

Military Employment and the Upward Mobility of Latinos in San Antonio

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The long presence of military installations extending back approximately a century has led to the designation of San Antonio as Military City USA. For long, the military represented the city's major employer.¹ The area's six military bases — Fort Sam Houston, Lackland Air Force Base, Randolph Air Force Base, Brooks City-Base, Camp Bullis and Camp Stanley — represent one of the largest active and retired military populations in the country. A 2011 study found that the Department of Defense (DoD) had a \$27.7 billion impact on the city's economy; supported 189,148 jobs in the city; granted \$4 billion in contracts locally; and provided support for 55,000 DoD retirees in the community.²

The military presence has touched the lives of countless San Antonians, particularly Latinos in the city. Particularly important was the role played by Kelly Air Force Base (AFB) (officially renamed from Kelly Field in 1948) — located in the city's heavily Latino Westside. Former San Antonio mayor and former secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Henry Cisneros, who grew up on the Westside, recently recalled with affection that his own father as well as neighbors worked at Kelly.³

Nelson Wolff, Bexar County judge and former mayor of San Antonio, notes that “For generations of Hispanic families, probably more so than anybody, ... it [Kelly AFB] pulled them out of poverty, it gave them hope. ... Kelly was the key factor in offering upward mobility for Hispanics.”⁴ Kelly provided opportunities for Mexican Americans who for generations had been excluded from greater opportunities for advancement. Employment at Kelly offered steady employment and allowed Mexican American workers — many of these, veterans — to buy a home and send their children to college.

Local artist Jesse Treviño, himself a veteran of the Vietnam War who lost his right hand in the war, aptly captures the image of the Latino worker at Kelly in his painting titled “No Te Acabes Kelly Field.” The title of the painting translates to “Do Not End Kelly Field.” Sarah Fisch describes the Latino worker featured in the painting: “Here's a guy with a government desk job, in his cubicle, manning his part of the federal territory, meeting you face to face. You're forced — challenged — to meet his eyes, to meet this portrait's subject on his terms. It's a bracingly powerful image.”⁵

Although the 1995 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) ordered the closing of Kelly, after the closure of Kelly in 2001, it became part of Lackland AFB, located nearby, with the majority of the operations becoming Port San Antonio, an industrial business park.⁶ Port San Antonio is housed on 1,900 acres and is home to 70 private and public organizations along with 12,000 employees working in the aerospace, logistics/manufacturing and government/military industries.⁷

The long-term impact of Kelly on the community and the city's Latino population remains significant. For example, Arturo V. Perez, who passed away a few months ago, worked for Kelly

AFB beginning in the mid-1950s.⁸ Perez rose through the ranks from supply clerk to senior engineer. Through his work with Kelly, he was able to make sure that all of his five children graduated from college. After working at Kelly, he earned his GED and completed electronic training, which opened up an opportunity for him to work on radios and televisions in the evenings. After he retired from Kelly, Perez opened his own business — Arturo's Barbacoa (barbacoa is a slowed-cooked version of barbeque), a very popular restaurant that he operated for twenty years.

Manuel J. Jimenez, who passed away in October 2015, after returning from the Philippines during World War II, worked at Kelly AFB as an aircraft mechanic.⁹ His work at Kelly helped him provide well for his family. Upon retiring from Kelly, where he worked for 36 years, Jimenez opened Pipo's Lounge, a small bar that grew into a popular family-oriented dance hall.

A generation of activists, like Luz Medina Escamilla, learned organizing skills at Kelly. Escamilla, who passed away in June 2014., had a very successful career over a span of four decades at Kelly AFB, rising from the position of key puncher to system analyst. She was a community activist with a deep passion for women and education issues, serving as a delegate at the first United Nations International Conference on Women, held in Mexico City in 1975.¹⁰ Escamilla mentored many women activists, including María Antonietta Berriozábal, the first Mexican-American woman elected to the San Antonio City Council (1981-1991).¹¹

Military employment no longer plays as dominant a role in nurturing upward mobility for Latinos. In their study of Mexican-Americans in San Antonio and Los Angeles, Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz observed a significant drop in military employment in San Antonio from 16 percent among parents in 1970 to 1 percent among their children in 2000.¹² Still, today, according to the 2010-2014 American Community Survey, Latinos who are U.S. citizens are more likely to hold a federal government job in the San Antonio-New Braunfels Metropolitan Area (4.3%) than in the other three major metropolitan areas of the state (Austin-Round Rock, 2.3%; Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, 1.9%; and Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, 1.4%).¹³

The legacy of military presence in San Antonio remains a critical element for the Latino community. For a generation of Latinos excluded from social and economic opportunities in the private sector, employment in the city's military bases helped them attain a middle-class life for themselves and their families. Many Latinos in San Antonio today retain a familial link to the military bases in the city. This legacy remains and constitutes an important part of the success story of this great American city.

Notes

¹ Robert Garland Landolt (1976). *The Mexican-American Workers of San Antonio, Texas*. New York: Arno Press.

² City of San Antonio Office of Military Affairs (2011). *San Antonio Military Economic Impact Study*. Accessed online on June 4, 2016 at <http://www.sanantonio.gov/oma/ImpactStudy.aspx>.

³ Henry Cisneros (2016). Presentation as part of the Centennial Tribute to Henry B. Gonzalez. San Antonio: University of Texas at San Antonio, College of Public Policy. May 3, 2016. Accessed online on June 4, 2016 at <http://nowcastsa.com/blogs/webcast-historic-impact-henry-b-gonzalez>.

⁴ Sig Christenson (2015). “Kelly’s closure shook the city.” *San Antonio Express-News* (Aug. 12). Accessed online on May 15, 2016 at <http://www.expressnews.com/150years/military-sports/article/Kelly-gave-birth-to-Hispanic-middle-class-6435894.php>.

⁵ Sarah Fisch (2009). “El Veterano: The Duke of Kelly Field.” *San Antonio Current* (Nov. 11). Accessed online on May 12, 2016 at <http://www.sacurrent.com/sanantonio/el-veterano-the-duke-of-kelly-field/Content?oid=2287165>.

⁶ Chris Sasser (2012). “Port San Antonio: Not Just Surviving, Thriving.” Texas A&M Transportation Institute Aviation Research. Accessed online on May 12, 2016 at <http://tti.tamu.edu/group/aviation/2012/02/15/port-san-antonio-not-just-surviving-thriving/>.

⁷ Port San Antonio webpage. Accessed online on June 8, 2016 at <http://www.portsanantonio.us/>.

⁸ Mary Mills Heidbrink (2016). “Perez started Arturo’s Barbacoa as a second career.” *San Antonio Express-News* (March 11). Accessed online on March 11, 2016 at <http://www.mysanantonio.com/obituaries/article/Perez-started-Arturo-s-Barbacoa-as-a-second-6885546.php>.

⁹ Mary Mills Heidbrink (2015). “Jimenez started a business after a 36-year career at Kelly.” *San Antonio Express-News* (Oct. 13). Accessed online on May 12, 2016 at <http://www.mysanantonio.com/obituaries/article/Jimenez-started-a-business-after-a-36-year-career-6569271.php>.

¹⁰ Jacob Beltran (2014). “Escamilla promoted women, education.” *San Antonio Express-News* (June 23). Accessed online on May 12, 2016 at <http://www.mysanantonio.com/obituaries/article/Activist-Escamilla-fought-for-women-s-rights-5573764.php>.

¹¹ María Antonietta Berriozábal (2012). *Maria, Daughter of Immigrants*. San Antonio: Wings Press.

¹² Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz (2008). *Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

¹³ Steven Ruggles, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek (2015). *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0*[Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

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