



Rigo Chacon - KGO / KNTV



Class of '97

Silver Circle Profile
By: *Kevin Wing*

In the San Francisco Bay area, and particularly in San Jose and the South Bay, one can confidently say that **Rigo Chacon** has touched many lives. He has inspired and mentored countless students and colleagues over his 32-plus years as a popular and respected television reporter.

Those who know Chacon best might say these claims are an understatement. But, the always modest and humble Chacon — who spent nearly 30 years as KGO-TV's South Bay Bureau chief — would be the first to discount these claims. No matter how one sees it, there appears to exist a Rigo Chacon edition of "Six Degrees of Separation" from San Jose to his native Janos, Chihuahua, Mexico.

Throughout most of his adult life, Chacon has been a magnet, through his work as a Bay Area TV reporter — first, for KNTV, and then later for nearly three decades at KGO-TV — as well as through his commitment to community service, especially in the Santa Clara Valley. Chacon remains an inspiration to many of his television colleagues, who have always looked up to him, hoping to meet the high standards he set forth every day in his work. Honors and accolades from the Bay Area community — too numerous to include — prove how much the always-trustworthy "favorite son" of San Jose is revered and called upon when needed. Many years ago, even a South Bay murder suspect, wanting to turn himself in to authorities but fearful of doing so, called on Chacon to accompany him because of his trust in the veteran newsman.

Chacon, who was inducted into the Silver Circle in 1997, has indeed touched many lives, including this writer's. When I was a 16-year-old working the drive-through window at a Jack-in-the-Box in Fremont, Chacon drove through one evening on his way home from a live shot. I told him of my TV news aspirations and still remember what he said: "Go for your dream, and don't give up." Little did I realize then that one day I'd work side-by-side with Chacon at KGO-TV's South Bay Bureau.

"When younger people tell me they consider me as their mentor, I'm honored and, perhaps, more

emotional about that comment than they will ever realize," says Chacon, who received the Governors' Award in 2003. "I've always taken pride in meeting young people who tell me they stayed in school and went on to college because they saw me on television."

One of those college graduates is **Damian Trujillo**, a reporter at KNTV/NBC Bay Area for more than a decade.

"I met Rigo when he spoke at my San Jose State journalism class," Trujillo says. "He gave me his business card, and a handshake. I kept his business card, and never let go of the handshake. Rigo is now my *compadre* — a man of great class. He set the bar high for every Bay Area reporter, a bar that's still there today, even with all the changes to our industry."

The three-time Emmy® Award winner is best known for his association with KGO-TV, but it wasn't his first TV job. Chacon's first tour of duty was for KNTV. He was hired by KNTV's then-news director, **Fred LaCosse**, and worked there from 1971 to 1974. The opportunity to be a reporter at KNTV came at a time when station management wanted to reach out to represent minorities on its newscasts.

Back then the broadcasting industry hadn't traditionally hired minorities. As a result, young people of color didn't study broadcast communications. So, KNTV had a difficult time finding candidates.

Undaunted, KNTV began searching for talent in the greater San Jose area. Chacon, by then in his mid-20s, was already making a name for himself with his involvement in community affairs since attending San Jose High School, where he served as student body president. Several individuals who knew Chacon, such as then-San Jose Mayor **Norman Mineta** and United Farm Workers leader **Cesar Chavez**, suggested his name to KNTV. LaCosse immediately hired Chacon, becoming the Bay Area's first Mexican-American TV reporter.

"We met over lunch. I quickly discovered this young man's attributes," LaCosse recalls. "He was intelligent. He was articulate in both Spanish and English. He was handsome. All Hispanic viewers could easily identify with him."

"I didn't see myself as a minority reporter," Chacon recalls. "I was a reporter who happened to have access to populations that had been theretofore ignored." Since then, many fellow journalists have credited Chacon for paving the way for them.

Chacon's hiring at KNTV was a smart move for the station. During his three years there, Chacon was the recipient of his and the station's first Emmy® Award, also becoming the nation's first Mexican-American journalist to receive one.

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**Rigo 2008
Governors'
Award**



Lucy & Rigo Chacon

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In addition to reporting, Chacon also anchored a Spanish-language newscast every Saturday night for two years. "I was proud of the newscast, because it provided a service that wasn't being provided by any other Bay Area station," he says.

During that time, Chacon received offers for reporting jobs from Los Angeles' KNBC and KTLA, but he remained at KNTV because he didn't feel he was ready for such a big jump. KRON wooed Chacon as well, but he lost out to **Bob Jimenez**. "I never lost to a better man," Chacon says of the longtime KRON anchor and reporter.

After Chacon won his and KNTV's first Emmy® Award for his documentary on the widow of **Pancho Villa**, the Mexican Revolutionary General, KGO-TV took notice. Then-station General Manager **Russ Coughlan** offered the former migrant farm-working child a reporting job. In the summer of 1974, Chacon went to work for KGO-TV.

Chacon remembers, "The Reporters were very sincere in their welcome: **Valerie Coleman, Don Sanchez, David Louie, Evan White, Ed Leslie, Dwight Casimere, Rick Davis, Steve Davis and Jim Vargas; (Fred) Van (Amburg), Jerry (Jensen) and Pete (Giddings)** were very supportive."

Although Chacon was based originally at KGO-TV's studios in San Francisco, it was a series of South Bay stories that prompted him to suggest to management to open a South Bay Bureau. "I kept generating stories out of Santa Clara County, and eventually, the station started up the South Bay Bureau," Chacon says. "The bureau was so well-received that other stations soon followed suit."

Chacon says the South Bay Bureau proved to KGO-TV management, and to viewers, that Santa Clara County deserved a full-fledged news bureau. "We were right," he says. "We started the bureau right at the beginning of the Silicon Valley explosion. It was already evident that Silicon Valley was about to burst onto the scene."

One story that always comes to mind for Chacon was **Marco Cordova**, a March of Dimes poster child in the late 1970s. "Marco was severely disabled, a

result of his mom taking a morning sickness medication during her pregnancy," Chacon says. "Marco had a brilliant mind and a beautiful heart. I think of him often. Years later, Marco was killed by a drunk driver. When I found out that he died, I was at the bureau and I had to stop what I was doing to take a walk around the block. Marco had such an impact on me."

Chacon says he covered hundreds of exciting assignments during his three decades at KGO-TV. Among them: "The '89 quake, the Lexington Hills fire, and the **Monica Rios** story," he recalls. "Her parents were divorced, and one of them kidnapped her. She wasn't returned until six years later." Chacon's coverage led to parental child stealing legislation in California.

During his career, four murder suspects surrendered to Chacon. One, **Ricky Flores**, surrendered to him and KGO-TV cameraman **Clyde Powell** in Mexico. "He was wanted for murdering his girlfriend and for seriously wounding a Santa Clara County Sheriff's deputy," Chacon recalls. "He had been on the run for a year. We brought him back to Santa Clara County to face charges." Flores' family felt comfortable telling Chacon where he could meet their son in Mexico. "They wanted assurances," he says, "that I wouldn't contact law enforcement, because they thought Ricky might get hurt or killed. At the time, he was the object of the biggest manhunt in Santa Clara County history."

In late 2003, Chacon decided it was time to turn in his microphone. "Working for Channel 7 was professionally the greatest experience of my life," he says. "The support I received from Channel 7 was unparalleled. In the end, however, too many elements combined to the point where my job ended up owning much of my personal life."

Chacon adds he doesn't miss being on television, but he misses working in it. "So much of that work entailed having the camaraderie with friends at KGO and the other stations."

Chacon is president and executive director of *Abrazos and Books*, a charitable organization he established. Since 1990, *Abrazos* has provided more than \$600,000 in college scholarships to 334 graduating Santa Clara County high school seniors. The

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Pete Giddings, Lynn R Friedman, Rigo Chacon

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scholarships are awarded during a gala event each summer. Chacon was inspired by a 9-year-old child in Mexico whose school was damaged in the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, but later rebuilt with \$1.3 million in donations from KGO-TV viewers.

"I'm very proud of what the graduates have accomplished," he says. "To my knowledge, not a single student has dropped out of college. They've become doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers and broadcasters. Collectively, they are changing the nation and the world."

"I have admired Rigo my entire career for his journalistic integrity, his dedication, his passion and his tireless commitment to the community," says friend and former KGO-TV colleague **Cheryl Jennings**. "He's inspired me to continue working with the incredible organization he founded, along with his wife, **Lucy**. I remember in the early days, Rigo and Lucy would pay for many of the scholarships and expenses out of their own pockets."

Through Rigo Chacon Enterprises, Chacon continues to do voiceover work and video production, and also belongs to several speakers' bureaus.

"As a news director, how serendipitous for me, that lunch of 38 years ago," says LaCosse, who gave Chacon his first job as a reporter at KNTV. "As a retired broadcaster, how honorable it is to remain one of his friends."



*(Bay Area television journalist **Kevin Wing** pens Off Camera's profiles on Silver Circle and Gold Circle members. He is a casual news writer for "NBC Bay Area News" at KNTV/NBC Bay Area in San Jose.)*

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