

Daniel Villanueva, a Creator of Univision, Dies at 77

By Margalit Fox

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Daniel D. Villanueva, a former professional football player who as a founder of the Univision network built a Spanish-language broadcasting empire spanning the United States, died on Thursday in Ventura, Calif. He was 77.

His death, after a stroke, was announced by his alma mater, New Mexico State University.

One of the first Hispanic-Americans in the National Football League, Mr. Villanueva was a kicker for the Los Angeles Rams from 1960 to 1964, and for the Dallas Cowboys from 1965 to 1967. He was also a television sportscaster and an executive of the Spanish International Communications Corporation, a forerunner of Univision. Based in New York, Univision is today the leading Spanish-language television network in the United States, serving nearly 30 million viewers in 57 markets.

One of 12 children of itinerant Mexican missionaries, Daniel Dario Villanueva was born in a two-room earthen hut in Tucumcari, N.M., on Nov. 5, 1937. His father was a Methodist minister, and Danny, as he was known, was reared wherever the elder Mr. Villanueva took a pulpit, including Phoenix and Calexico, Calif. As a boy, he helped support the family by picking asparagus, watermelon and cantaloupe.

After studying at what is now Reedley College in Reedley, Calif., the young Mr. Villanueva entered New Mexico State on a football scholarship. He earned a bachelor's degree in English, edited the campus newspaper and was a member of the team that won the 1959 Sun Bowl, beating North Texas State 28-8.

In 1960, after a Rams scout saw him kick a 49-yard field goal, the team signed him to a \$5,500-a-year contract. Mr. Villanueva was savvy enough to request a signing bonus.

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“They gave me \$200,” he told The Los Angeles Times in 1985. “They took it out of my last check.”

In his years with the Rams, Mr. Villanueva, who in 1962 led the league in punting yardage with 3,960, was made unremittingly aware of his ethnic heritage. By all accounts he bore with good grace the nickname, El Kickador, bestowed on him by the news media, and the bullfighting music that was played whenever he took the field at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

“We had a black bus and we had a white bus in those days; we were segregated,” Mr. Villanueva told ESPN.com in 2008. He recalled a teammate once announcing, “All black guys get on that bus, white guys get on that bus, and Danny, you take a cab.”

“I understood,” Mr. Villanueva continued, “I was neither fish nor fowl.”

In 1962, to supplement his football income, Mr. Villanueva went to work as a sports announcer for KMEX, then an obscure Spanish-language television station in Los Angeles. He had to relearn Spanish, from which he had turned away in response to pressure to assimilate.



Daniel Villanueva making a field-goal attempt with the Los Angeles Rams in 1961. Associated Press

“We were that transitional generation that thought that by distancing ourselves from our culture, our language and our background and our roots, we were going to somehow magically be accepted by the general community,” he said in the 1985 Los Angeles Times interview. “It didn’t work.”

After being traded to the Cowboys, Mr. Villanueva commuted by air to his television job in Los Angeles. With the Cowboys, he took part in the N.F.L. championship game of 1967, known ever after as the Ice Bowl, at which the temperature at Lambeau Field, with the wind chill, was about 48 below zero. Dallas lost to the Green Bay Packers, 21-17.

On retiring from football in 1968 — the weather at the Ice Bowl drove him from the sport, he often said — Mr. Villanueva became the news director of KMEX. He was later the station’s president and a co-owner. On weekends he moonlighted as a sportscaster for KNBC-TV, the network’s Los Angeles affiliate, where his colleagues included a young Tom Brokaw.

Under Mr. Villanueva’s stewardship, KMEX became the flagship station of the Spanish International Network. It also became a lodestar for the region’s diverse Spanish-speaking population.

“KMEX has spent \$1.25 million over the past 11 years on food for barrio families at

Christmas,” The Christian Science Monitor reported in 1985. “Runaways have appeared in the KMEX lobby. When a Salvadorean woman, in the U.S. for an operation, had her money stolen, the station paid for the operation. When a downtown hotel burned down one night, KMEX paid to fly the bodies of the Mexicans inside back to Mexico.”

Mr. Villanueva went on to become an owner and a senior vice president of the network’s parent company, the Spanish International Communications Corporation. In 1987, the corporation’s television stations were sold to Hallmark for more than \$260 million and renamed Univision. He remained with Univision until 1990.

Other ventures with which Mr. Villanueva was involved over the years include Telemundo, a rival network to Univision; Rustic Canyon/Fontis Partners, a private equity concern; Bastion Capital; and the Los Angeles Aztecs and Galaxy soccer teams. A noted philanthropist, he contributed to New Mexico State and many other institutions.

Mr. Villanueva lived in Camarillo, Calif. His survivors include his wife, the former Myrna Schmidt; two sons, Daniel L. and Jim; four brothers, Samuel, Paul, Ben and Primo; four sisters, Mary Blank, Lily Hernandez, Noemi Prince and Ester Aguilar; five grandchildren; and eight great-grandchildren.

Long after he became a multimillionaire, Mr. Villanueva looked back with amusement on his four-figure N.F.L. salary. After he signed with the Rams, he told ESPN.com in 2008, the team informed him that the size of his paycheck was not to be made public.

“I’m glad,” Mr. Villanueva said he replied. “Because I’m as ashamed of it as you are.”