

Manuel Aparicio | 1926 — 2008

Educator's ideas helped others

By Marty Clear, St. Petersburg Times Correspondent

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TAMPA — When he was a boy, **Manuel Aparicio** didn't seem destined for a life in academia.

When he started his education in Tampa's public schools, he spoke only Spanish. He had no idea what his teachers were saying. Even when they said things they thought he should understand, their accents made them incomprehensible to him.

"He couldn't even understand them when they said 'Manuel Aparicio,' " his wife, Consuelo, said.

A legendary priest changed the course of Mr. Aparicio's life.

He was just 12 when his mother died, and Mr. Aparicio was sent to Boys Town in Nebraska, where Father Edward Flanagan took a special interest in him.

"He wasn't there very long, but Father Flanagan took him under his wing," Consuelo Aparicio said. "I think he wanted him to become a priest, but Manuel liked girls."

Father Flanagan deeply instilled in young Mr. Aparicio a love for education. From then on, Mr. Aparicio devoted his life to making sure the people of Hillsborough County had opportunities to learn.

"He never stopped," his wife said. "He never retired until he was very sick. And even then, he would be giving the hospice nurses advice."

Mr. Aparicio died June 13, just a couple of weeks after his 82nd birthday. He had battled spinal cancer for several years and had been very ill for the past 11 months.

He started his education career at Sulphur Springs Elementary School and later taught at Van Buren Middle School.

The only thing he valued more than education was his own family. To make sure his wife, son and daughter were provided for, he worked evenings in the Sears credit department and weekends at a miniature golf course.

Because he didn't have his regular teaching job in the summer, Mr. Aparicio came up with a plan.

"He approached the School Board with the idea that he would be a traveling science teacher, and they agreed," his wife said.

So every summer, Mr. Aparicio would travel to schools around Hillsborough County, showing kids in summer programs the joys of science. He brought his own son and daughter along with him.

He knew that a lot of adults hadn't had educational opportunities and devoted much of his career to adult education. He was the first supervisor of adult basic education in Hillsborough County. He later founded and became the first principal of Adult Day High School, which was on Nebraska Avenue near Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

He also started the county's adult migrant education program, teaching basic life skills to migrant workers.

"People would take advantage of the migrants," his wife said. "They would sell them fruit but they'd sell them 12 ounces and charge them for a pound, because the migrants didn't know there were 16 ounces in a pound. He would teach them those kinds of things, so people didn't rob them."

He spent much of the past year in debilitating pain, but never let it show. The only thing he seemed to be concerned about was his family. He'd never complain about his own condition, but always ask to hear stories about his grandchildren.

"Before he died, he told me he wished he had spent more time with us," said his daughter, Star Aparicio Schmidt. "But I don't remember him not being there. I knew he worked three jobs, but he was always home for dinner. He was just always there for us. He was the best dad and the best grandfather."

Besides his wife and his daughter, Mr. Aparicio is survived by son, Manuel Aparicio IV, his sister, Mary Fontanills, and two grandchildren.