CA and devoted themselves to teaching English to Spanish speaking farm workers and Spanish to English speaking members of their church congregation. For many Spanish speaking Latinos, he translated legal documents and taught civics classes to become an American citizen.

Peter and Jean moved to Chula Vista, CA in 2004 and lived several years at Fredericka Manor. Together, they launched a Spanish language program for seniors in their new community. The two were married for (60) years and spent their last years together at Nazareth House in San Diego until Jean Chacon passed graciously in March, 2014 of cancer at the age of (81) and Peter passed peacefully of pneumonia on December 14, 2014 at the age of (89). Peter lived a life full of passion and faithfulness as he modeled a servant leadership heart for all of us to follow.

He is survived by his four sons and their wives: Chris/Julie Chacon and Paul/Barbara Chacon of San Diego, Ralph/Dana Chacon of Athens, GA and Jeff/Lisa Chacon of Tampa, Fl., including (10) grandchildren and (4) great grandchildren. Funeral services will be held on Saturday, January 24th at 11am at the San Diego Church of Christ meeting at Lewis Middle School, 5170 Greenbrier Avenue, SD, CA 92120. Please contact Paul Chacon at [paul@chaconparking.com](mailto:paul@chaconparking.com) or (619) 318-3651 for questions or more information. Please send donations in lieu of flowers to the Mission Center of HOPE at [www.missioncenterofhope.com](http://www.missioncenterofhope.com) .