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“La Voz de los Otros”: An Overview of the Life and Career of Eliud “Pete” Suazo, Utah’s First Hispanic State Senator, 1951–2001

By JORGE IBER

One afternoon in mid-August 2001, Utah State Senator Eliud “Pete” Suazo stopped by Third District Juvenile Court Judge Andrew Valdez’s office to invite his friend to join him on a deer hunt near Joe’s Valley Reservoir in the Manti-La Sal National Forest. The senator, an avid outdoorsman, thought it would be a wonderful way for the two men to spend some time with their kids and enjoy the beauty of Utah’s scenery. The judge declined the offer, not wanting, he joked, to “have to do all of the cooking for the campers.”¹ As they had done many times previously, the two long-time friends said their goodbyes and agreed to speak again upon Suazo’s return to Salt Lake City. Tragically, there would be no more reunions for, as the headlines of the *Salt Lake Tribune* and *Deseret News* attested on the afternoon of Monday, August 20th, Pete Suazo, the only Hispanic then serving in the

Pete Suazo testifying at hate crimes hearing.

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¹ Andrew Valdez, interview by the author, March 16, 2005.

Utah state legislature, had died as a result of an ATV accident while on his way back to camp on Sunday evening.² Understandably, state legislators and government officials were shocked by the death of their colleague. Politicians from both parties offered condolences to the family and universally praised Suazo's life and career. Among Republicans, Governor Michael Leavitt touted his "tireless efforts to improve the lives of youth and minorities in our state"; Attorney General Mark Shurtleff described him as "a voice for the voiceless, a champion of the underdog and a man of honor"; and Utah Senate President Alma Mansell fondly recalled Pete's "honest willingness to resolve issues."³

Fellow Democrats were even more effusive in their acclamations. State Party Chair Meagan Holbrook noted that "Pete was a heroic figure to the Hispanic community and (to) all...who work hard and play by the rules."⁴ U. S. Representative Jim Matheson praised Suazo as a "champion for human rights. Pete's unfaltering commitment to fairness, decency and human dignity was an inspiration to me." Finally, House Minority Leader Dave Jones stated that Utah had lost "one of the great bridge makers, who linked the minority population with the majority...and enabled us to learn about each other."⁵ Clearly, the senator was an important contributor to the Beehive State's government and, in many ways, represented the increasing level of diversity which is now part of life in what had once been one of the "whitest" states in the Union. This essay, then, provides a brief summary of Eliud "Pete" Suazo's life and career and ties his story to the broader, and broadening, tapestry of minority life in the state of Utah.

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the field of Chicano/a studies became an important part of research within the mosaic of the American West. In general, historians in the specialization sought to challenge the "unflattering roles" and portrayal of "Mexican Americans as field laborers or quaint figures un-accepting of American values and way of life."⁶ While in many ways path-breaking, a widespread trait of early works was that the research focused, almost exclusively, upon the significance and activities of organizations such as unions, mutual aid societies, church groups and other entities as vehicles of resistance to Anglo oppression in the workplace and daily life. The trend became so ingrained that, until

² A word about terminology is appropriate at this point. The terms "Spanish-speaking," "Spanish-speakers," and "Spanish-surnamed" and "Hispanics" will be utilized to refer to the entire community. Finally, the term Chicano/a will be utilized to refer to the community during the years of the Chicano Movement— from the late 1960s through the late 1970s.

³ Greg Burton and Jacob Santini, "ATV Accident Claims Suazo," *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 21, 2001.

⁴ Dennis Rombooy and Bob Bernick Jr., "Democratic State Senator Pete Suazo Dies in ATV Accident," *Deseret News*, August 20, 2001.

⁵ Burton and Santini, "ATV Accident Claims Suazo."

⁶ Arnaldo De Leon, "Whither Tejano History: Origins, Development, and Status," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 106 (January 2003): 351. Although this article specifically refers to the history of Mexican Americans in the state of Texas, many of the themes presented therein are applicable to the characterization of people of Mexican descent throughout the American West.

recently, “one seldom encountered a book on the life of a prominent” individual of Mexican descent. Fortunately, in the last decade or so, a few historians have commenced rectifying this lacuna with biographies of “entrepreneurs...academicians...(and) political bosses” whose lives impart fresh insights into the Mexican American historical experience.⁷

Historian Thomas Kreneck argues that incorporating biographical studies into the broader study of this population provides focus upon persons who:

...distinguished themselves locally or regionally...such men and women combine elements of the illustrious and the ordinary, and they embody the story of their people. Their presence insures that the history of barrio Americans...does not have to be only the account of faceless laborers, classes, and gender as reflected in the statistics of wages, occupations, and demographics. This is not to denigrate such study, but only to suggest that...the human dimension to Chicano history be reinforced and the individual be given proper credit...⁸

The life of Senator Suazo dovetails quite effectively with such arguments for he lived a life of overcoming barriers and dedicated himself to improving both his hometown and state. His story summarizes and sheds light upon community and personal struggles, obstacles, and opportunities that have characterized the experience of Spanish-surnamed people in Utah and the entire West. His sacrifice, diligence, dedication, and energy make him a role model for all of Utah’s citizenry; truly a person worthy of recognition within the social and political history of the state and the West.

The Suazo family migrated to northern Utah during World War II. His mother, Cecelia, was born in Cuba, New Mexico. During the late 1940s, prior to her marriage, she supervised a maintenance crew at Hill Air Base in Layton. His father, Patricio, was born in Alamosa, Colorado, and worked as a crane operator and labor recruiter for the AFL-CIO in northern Utah.⁹ They were not alone in making this trek as Utah’s economic expansion during the war and post-war years generated a substantial Hispanic migration to Salt Lake City and its suburbs; with a large percentage of those persons hailing from northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Among key employment sectors for Spanish-surnamed men and women during the 1940s through the early 1960s were local military facilities, the transportation sector, extractive industries, food processing, and domestic work.¹⁰ The majority of such (*recien llegados*) newcomers congregated in the multiethnic west side of the capital city or in nearby towns such as Murray, which had sheltered a Mexicano presence since the early 1910s.¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 361.

⁸ Thomas Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001), 14. This book details the life of Houston restaurant owner and civic activist, Felix Tijerina.

⁹ Becky Suazo, interview with author, May 13, 2005.

¹⁰ Jorge Iber, *Hispanics in the Mormon Zion, 1912-1999* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2000), 55-59.

¹¹ Ibid., 6-17. See also Jorge Iber, “El Diablo Nos Esta Llevando: Utah Hispanics and the Great Depression,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 66 (Spring 1998): 159-77.

During the post-war decades, occupational opportunities afforded some barrio dwellers prospects to better their economic circumstances as wages increased and with access to previously closed jobs and positions. By the early 1950s, many Spanish-surnamed people in Utah believed that, through participating in World War II and Cold War efforts, they had proven themselves as hard working productive employees who had won a measure of respect from other Utahns. Still, appreciation for services rendered did not eliminate all vestiges of discrimination and prejudice.

Eliud “Pete” Suazo was born into this economic and social milieu on June 4, 1951.

He was the first of ten children, eight of whom survived into adulthood. In the late 1950s the Suazos purchased a house and moved to the city’s west side. While by no means comfortable, through hard work and industry, the family eventually purchased a second property from which they derived a small rental income. From an early age, Pete contributed to household finances by selling newspapers, working concessions at Derks Field during baseball games, and catching muskrats near the Jordan River, which he skinned in the family’s basement and then sold the hides.¹²

Suazo’s childhood can be described as happy and seldom touched directly by the more virulent aspects of discrimination, but there were incidents during his youth that helped inculcate him in the social realities of minority life in the Salt Lake City of the 1950s and early 1960s. In the sixth grade, a band teacher at Edison Elementary did not permit Pete to be part of the ensemble because he was a “Mexican.” Further, Becky Suazo noted that she and her brother often fought at school in order to protect their darker-skin siblings from taunting and being called names like “Indian” or “*negrita*” (a derogatory term which translates as “little black girl”).¹³ The Suazo family affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination, and the children often faced harassment for their religious affiliation from the offspring of their Mormon and Catholic neighbors.¹⁴ In sum, while not having to endure direct segregation and overt racial hostilities



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Pete Suazo joking with an unidentified lady in front of the Wallace F. Bennett Federal Building.

¹² Becky Suazo, interview.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For a broad discussion of the impact of religious affiliation upon Hispanic life in Utah, see Iber, *Hispanics in the Mormon Zion*.

Suazo, by the time he finished middle school, sensed that Utah society had destined him to the life of an “outsider,” someone who did not quite “fit in” with the majority society of the city and state.¹⁵ Experiences such as these undoubtedly shaped the political agenda that he embraced and fought for during his legislative career.

During his years at Salt Lake City’s West High School, Pete was an average student. Societal issues did not seem to concern him, instead his foremost area of interest was in being part of the wrestling team; for which he competed at the 103 pound classification.¹⁶ But when he graduated from high school in 1969, it was impossible to totally disregard political events and trends surrounding the Chicano/a Movement even in a predominantly white state such as Utah.

By the late 1960s, the societal ills of the Spanish-speaking population of the Beehive State were, in many ways, not very different from those which Chicanos/as confronted elsewhere. Briefly stated, the denizens of Salt Lake City’s west side and other metropolitan areas of the state such as Ogden were disadvantaged. Compared with whites, a lower percentage earned high school and college degrees. They earned less, worked in less skilled occupations, and had a higher unemployment level than did other segments of Utah’s people.¹⁷ While the Spanish-surnamed in Utah did not endure segregation or the existence of “Mexican” schools, as in Texas, they certainly were not treated as equals. Such trends stimulated the genesis of a group known as the Brown Students Association at West High in late 1967, as well as a broad, community-based civic action entity in Salt Lake City that same year, known as the Spanish-Speaking Organization for Community, Integrity, and Opportunity—SOCIO. Both organizations played important roles in Pete Suazo’s future endeavors.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s SOCIO leaders such as Ismael Maez and school teacher Archie Archuleta worked to politicize the youth of the west side of Salt Lake City. In particular, it was Maez’s “stories about Aztecs and conquistadores” and his arguments concerning parental tax support for public schools that began to stir Pete toward social activism.¹⁸

Ultimately, Suazo, who enrolled at University of Utah in 1969, was transformed from a disinterested political and societal bystander into one of the leaders of that institution’s Chicano Student Association (CSA). Among the organization’s activities during his undergraduate years was a call for the creation of a Chicano Studies program, bringing Movimiento speakers to campus, raising awareness of United Farm Worker (UFW) boycotts and

¹⁵ For specific information on segregation and racial hostilities, see Iber, *Hispanics in the Mormon Zion*, chapter 5, “‘Second-Rate Citizens’: Utah Hispanics during the Postwar Years, 1946-1967”.

¹⁶ Becky Suazo, interview and Valdez, interview.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* For specific information on activities of the Chicano Studies program at the University of Utah, see chapter 6, “‘The Advocacy Battle for our People’: Hispanic Activism in Northern Utah, 1968-1986.”

¹⁸ Valdez, interview.

activities, and a push for more scholarship money to bring minority students into the overwhelmingly white population on campus.¹⁹ While the Chicano Studies program was not implemented, the University of Utah's CSA attracted prominent speakers, such as Reies Lopez Tijerina, to Salt Lake City and helped SOCIO in various local campaigns.

The young Suazo also became part of a recruitment team, sponsored by a Ford Foundation grant, which entered the city's west side barrio and aggressively recruited both Mexican American and Native American students. One of the individuals he convinced to attend the University of Utah was his long-time friend Andy Valdez who graduated in 1977 with a law degree. Suazo and other members of the CSA also worked directly with SOCIO to improve conditions in the barrios of Salt Lake City and other places in Utah by confronting such problems as a lack of political representation, high drop out rates, excessive height requirements for the Salt Lake City police department, and the under-representation of Chicano/a educators in local schools.

While pursuing his degree, Suazo married for the first time. The marriage was not without conflict as his father-in-law was not particularly pleased that his daughter had married a "Mexican."²⁰ The marriage produced two children, Travis, born in 1970 and Jake, who died shortly after his birth in 1972. A combination of family tensions and the loss of a child ended the marriage.

In 1973, after earning an undergraduate degree in criminology, Suazo entered law school, but he dropped out after one year. During the next three or four years he worked as a construction laborer in Utah and southern Idaho, eventually accepting a position as manager of an apartment building in Salt Lake City. In the second half of the decade he became more focused concerning his future direction and settled upon the two



ALICIA SUAZO

Pete Suazo speaking at a rally in opposition to making English the official language in Utah.

¹⁹ The term "movimiento" refers to the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s which fought to improve the civil rights and educational opportunities of Mexican Americans and other Hispanics throughout the West.

²⁰ Alicia Suazo interview by author, March 29, 2005.

great loves of his life. His first love was Alicia Lopez whom he met in 1973 while she worked on the University of Utah campus and who graduated with a teaching degree in 1979. The couple married in 1978 and had two children Emilio and Julio. In addition, they adopted their nephew Abel, after Pete's sister Deana died in 1993.²¹

By the late 1970s, Suazo's second fundamental driving force became public service. He earned a master's degree in human resource management and economics from the University of Utah in 1978 and was directly involved in numerous causes and organizations in the community. In addition to continuing his affiliation with SOCIO, he participated in local efforts to support UFW strikes and boycotts; campaigned for Rey Florez Jr., whom voters of the Sixth district of Salt Lake County elected in 1978 as the first Chicano to serve in the Utah State House of Representatives; worked to elect Dr. Eugene Garcia, the first Chicano to seek election to the Salt Lake City school board; ran unsuccessfully for a school board position himself in 1979; and served as a convention delegate for U. S. Senator Edward Kennedy in 1980.²²

As a result of his numerous civic and community undertakings, Suazo acquired valuable political capital and experience, earned local notoriety, and forged a close personal and professional alliance with one of Utah's most important and charismatic Spanish-surnamed political figures of the era—John Florez. John, younger brother of Rey Florez, was active with many local groups and organizations. He taught Suazo how to manage a political campaign, tutored him on various get-out-the-vote strategies, and, most importantly, introduced and helped connect his younger colleague to the state's Democratic political machinery.²³ By 1980 such ties had, apparently, placed Suazo in an ideal situation to achieve elected office in his own right; but it was not yet to be.

Three circumstances temporarily sidetracked Pete's aspirations. First, both he and Florez worked for the gubernatorial campaign of Scott Matheson, who was elected Utah's governor in 1976 and reelected in 1980. After Matheson's first triumph, a group of Utah's Hispanic leaders approached the governor seeking political appointments, expanded assistance for the community, and greater access to the corridors of power. Florez and Suazo visited the governor to ask why no members of their community had been appointed to decision-making positions in the government. Purportedly, Matheson responded that he had wanted to hire such individuals, but that he and his staff simply "could not find any qualified Chicanos." According to Florez, this offense by the governor was very distressing for his idealistic colleague.²⁴

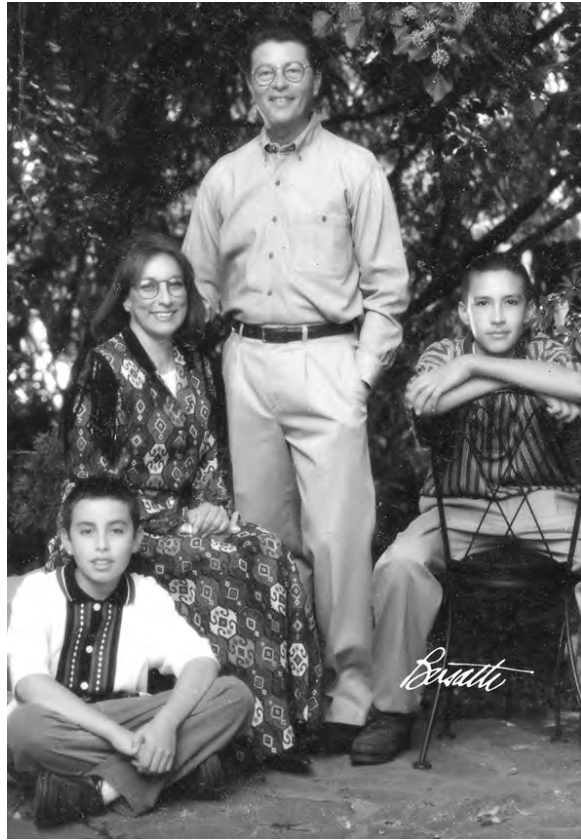
²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Susan Whitney, "Generations of Change: The Saga of Utah's Florez Family," *Deseret News*, November 15, 1995; and John Florez, interview with author, May 6, 2005.

²⁴ Florez, interview. The Matheson administration eventually did hire one Chicano administrator: Andy Gallegos in Social Services.

Second, John Florez became involved in a bitter dispute with a Salt Lake County Democratic Party official who, he felt, was condescending and took the Mexican American vote for granted. As a result, Florez, the stalwart defender and supporter of the west side, did the unthinkable; bolting party ranks and becoming a Republican.²⁵ The political party switch was another traumatic circumstance for Suazo; his close friend and political mentor had left the Democrats and in 1982 helped Willie Guzman, another Chicano, run as a Republican candidate against his sister-in-law,



Bobbie Florez, who had been appointed to fill her late husband's seat in the House of Representatives. While Florez's political, though not philosophical, about face failed to sever his ties to Suazo, it caused a great deal of concern and consternation for the aspiring politician.

Pete Suazo, his wife Alicia and two sons, Julio and Emilio.

Finally, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the political climate of the Beehive State shifted and Utah became dominated by Republicans. Given Suazo's philosophical leanings and his ties to a minority party, his political future appeared limited. Consequently, the Suazos left Utah in 1982 and moved to Penasco, New Mexico, where Alicia taught school and Pete looked for work.²⁶

Although John Florez's decision to leave the Democratic Party had been politically and personally painful for his protege, he still remained Utah's most important Chicano activist and he used his political connections to help Pete secure a public service position in New Mexico. In a letter dated December 20, 1982, Pete expressed his thanks for the help in getting a job with the El Valle De Los Ranchos Water and Sanitation District:

²⁵ Whitney, "Generations of Change."

²⁶ Alicia Suazo, interview.

You really went above and beyond the call of duty by contacting other folks to write letters on my behalf. I've always had a tough time asking for help that directly benefits me. I consider it a true blessing to have you as a friend and mentor...I was selected as the Administrative Director; now I've got my hands full again. I know you accept my success as your success. I can honestly say that no one has had more to do with bringing me from a little West-Side punk, to educating me, guiding me and helping me become the person that I am. This is not mush, John; I really appreciate everything you've done for me.²⁷

It appears from this document that any party differences which may have existed due to Florez's decision to break with the Democratic Party had failed to loosen the bonds of personal friendship between the two men. Upon Suazo's return to Salt Lake City, after the death of his grandfather in late 1985, the relationship proved invaluable to the success of the younger man's political aspirations.²⁸

After returning to Utah, Suazo utilized local connections to procure employment as a grant writer with the Institute for Human Resource Development (IHRD), an agency funded and controlled by SOCIO. The IHRD was charged with hiring Hispanics and administering social service projects to benefit people in the community. Suazo's work for IHRD led to a similar position in Salt Lake City Mayor Ted Wilson's administration. Additionally, Suazo continued working as a community activist to address the needs of barrio youth and the growing gang problem in the west side. His endeavors brought him to the attention of the city's new mayor, Palmer DePaulis, who served from 1985-1991, and named Suazo Director of his Community Affairs Office in 1986. Mayor DePaulis selected Suazo because of his "thoroughness and work ethic and how versatile he was. Pete could work with people of diverse backgrounds and cared deeply about justice and redressing problems."²⁹

He served as the city administration's point man on a variety of issues including the shortage of low-income housing, the city's growing gang problem, and improving the graduation rate of minorities in area schools. He was also part of a group that formulated an action plan for the diversification of the Salt Lake City economy. Representative of Suazo's many-faceted work in support of poor and minority residents was the establishment of the In-School Scouting Program in Salt Lake City Schools.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) has been closely connected with the Boy Scouts of America since 1911, when church leaders selected scouting as an official church youth program.³⁰ While this undertaking provided countless boys with an opportunity to participate in

²⁷ Letter from Pete Suazo to John Florez, December 20, 1982. Copy of the letter is in author's possession.

²⁸ Florez, interview.

²⁹ Palmer DePaulis, interview with author, May 13, 2005.

³⁰ Lowell M. Snow, "Scouting," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 3:1275-77.

worthwhile activities, it also had unintended consequences. Because most of Utah's troops were based in local LDS wards and the majority of Hispanic youths in the state are Catholic, participation in this program by barrio youths had been limited. As Suazo noted in 1989, "Many children growing up in Utah have not had easy access to scouting....For all practical purposes, the Boy Scouts of America has been an LDS church program. That's not to say that's not good, but a lot of kids who could have gained some benefit from it haven't been exposed to scouting." Mayor DePaulis and Suazo believed that scouting could help keep some of the west side's troubled kids on the straight and narrow. Their undertaking, which initially targeted four thousand students, boys and girls on fifteen campuses, was designed to teach inner city youths valuable skills such as honesty and responsibility; as well as an appreciation for nature. Pete argued that a small investment in such a program would save the city substantial amounts of money in the future for it was "something we can do proactively...to build a much stronger sense of pride in young people." By the early 1990s, the innovative program was in place on school campuses city-wide.³¹

In 1991, with the DePaulis administration on its way out of city hall, once again, it was time for the now forty-year-old Suazo to reassess his future. Given his extensive experience in government, both he and his wife believed the time had come to seek elective office. Before making a decision, however, he sought the counsel of his two political mentors. Not surprisingly, Mayor DePaulis and John Florez advised him that the moment had indeed arrived; still, the men cautioned, it was imperative that Suazo take care to not be perceived strictly as a "Chicano" candidate. Florez, in particular, reminded his friend that it would be necessary to reach out to all sectors of the west side community, including local unions and other components of the Democratic Party such as gays and lesbians, in order to win. In doing so, he could provide a voice for the various "others" long ignored by the state's political power structure.³²

Suazo had to decide whether to run for a Utah House or Senate seat. Initially, he thought about the possibility of running for the upper chamber and challenging Senator Rex Black. This seemed like a good possibility for, as the *Deseret News* noted in 1992, Black's "district has changed over the years and a young, aggressive Hispanic...would likely have had success against Black."³³ It was at this point that Florez, once again, proffered sage advice. While the minority population within the district might have generated sufficient votes for victory, the veteran politician argued that Suazo should not pigeonhole himself politically.

Because Senator Black had the support of organized labor, and Suazo did

³¹ Robert Rice, "Support Scouting to Reach 'At Risk' Youths, Mayor Urges," *Deseret News*, March 7, 1989. DePaulis, interview.

³² DePaulis, interview, and Florez, interview.

³³ *Deseret News* July 10, 1992

not want to damage relations with that important constituency, he wisely chose not to challenge for the senate seat. Instead, he focused upon the Twenty-third House District, a seat then held by conservative Democrat Ted Lewis. The incumbent, who often sided with Republicans, did not have the backing of labor, Hispanics, and gays and lesbians, primarily because he did not support hate crimes legislation.³⁴ With two such powerful Democratic constituencies against him, Lewis lost the party's nomination at the county convention. Suazo, who earned more than 70 percent of the delegate votes, scored a major political victory by cobbling together a coalition that would keep him in office until his untimely demise.³⁵

Not surprisingly, after taking office, Representative Suazo focused attention upon issues that most directly impacted his core constituents by speaking out about affordable housing and child care, high drop out rates for minorities in Utah schools, crime prevention, and increasing awareness of the needs of minorities. Given his love of the outdoors and sports, he also concentrated on issues such as the regulation of boxing, wrestling and hunting. Finally, utilizing his background in management and economics, the freshman representative also established Impact Business Consultants; an enterprise dedicated to helping minority individuals navigate the often turbulent waters to establish their own businesses.³⁶

During his two terms in the lower house (1993-1994 and 1995-1996), Suazo sponsored a total of thirty-one bills, eight of which were passed and signed into legislation.³⁷ While not being able to pass much of his agenda, Suazo increasingly used his position to become a powerful and active voice for the forgotten people and issues of Utah. Particularly significant was his consistent call for state leaders to examine such issues as affirmative action, hate crimes legislation, crime, and the growing number of undocumented aliens living in the state.³⁸ Given his concern for the "others" concentrated

³⁴ See the following articles from the *Deseret News*: Bob Brenick Jr., "House Races Give Hard Workers a Chance," July 10, 1992; Kristen Moulton, "State's Minority Programs Decry Loss of Federal Aid and 'Lackadaisical' Neglect from Predominant Utahns"; "Demo Seeks House Seat in Dist. 23"; "Bangerter Taps Demo to Fill Vacant House District 23 Seat"; May 10, 1992.

³⁵ Jay Evensen, "Chaos Keeps Demos From Adopting Platform," *Deseret News*, May 31, 1992.

³⁶ For an overview of the activities of Representative Suazo during his term in the Utah House, see the following articles from the *Deseret News*: "Utah Must Provide More Funds for Counseling and Language Programs, Minority Leaders Say," May 10, 1992; "MED Week Nominations are Due by Friday," May 19, 1993; Nicole A. Bonham, "4 Hispanics Honored for Recent Appointments," August 29, 1993; Will Grey, "Adequate Child-Care Funding Sought," December 5, 1993; Adam Elggren, "Spirited Audience At U. Hails Rights Leader, Utah Cultures," January 16, 1994; Joe Costanzo and Jerry Spangler, "Lawmakers Design Programs Aimed at Curbing Youth Crime," February 4, 1994; Matthew S. Brown, "New Fees Could be Taxing for Hunters, Other Utahns," March 1, 1993; "Martial Arts," February 19, 1994; Brooke Adams, "S.L. to Support Creation of a Youth City Council," June 18, 1994; Jerry Spangler, "Demo Urges Letting Taverns Serve Wine as Well as Beer," June 25, 1994; and Amy Donaldson, "Police, Teens Meet in Sport Court Setting," August 27, 1994.

³⁷ According to his childhood friend, Judge Andrew Valdez, this figure does not provide an effective assessment of Pete Suazo's value to the state. Valdez, interview.

³⁸ See the following articles from the *Deseret News*: Jennifer K. Hatch, "Corradini Calls S.L. Parking-Lot Shooting as Serious as Major Flood or Earthquake," September 30, 1994; "Leavitt Modifies Views on Illegal Immigration," December 29, 1994; Susan Lyman-Whitney, "Affirmative Action," May 18, 1995; Bob

on the west side, it is not surprising that he won reelection handily in November 1994.³⁹ In 1996, when Senator Rex Black decided not to run for reelection, Suazo ran for the vacated seat and trounced his Republican opponent James A. Waters by a 65 to 35 percent margin.⁴⁰

Once ensconced in the upper chamber of the legislature, Suazo continued



ALICIA SUAZO

Pete Suazo with two boys at a youth boxing banquet.

pushing his agenda. For example, by the end of 1997, Pete helped pass legislation that made it legal for Utahns with terminal illnesses to sell their life insurance policies for cash. The legislation earned the freshman Senator much praise from the AIDS Coalition of Utah, which awarded him their Political/Social Policy Award in September. Later that year he spoke out on the issue of AIDS education at a World AIDS Day event at the state capitol; chastising officials for not providing sufficient funding for education about the disease. "It's time we stopped the denial, start educating and start preventing."⁴¹ In addition to speaking out on behalf of his constituents, Suazo had a more personal reason for this policy position; he wanted to honor his sister Deana, who died from AIDS in 1993.⁴²

Other issues which the senator from District 2 raised within and outside the legislature called for broader representation of minorities within the Salt Lake Olympic Organizing Committee (SLOC) and the passage of legislation to provide basic health insurance coverage for Utah's mostly Mexicano and Mexican American farm workers.⁴³ He also worked to improve the status and regulation of boxing in the state by proposing a tax on pay-per-view

Bernick Jr., "Demo Aims to Add Tool Against Gangs," June 22, 1995; Zack Van Eyck, "Lawmaker Urges Creation of Civil Rights Commission," January 15, 1996; "House Panel gives Green Light to a Crackdown on Joyriding," February 1, 1996; Lois M. Collins, "Welfare Reform Clears Committee," February 19, 1996; and "Stephens Snags Top Rating of 100% for 3rd Year Running," April 7, 1996.

³⁹ "House of Representatives," *Deseret News*, November 9, 1994.

⁴⁰ See the following articles from the *Deseret News*: "9 Legislators Won't Seek to Hang on to Their Posts," February 29, 1996; "Who Are the Candidates? Here's a Listing," March 20, 1996; and "State Senate," November 6, 1996.

⁴¹ Douglas D. Palmer, "AIDS Coalition Honors Utahns, Organizations," *Deseret News*, September 27, 1997.

⁴² Spencer Young, "Utahns Remember Victims of AIDS," *Deseret News*, December 2, 1997.

⁴³ Lisa Riley Roche, "Group Says SLOC Needs Broader Representation," *Deseret News*, December 5, 1997 and "Senate Panel Passes Bill on Farm Workers Insurance," *Deseret News*, February 13, 1998.

matches with the revenues to go to support amateur boxing clubs and the Utah Boxing Commission.⁴⁴ Even if his legislation failed to pass, the senator did much to raise awareness regarding the concerns of Utah's "others."

Although such proposals caused controversy, all of this paled in comparison with the legislation that he made the cornerstone of his time in the senate: the revision of the 1992 Utah Hate Crimes law. His sense of justice, his support for Utah's gay and lesbian population, and the killing of a young Latino, Alfonso Repreza, on the streets of Salt Lake City on Halloween night 1998, helped fuel this particular stand and led to the introduction of Senate Bill 34 during the 1999 legislative session.⁴⁵

The proposed legislation "would protect people against hate crimes on the basis of race, religion, national origin, color, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or mental and physical disabilities." Support for the bill came from groups such as the local chapter of the NAACP, the Utah Sentencing Project, the Episcopal Diocese, Utahns for Choice, and the Utah Democratic Gay and Lesbian Caucus. Suazo marshaled much evidence in support of his bill, arguing that, since 1992, "more than 500 hate crimes have been reported in Utah." Specifically, he stated "60 percent of Utah's hate crimes are committed because of the victim's race; 15 percent because of ethnicity and 13 percent because of sexual orientation. The rest, more than 10 percent, are committed because of religion."⁴⁶

Opposition to the proposition came from organizations such as the Eagle Forum. The group's head, Gayle Ruzicka, argued that Suazo's proposal would divide, not unite Utahns. "Why are we even considering something like this? All people deserve to be protected equally." The bill never made it out of committee; failing on a straight party line vote.⁴⁷

The push for hate crimes legislation garnered positive and negative notoriety for Senator Suazo. His core constituents lavished praise upon him for this stand. However, the push for the regulation did not produce

⁴⁴ Zack Van Eyck, "Pay-per-View Tax Would Boost Boxing," *Deseret News*, February 7, 1998.

⁴⁵ The following articles are from the *Deseret News*: Amy Joi Bryson, "2 Families Agonize After Deadly Fight," November 3, 1998; Spencer Young, "Suspect in Stabbing a 'Good Young Man,' Father Says," November 6, 1998; Hans S. Moran, "3 Teens to Stand Trial in Slaying," February 6, 1999; "Judge Balks at Lowering Bail for Straight Edger in Killing: He Cites Remarks Teenager Made on National TV Show," March 30, 1999; Hans Camporreales and Jana L. McQuay, "Straight Edger Gets Suspended Sentence in Slaying: He Chased After Victim but Tried to Stop Fatal Attack," July 13, 1999; Derek Jensen, "Defendant Pleads Guilty in Slaying: Straight Edger Admits Killing in Halloween Fight," September 21, 1999; "A 2nd Straight Edger Pleads Guilty in Slaying," October 20, 1999; "2 Straight Edgers Receive Maximum in Terms of Slaying," December 15, 1999; "Stories Vary on Halloween Brawl that Ended Teen's Life in 1998: Prosecutors Rest Case; Jury Likely to Deliberate Soon," December 23, 1999; Brady Snyder and Derek Jensen, "Straight Edger Acquitted of Murder," December 24, 1999; and "Appeals Court Sends Back Straight Edger's Case," October 12, 2002.

⁴⁶ Susan Whitney, "Utahns Often Unaware of Hate Crimes: 'Week Without Violence' Starts with Some Statistics," *Deseret News*, October 21, 1999.

⁴⁷ The following articles are from the *Deseret News*: Ami Jo Bryson, "Hate-Crimes Debate Grows Contentious," February 2, 1999; "Utah Lawmakers Resist Hate-Crime Reforms," February 5, 1999; "Senate Committee Rejects Changes in Hate-Crimes Bill," February 4, 1999; and Bob Bernick Jr., and Jerry Spangler, "Morals' Legislation is Lacking This Season," February 7, 1999.

tangible results and generated intense debate between two old friends. The ever-pragmatic John Florez, once again, disagreed with the strategy and tactics of his apprentice lamenting that instead of gaining ground, Suazo was mistakenly “spending his political capital [on hate crimes] and [it] does not do diddly concerning [the more important] issues of education.”⁴⁸ Instead, Florez counseled Suazo to work on “more important issues” such as school funding and drop out prevention. Florez reminded his friend that, contrary to the icy reception from the Matheson administration, by working with the GOP majority, he had managed to get Hispanics appointed to



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government positions starting with the Norman Bangerter administration in 1985. Indeed, Florez authored the executive order which established the governor’s Minority Council; a direct link for the state’s minority populations to the highest elected official in the state. Florez chided Suazo “see, we have been working our butts off to help the Democrats and nothing happens, and we get a Republican and he appoints three of us to key policy positions.”⁴⁹

Once again, Suazo agonized over the reality of his political circumstances. He wanted to press for legislation that his constituents considered crucial; but there seemed to be little, if any, possibility to secure passage of a hate-crimes bill. Finally, by the time the legislature began its January 2000 session, Suazo had worked out a compromise that could satisfy his supporters and signal his willingness to reach out to more moderate elements of the Republican majority.

⁴⁸ Florez, interview.

⁴⁹ Ibid. These three individuals were: Joe Pacheco of the Tax Commission, Vickie Palacios of the Board of Pardons, and John Florez of the Utah State Industrial Committee.

Senate Bill 14 was his attempt to bridge the political and philosophical gap. Instead of offering a listing of “protected classes,” the new version of the bill only “created a more severe penalty for crimes in which the victim is targeted primarily because of...bias or prejudice.” The inclusion of the phrase “primarily because of bias,” was enough to satisfy Republican Terry Spencer, a lawyer, who stated that this was “exactly the type of language he wanted to see included in the measure.... I think this is one of those debates that we do need to hear a full debate on the Senate floor.” As a result, the committee voted to report favorably on Senate Bill 14. Once on the floor, Suazo reminded his colleagues that “A hate crime goes beyond just the individual victimization or the injury involved with that victim. It is intended, often times, to terrorize a community.” To answer those senators who expressed concerns over the supposed censoring of thought, he also argued that, “A person’s first amendment right to free speech, however obnoxious that may be, ends at the point of your fist. You cannot then inflict any pain as in assault and battery or graffiti against someone as a result of that speech.” Although some members continued to express trepidation, the senate voted overwhelmingly (24-4) in favor of the legislation.⁵⁰ Just as it appeared that passage was a possibility, however, the house committee dealing with the legislation tabled the matter, due in part to heavy pressure from the Eagle Forum, and the session ended. Still, Suazo’s compromise language had moved the bill to its furthest point in the legislative process. As a Democratic legislator in Utah, he had learned that it was necessary to have the “‘will of an ant’...and he will come back next year with another hate crime bill. If it takes four years, it takes four years.”⁵¹

Senator Suazo’s consistent stand for hate-crimes legislation no doubt solidified his standing among many of his constituents. An examination of certain aspects of his reelection campaign in 2000, however, makes it apparent that he was not interested in playing the role of Sisyphus. Indeed, many of his statements indicated that he wanted to reach out, as mentor John Florez strongly suggested, to colleagues on the Republican side of the aisle. This shift in political terminology is evident in some of his statements to the *Deseret News* in October of that year.

In a response to a series of questions put to the three candidates for Senate District 2 seat (opposing Suazo were Richard D. Barnes a Libertarian and Sandra Richter a member of the Independent American Party) the three contestants addressed the key issues confronting the district

⁵⁰ The following articles are from the *Deseret News*: Amy Joi Bryson, “Measures Target Profiling, Hate Crimes: Both Likely to Spur Heated Controversy,” January 17, 2000; Zack Van Eyck, “Correction: Wording Change Enables Hate-Crimes Bill to Advance,” February 8, 2000; and “Hate-Crime Bill Prevails over Senate Objections,” February 15, 2000.

⁵¹ The following articles are from the *Deseret News*: “Legislative Wrap-Up,” February 18, 2000; Bob Brenick Jr., “Lawmakers Split Over Hate Crimes,” February 23, 2000; Lucinda Dillon, “Minority Legislation Fares Poorly: King Day Bill Passes Despite ‘Hateful Comments,’” March 2, 2000; and “Legislature 2000: Summaries,” March 2, 2000.

and the state. Surprisingly, Suazo made no mention of the hate crime legislation that he had so strongly supported in previous years in his response to a question about the “three major issues facing state government today.” Instead, he focused on schools and quality of life. “Public education is my primary concern...I am distressed to see so many so-called temporary classroom trailers on the campuses of our elementary schools.” In addition, he discussed his support of a tax increase for mass transportation and efforts to improve air quality in urban areas. In most of his responses, Suazo definitely backed issues that appealed to most west side Democrats: tighter gun control, opposition to the Official English Initiative then being pushed in Utah, and removing the Beehive State’s infamous sales tax on unprepared food. In other responses, he came across as being in line with aspects of a moderate Republican agenda. For example, in response to possible tax increases he stated:



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Pete Suazo ice fishing at Scofield Reservoir.

I have absolutely no intention of voting for increases in income or property or even the sales tax. I do not think it is appropriate for the voter at the local county level to consider tax increases from sales tax to fund mass transportation systems. As an individual voter, I am prepared to do this. As a legislator I would resist a tax increase on gasoline, prices are already too high.⁵²

At the start of the 2001 legislative session, it appeared that supporters of the measure had made headway, if not in the legislative chambers, then among the general public. In February the *Deseret News* and KSL (the local CBS radio and television affiliate, owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), conducted a poll in which individuals were asked if hate crimes were a “problem” in Utah. Unexpectedly, the majority, 60 percent, responded in the affirmative. “Another 52 percent said they would support changes to the state’s law currently proposed by Sen. Pete Suazo, D-Salt Lake City.” Still, even with growing support from the people of Utah, Senate Bill 37 was not necessarily going to become law for “even if SB37 passes the Senate, it could face a tough road in the House, where a similar bill died last year... [and] the House Judiciary committee...already killed HB50, a...bill virtually identical...sponsored

⁵² “State Senate District 2,” *Deseret News*, October 1, 2000.

by Rep. David Litvack, D-Salt Lake City.”⁵³

Just when it appeared that Senate Bill 37 was doomed to failure, one Utah organization, which Senator Suazo characterized as a “hate group,” inadvertently helped push Senate Republicans toward support for the measure. The National Alliance, “which sees whites as a superior race, is worried hate crime laws are an ‘Orwellian type of thought control,’” sent members of the senate a CD designed to counter Suazo’s arguments with “a 15-minute speech by...Chairman William L. Pierce...[discussing] conspiracy theories on the ‘Jewish media bosses’...[and] race-mixing white trash...” The “advice” from the National Alliance prompted some in the majority party to continue working with Suazo and finally, with the inclusion of the phrase, “as demonstrated by the defendant’s actions at the time the offense was committed” the amended version of Senate Bill 37 cleared the senate by a vote of 21-5.⁵⁴

As the new version of the legislation made its way to the House of Representatives, both Governor Michael Leavitt and Attorney General Mark Shurtleff expressed their support for the bill, but the state’s highest elected official “stopped short of admitting whether he would approach individual representatives to sway their support for SB37.”⁵⁵

Unfortunately, on March 1, 2001, the legislative session ended and for the fourth consecutive year the bill failed to pass. Suazo was not to be dissuaded declaring once again: “I am not going to let the issue die.”⁵⁶

Considering the amount of political capital spent on the hate crime bill during the previous sessions, it is important to note that Senator Suazo also pushed other legislative issues. Because he had boxed in his youth, served as an International Boxing Association referee since 1999, and had been involved with young boxers from the west side for many years, it is not surprising that he sponsored legislation designed to strengthen the sport in Utah.⁵⁷ Suazo was particularly interested in providing the Utah Boxing Commission a degree of independence necessary for it to promote, not just regulate, pugilism. Formerly, the regulatory body had been part of the Utah Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing and the legislation Suazo introduced sought to make the board much more proactive. As former chairman of the commission Larry Fulmer noted, “we weren’t allowed to encourage the sport, we were simply there to regulate it. Now the boxing commission will actually encourage promoters instead of just being a thorn in their sides.”⁵⁸

⁵³ Derek Jensen, “Utahns Say Hate Crime is Problem,” *Deseret News*, February 13, 2001.

⁵⁴ The following articles are from the *Deseret News* and written by Derek Jensen, “Alliance Draws Suazo Fire: Utah Lawmakers Get Letters, CDs on Hate Crime Bill, February 18, 2001; “Revival for Bill on Hate Crimes?” February 20, 2001; and “Senate Revives Hate-Crimes Bill,” February 21, 2001.

⁵⁵ Derek Jensen, “Suazo Strives to Revive Hate-Crimes Bill,” *Deseret News*, February 28, 2001.

⁵⁶ Bob Brenick Jr., “Weary Lawmakers end ‘Mild’ Session: But They’ll be Back to Settle Applied-Tech Issue,” and “Online Guide: Top Issues of the 2001 Legislature,” *Deseret News*, March 1, 2001.

⁵⁷ Becky Suazo, interview.

There were three goals for the boxing commission: to increase the number of fights in the state, to regulate such events properly for the safety of the fighters and the enjoyment of fans, and to provide opportunity for youths from disadvantaged backgrounds. As Suazo noted in 1998, "Boxing has always provided an opportunity for low-income youth, particularly, minority youth."⁵⁹

Still another service that Pete Suazo provided to the citizens of Utah was his work on the joint House-Senate Redistricting committee. The work began in April 2001. He believed it was his duty to make sure that the voice of the minority populations be heard during the often contentious process. Early on, some members of the majority Republican Party suggested that District 2 be redrawn to include more rural parts of northern Utah that traditionally voted Republican, or that parts of the west side be moved to a district that already included more rural counties. However, committee co-chairman, Republican Michael Waddoups "went out of his way to keep intact Hispanics in areas" of Suazo's district. "We thought it important, especially with minority lawsuits over redistricting, to keep community of interest whole. And we did, and Pete likes it."⁶⁰ As a result of his efforts in the senate, in early August 2001, Pete Suazo was selected by his party's colleagues to assume the position of assistant minority whip.⁶¹

By the autumn of 2001, Pete Suazo had accomplished much of what he wanted in regard to his professional life. He was a respected legislator, a strong and vibrant voice for his community, and a moral conscience for the Utah legislature in regard to its treatment of minorities. All came to a sudden and tragic stop on the evening of August 19, 2001. Friends and family grieved his loss, and the caucus of the Democratic Party turned to his widow, a career school teacher, to serve in her husband's stead. While many politicians paid lip service to the legacy of Pete Suazo, particularly in regard to redistricting, it was clear that some would take advantage of the situation. Pledges of fairness made regarding Senate District 2 while Suazo lived became distant memories after his widow's move to the senate. Boundaries were realigned and the district became much more Republican as the west

⁵⁸ C.G. Wallace, "Utah Finally Gets Boxing Commission: Board is Charged with Promoting Boxing in the State," *Deseret News*, June 3, 2001.

⁵⁹ Jason Swensen, "Boxing has Cheerleader on Hill," *Deseret News*, February 18, 1998; and Zack Van Eyck, "Suazo Wants to Expand Boxing Panel's Role," *Deseret News*, June 20, 2000. One of the significant results of his legislation has been the increasing number of Utah-based boxers who have made their mark in the professional ranks. The best example of this trend is Gary Gomez from West Valley City, who, in December of 2004, won the WBC Continental Championship belt in the cruiserweight class (190 to 200 pounds). Aaron Cole, "Boxing Provided Him Direction: And Gomez Wants to See Sport's Image Improved," *Deseret News*, April 29, 2005.

⁶⁰ The following articles are from the *Deseret News*, Dennis Romboy, "Coming Soon: Redistricting: Utah Panel Set to Start Shifting School Board, Political Boundaries," April 5, 2001; Bob Bernick Jr., "Waddoups Drafts Redistricting Plan: He Says Parties Will Have Say in Actual Redrawing," May 18, 2001; "Senators Getting Jostled in Redistricting," July 13, 2001; and Jesse Hyde and Bob Bernick Jr., "Redistricting: Solomon's Way?: Throckmorton Plan Would Bisect Utah and S.L. Counties," July 13, 2001.

⁶¹ "New Leaders in Utah Senate," *Deseret News*, August 5, 2001.

side's Spanish-surnamed population now resides in a more conservative district comprised mostly of Utah County. By the end of the 2002 session, Alicia Suazo, dejected about the failure to pass hate crimes legislation and not wanting to participate further in the brutal world of politics, decided not to run for her husband's former senate seat.⁶²

In the years since his passing, Pete Suazo has been remembered as a powerful voice for Utah's Latino and other minority communities. Finally, the 2005 legislature passed an amendment to the state's original 1992 hate crimes legislation (House Bill 90, sponsored by David Litvack, a Democrat from Salt Lake City) which criminalized much of the behavior that Suazo had challenged. Upon passage, the legislature praised his memory and tireless efforts in seeking justice and fairness for all citizens. Other aspects of the Suazo agenda have been equally successful. The Utah Boxing Commission, now the Pete Suazo Utah Athletic Commission, continues to develop the sport in the state. Another area of interest for Senator Suazo was the creation of minority businesses. This worthy endeavor is now served by the Pete Suazo Business Center located at 960 West 1700 South in Salt Lake City. The center, with the assistance of major Utah commercial entities, the Brigham Young University and University of Utah Business Schools, and the Utah Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, is dedicated to making the dream of business ownership a reality for all; but specifically for Utah's burgeoning Hispanic population. Finally, the College of Social Work at the University of Utah, now awards a prize named in his honor to individuals working for increased social justice in the state. In 2004, one of the organizations so honored was the Centro de La Familia, the renamed IHRD, one of the remnants of the SOCIO coalition which so impacted Suazo's life and career.⁶³

The life and career of Eliud "Pete" Suazo, like the lives of other Mexican Americans who have been the subject of recent biographies, "testifies to a level of self-determination that is often underemphasized in discussions of Mexican American historiography."⁶⁴ The actions of such individuals did much to raise awareness and improve the lives of the people in their communities. From the early 1970s, Pete Suazo challenged the treatment of minorities often considered as "others" by the majority population of Utah. Given the conservative nature of politics in the state, this was a difficult task.

⁶² The following articles are from the *Deseret News*, Elaine Jarvik, "Alicia Suazo Urged to Replace Her Husband in State Senate," August 26, 2001; Bob Bernick Jr. and Zack Van Eyck, "Stephens Sees a Fair Redistricting: Lawmakers Meet a Day after Demo Protest Rally," September 25, 2001; "Winners and Losers (Legislative Redistricting)," October 6, 2001; and Bob Bernick Jr., "Suazo Says She'll Not Seek Own Term," March 21, 2002.

⁶³ Gladys Gonzalez, interview with author, March 28, 2005. See also the following articles from the *Deseret News*: Jennifer K. Nii, "Suazo Center Opening: Purpose is to Help Underserved Group Build Businesses," August 22, 2003; Deborah Bulkeley, "Suazo Center to Empower Minorities: Ground Broken for Facility to Help Businesses," October 29, 2004; and "Suazo Awards Hail Social Justice Efforts: Recipients are Five People, Centro de La Familia," March 13, 2004.

⁶⁴ Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 8.



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Thomas Kreneck, in his biography of Houston Hispanic leader Felix Tijerina, noted that his subject contributed to Mexican American history in three ways; “he fostered a civic infrastructure vital to community advancement...influenced public policy by providing a needed Mexican American perspective... [and provided] a positive symbol of Mexican American character and achievement.”⁶⁵ Pete Suazo did all of this and more. By examining the life story of this “little west side punk,” as he called himself, students of the state’s history can gain a fresh perspective on the life of minority populations. Given the dramatic increase in Utah’s Hispanic population, now estimated to be around 264,000 (almost 11 percent of the state’s total population), it is of paramount importance to record such stories, not only for the inspiration that they can provide, but to promote goodwill and greater understanding among all of the various peoples that call the Beehive State home.⁶⁶

Suazo family members participate in the groundbreaking ceremony on October 21, 2004, for the Pete Suazo Business Center: standing left to right, Victor Suazo, uncle; Caitlyn Suazo, niece; Mikayla Suazo, cousin; Sonny Suazo, nephew; David Suazo, uncle; Delila Mitchell, niece; Elijah Mitchell, great nephew and godson; Georgia Aarellano, sister; Andy “Gonzaga” Suazo, brother; Cecilia Suazo, mother; Anna Marie Brown, sister; Pat Suazo, father; Alicia Suazo, wife; Julio Suazo, son; Emilio Suazo, son; Becky Carter, niece; Joshua Carter, nephew; Deja Carter, great niece; and Agustus Carter (seated), nephew.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

⁶⁶ Pew Hispanic Center, “Chronicling Latinos’ diverse experiences in the changing America: A Statistical Portrait in the changing America: A Statistical Portrait of Hispanics at mid-century.” Table 10, Hispanic Population by state: 2000 and 2005; Table 12, Hispanic Population by State: 2005. <http://Pewhispanic.org> (accessed December 20, 2007.)