



Johnny Nunez is shown with his family in 1964. His wife, Estelle, holds his youngest daughter, Gina. From left are children Sandra, Johnny, Jacques, Vicki, Jerry, Jody and Jay Carlos.

## Coach, referee broke racial barrier

By Connie Cone Sexton  
The Arizona Republic

There were games Johnny Nunez didn't want his wife, Estelle, to see.

It was the mid-1950s, and Estelle enjoyed sitting in the stands, watching as Nunez refereed high school basketball games.

But when he'd travel from Phoenix to certain rural schools, he encouraged her to stay home.

He didn't want her to witness the repercussions of being one of the first Hispanic high school referees in the state. Nunez and his cousin Rudy Rivas Sr. were at the forefront, paving the way for other Hispanics, said another cousin, Tommy Nunez.

At some games when Nunez would make a controversial call or eject a coach, he'd quickly hear ethnic slurs.

"But he wouldn't stand for it. He didn't take too many insults," Tommy Nunez said.

That self-assurance and courage served Nunez well. He became one of the most well-respected referees of the mid-'50s and '60s. It was a path that Tommy Nunez chose to follow. Today, he's a leading referee in the National Basketball Association.

He said Johnny Nunez never had the chance to officiate a professional game but would have done an outstanding job.

"He was refereeing when I got out of the Marine Corps, and I watched him work a couple of high school games. He had the talent and the ability and confidence. He had been a great athlete in high school and college, and that carried over to the court."

Johnny Nunez stood about 5 feet 9 inches and was trim and agile.

"Image is everything, and he had a tremendous court presence," Tommy Nunez said. "His pants were pressed, his

### A LIFE REMEMBERED



High school coach and referee **Johnny Nunez** was a father of eight when he graduated from ASU in 1964.

shoes shined. He always looked like he had walked out of a men's department store."

His calls were sharp, crisp, to the point. "There are referees who take the game lightly and do it just for the money. Johnny didn't. He cared about the game and the players," Tommy Nunez said.

Johnny Nunez didn't have to be refereeing to command attention. One night, he was watching a friend referee a junior varsity game. A fight broke out among the players and started to escalate. Nunez came out of the stands and walked out onto the court.

"The people all backed off; they had respect for him," Tommy Nunez said.

Johnny Nunez died Sept. 20 of cancer at age 73, leaving behind a large and boisterous family, proud of the choices he made during his lifetime as an Army Airborne paratrooper, Phoenix firefighter, referee and high school coach.

Johnny James Nunez Jr. was born at home in Phoenix on Feb. 11, 1928, to parents John and Natalia. His sister, Rose, was born five years later. He graduated from St. Mary's High School in 1946, having lettered in football, basketball and baseball.

He topped that at Phoenix College, lettering in four sports. He graduated, joined the Army and married Estelle after basic training.

Nunez served in the 11th Airborne Division and made a dozen jumps as a paratrooper.

While he was stationed in Japan, he served in the military police. He enjoyed the structure of the role.

When he got out of the service, Johnny and Estelle settled in Phoenix. They had eight children from 1949 to 1964: Sandra, John Jay III, Jacques, Vicki, Jerry, Jody, Jay Carlos and Gina. Their first-born son, John Jay, was killed in a car accident in 1987.

The elder Nunez was thrilled at having a large family but wanted to ensure he could support them. He first worked as a Phoenix firefighter and as a part-time insurance investigator. He somehow sandwiched in his referee work.

Despite the hardships, Nunez balanced his job and family and went back to Arizona State University to fulfill his lifelong dream of coaching. He graduated on May 26, 1964, at age 36.

He landed his first coaching job at Gerard High School and worked in several schools in the Phoenix Union district from 1975 until he retired in 1990.

Gina Nunez said she and her siblings loved watching him coach and would travel the state to cheer on the teams.

She said her father was a fair, hard-working man. "We grew up with a rich, strong family history, knowing who we were. Dad made sure of that."

Survivors include his wife, Estelle; children Sandra, Jacques, Vicki Britton, Jerry, Jody, Jay Carlos and Gina; 10 grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; his sister, Rose; and two nieces.

A Life Remembered celebrates the lives of interesting people in Arizona who have recently passed away. To suggest someone, call Connie Cone Sexton at (602) 444-8894 or e-mail remembered@arizonarepublic.com.

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