

Paul Sandoval, longtime Colorado Democratic activist, dead at age of 67

By Lynn Bartels The Denver Post The Denver Post
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Paul Sandoval, a wheeler-and-dealer who mapped out the careers of numerous politicians in an office at his tamale shop, has lost the biggest campaign of his life.

Known as the godfather of Colorado politics, the former Democratic state senator advised everyone from governors to U.S. senators on issues big and small, from bilingual education to pollster strategy.

Last year in February doctors diagnosed Sandoval with pancreatic cancer, and told him he likely had six months left to live.

His wife, Paula, said he died about about 2:30 this afternoon. He was 67.

"He died very peacefully," she said.

In recent weeks, he had been on a portable hospital bed in his living room. Among the visitors he received on Friday was Ken Salazar, U.S. Secretary of the Interior. Paula Sandoval said her husband understood Salazar but was unable to speak much with him because he was so weak.

"We have lost a friend, leader and visionary today," Salazar said in a statement.

"In his life, Paul Sandoval gave voice to fellow citizens who wanted better schools, safer communities and a chance to pursue the American dream. I will never forget his passion for public service, his heart, and the love he showed for his friends, neighbors and family. He is a role model and a hero."

It was at Sandoval's tamale shop, La Casita, in 1997 that the pair drew Salazar's future on a restaurant napkin: Salazar would run for state attorney general in 1998. He held that post until being elected U.S. senator in 2004.

Gov. John Hickenlooper said Sandoval was "beloved by many Coloradans."

"Many a great conversation took place and many tamales eaten in the backroom of Paul's restaurant," he said in a statement. "While his family and friends were his passion, he loved a good political fight. He was a man with a deep reservoir of humility and compassion and an amazing sense of humor.

"Our hearts go out to his wife, Paula, and his entire family. Helen and I will miss him beyond measure."

Paul John Sandoval was born June 29, 1944, in Denver on a stretch of Mariposa Street that would become Interstate 25. He was the ninth of Jerry and Camilla Sandoval's 11 children. Two siblings died in childhood.

Before he could speak much English, Sandoval could say "Denver Post — 5 cents" and he hustled alongside his brothers to sell newspapers. His brother, Joe, a former educator with Denver Public Schools, recalled last year that they once had to track down a delinquent customer at a bar.

"Paul said, 'What about my interest?' The guy said, 'Here's your quarter interest.' I had never even heard that term 'interest' before," Joe said. "Paul's been a wheeler and dealer all his life."

The boys grew up surrounded by politics. Their dad and uncle founded the meatpackers union, and Sandoval learned at an early age it was about the person, not the party.

"Paul and my dad used to stay up all hours of the night waiting for election results," Joe said. "I couldn't handle it; I had to go to bed. But Paul became a political junkie."

By eighth grade, Sandoval was delivering groceries for the Gem Market in northeast Denver. A few blocks away, a tall kid named Wellington Webb had the same job at Goodrich Grocery.

In the 1970s they served together in the legislature and in 1991 Sandoval helped Webb become Denver's first black mayor.

In addition to his wife Paula, a former state senator and Denver City Council member, Sandoval is survived by four daughters from his previous marriage: Kendra, Cris, Andrea, and Amanda; and a son, Brett Sterkel, from an earlier relationship.

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