



Calexico's Characters

Calexico has more than its share of characters: men, women and kids of all shapes, sizes and personalities who, because of what they do or how they live, warrant a second look. Each week, in a brief word sketch and accompanying photo, Mi Calexico will feature one or more of our local characters. Some will be well-known, other less so, but each will be unique and worthy of being described as a "Calexico Character."

To know and understand María Dolores "Loli" Torres, you need to recognize that she has two main priorities in her life:

✓ The first is family; four adult children, 11 grandchildren, seven great grandchildren and a wide circle of friends who're the same as "family".

✓ The second is Calexico, where she was born, raised and has lived her whole life.

Family is, first of all, Loli's parents, Reyes Angel and María Dolores Mercado, both of whom (like lots of Calexico folks) were born

and raised south of the border and immigrated here. The couple met when each was employed at the Sam Ellis Store, married and ultimately had six children. Loli was the baby of the family, born following a set of twin sisters, two brothers and a slightly older sister.

Loli laughingly calls herself "a child bride," because she was graduated from Calexico High in June 1963 and married Fernando "Nene" Torres six months later. Nene died in October 2010; absent his death, the couple would celebrate their 50th anniversary this winter. Loli, who is both a celebrated hostess and an equally enthusiastic guest, insists she just may have an anniversary get together anyway.

When not involved with family and friends, Loli is devoted to community service, a tradition she says she inherited from her mother and absorbed from her marriage. Her mother regularly served as a poll volunteer at election time and was a stalwart member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, where several generations of priests became her "adopted" sons. For his part, Nene served two terms on the Calexico City Council, where he was twice elected mayor. He also was a member of the city street names commission and acted as a parking referee.

"I'm not a Nene," Loli says, "but I know he'd want me to be involved. I remember that I'd help write his speeches, but he'd just hold the paper in his hand and speak from his heart. "I like to do my own little thing in the background," she adds.

In 1986, a happy accumulation of Loli's "little things" resulted in her selection as one of that year's MANA de Imperial Valley by the national Latina organization.

Following a 16-year career working at the Calexico Chronicle, Loli moved to the Calexico office of the California State Economic Development Department (EDD), which, among other services, assists farm labor contractors hire farm workers and workers secure employment. Because field work begins early (the EDD office opens at 3:00 a.m.), staffers began bringing in coffee and pan dulce, not just for themselves but for those seeking work. After several years of informally serving "breakfast", EDD director Eddie Albañez, along with Loli, Lydia Diaz, Joe Lucio and Gil Ortega, approached Councilman Arturo Rioseco, who helped secure City funding, augmented by donations from labor contractors and a number of local businesses. Last year's edition of the annual Farmworker's Breakfast, usually held early in December, hosted more than 3,000 workers, served by a veritable brigade of volunteers. Even though Loli is retired from the EDD after a 27-year career, she still insists on taking part in what she calls her "favorite, once-a-year activity".

Loli Torres: wife, mother, grandmother, great grandmother, friend and quiet community activist...✓