

Mysterious and beloved, Antonio Camarillo is at home forever in the San Diego shrine he protected



CHICANO PARK'S GUARDIAN ANGEL

By LESLEY GARATE

BARRIO LOGAN —

Gio Camarillo was a mystery, even in death. Like a lost angel he seemed to drop in from out of nowhere. When he left the Earth in February, admirers called him a guardian angel returning to Heaven.

His 33 years of fiercely loyal stewardship of Chicano Park earned him the honorific “Guardian Angel” and a place on a mural alongside other Chicano heroes. Camarillo would say he was no angel but he embraced the role of guardian.

Little is known about the early life of Antonio Chavez “Tio” Camarillo other than he was originally from Guanajuato, Mexico and a huge fan of the Club Leon soccer team. He was once married, but no one seems to know if he had any children. Nor did acquaintances know what he did in Mexico before crossing *la frontera* for good in 1989.

He came upon Chicano Park and rarely left. Without housing for most of his 33 years in the United States, Camarillo considered Chicano Park home.

His best friend Jose Cruz Mendoza said Chicano Park embraced Tio and he embraced the park.

“They took good care of each other,” Mendoza said. “He was always there, keeping an eye on things.”

Gente Unida founder Enrique Morones said it was no accident Chicano Park was always pristine and void of graffiti during Camarillo’s residency as its guardian angel. Morones said he often escorted university students and Chicano scholars to Chicano Park. An introduction to Camarillo was part of the ritual. *El Angel Guardian* would regale them with stories.

“Tio loved our beautiful Chicano Park very much and made sure it was always spotless,” said Morones. “He knew so much about the park. He was kind of like a (museum) docent and would answer questions if you asked him. He was an encyclopedia of park history.”

Camarillo, after 33 years, was almost as iconic to the park as its world-renown murals and colorful Indio-Chicano ceremonies. His long silver mustache, *caballero sombrero* and cowboy boots were unmistakable, as was his insistence that the past stay in the past.



Tio Camarillo

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Chelsea Pelayo, CHULA VISTA RESIDENT

He declined offers from his *hermano* Mendoza to visit Guanajuato and other parts of the United States. He said he was happily plugged into *la tierra firma* of Chicano Park, occasionally posting up in a nearby cantina to watch his beloved Club Leon on TV.

Chelsea Pelayo, a Chula Vista Chicana studying medicine in New Mexico, said Camarillo was essential to the park and the broader community.

“Tio was such a wonderful and rare person,” she said. “I know his spirit lives on in the park amongst the pylons under the bridge and the community that makes that park a vibrant and important place for Chicano history.”

Morones said Camarillo was a rock in the winds of history. He cleaned and raked Chicano Park in the tense days after 9/11, through the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, during COVID and across six presidencies.

“None of that mattered to him as much as the park,” Morones said. “He could not control everything that went on in the world, but he could impact the park and help to make people happy.”

At least twice the outside world shattered the solemnity of the park. In 2016 a drunken sailor drove a pickup truck over the side of a Coronado Bridge off ramp, plunging into a crowd at Chicano Park. Four visitors attending a classic car show were killed. Camarillo was there to help clean up the aftermath and repair the damage.

In 2018 Camarillo joined Morones, Chicano muralist Salvador Barajas and more than 1,000 other allies of Chicano Park to defend it against a mob of white supremacists calling themselves Patriot Picnic 2.0. A ragtag coalition of about 60 Klansmen, Trump supporters, Minutemen and neo-Nazis threatened to deface the park’s collection of murals, but they were turned away without making so much as a scratch.

Most days were much less eventful. Camarillo marked them by tending to the park and chatting with visitors. Mendoza said Camarillo did not know a stranger. He made it a point to know the San Diego Police officers who patrolled Chicano Park and





Barrio Logan.

“Tenia un character charismatico,” he said. “Others were attracted to him.”

Tio was in poor health his final two years and frequently hospitalized. Mendoza and his wife Gloria visited him regularly. On the day he asked a nurse to shave off his mustache, they said they knew the end was near. Camarillo died that day at age 82, decked out in emerald Club Leon gear.

Camarillo wished for his ashes to be scattered around roses Mendoza planted in Chicano Park to honor La Virgen de Guadalupe. Mendoza granted his friend’s request, dusting the plants growing not far from the Barajas mural featuring a sprightly Tio with his flowing mustache, weathered hat and worn cowboy boots.

He is at home in the park forever more. ■

People wishing to contribute to the cremation fund for Antonio “Tio” Camarillo may send a check made out to Gente Unida with the notation “Tio Funeral” on the memo line. Mail checks to: Gente Unida, P.O. Box 86598, San Diego, CA 92138.



‘A Wonderful and Rare Person’

Tio Camarillo is mourned by his best friend Jose Mendoza (top) and Gente Unida founder Enrique Morones at the site of a Salvador Barajas mural in Chicano Park that honors *el angel guardian*.

