

Hometown Heroes: An art show every day at local gallery

by **Don Pace** - in the Las Vegas Optic, November 2009

Tito and Mary Chavez are celebrating a quarter century at their business, Tito's Gallery, on Bridge Street, where they sell jewelry.

"This week we had an order from the United Kingdom," Mary said. "The best part about our gallery is the people we get to meet, and all the friends we make by being here — that's the best part."

"And then we're surrounded by all this beautiful art, and it doesn't stay the same, it changes. So, our motto is, "An art show every day, and we really believe that," Tito said.

Tito is a descendant of one of the founding families of Las Vegas.

"My mother was the great granddaughter of one of the Romero sisters that helped found this town. She was the youngest of the sisters, there were five brothers and five sisters, and the family was quite prominent in Las Vegas' heyday," Tito said.

Tito's father was from Albuquerque and met his Tito's mother while attending Highlands University. After graduating, Tito's father moved the Chavez family around the state.

"We're eight children, and we were born in seven different towns in New Mexico, I was born in Belen," Tito said.

After graduating from the University of New Mexico, Tito moved to Alpena, Mich., where he worked with a Protestant ministry serving migrant workers and their families.

"I was the first Catholic to work in the Protestant migrant ministry, where I met Mary. She and another young woman were running a day care center for migrant children. I would visit the camps and take the kids to town to go to the movies, or rollerskating or to the lake," Tito said.

Tito said their jobs brought the couple together, and after his second year in Alpena, he and Mary began to date.

"And then I lured her to New Mexico," Tito said, laughing.

While Mary runs the gallery, Tito works close by, making an array of bracelets, ear rings and special-order pieces. Holding up a cross, Tito looks at a ledger that says it is his 7,534th piece since he started keeping count in 2000.

"So, for 32 years, I didn't number my work," Tito said.

Tito continues to teach part time at Rio Gallinas, and the United World College. He also sits on the board of a number of organizations.

For more than 40 years Tito has been designing and making jewelry; he began working with precious metals and stones while attending UNM graduate school.

"When we came to Las Vegas I was making a modest, but steady supply of jewelry and selling it from the house. In 1985, Mary and I decided to open a shop. We moved into a 200-square-foot room at the Sunrise Plaza, which is now Daylight Donuts," Tito said.

After about three years, Tito's was where the police station now sits. Later, the gallery moved down to a place on Bridge Street, then shifting to another spot on the street, 157 Bridge St., which once housed the old Old Town Police Station, complete with jail cells.

"Now we are celebrating our 25th year in business. There aren't too many independent businesses that can say they have been here that long," Tito said.

Tito said the building had rotting floors and crumbling walls.

"We had to tear the place apart and put it back together again," Tito said. "We replaced the foundation, the ceiling, plumbing, and electrical, so we're sure we have prepared the building for at least another 100 years."

The Chavezes have worked to unite businesses to bring the historic Plaza Park area back to its glory days.

"Bridge Street looks really different than it did 20 years ago. Some people ask why there are so many boarded-up buildings, and I tell them, 'You should have been here 15 years ago.' There are only a few buildings that remain empty, and that's kind of by the choice of the owners."

Tito said concerned citizens are trying to get the city to enforce building codes.

"But as long as they don't, you're going to have some buildings along the street that are not up to code and are unsightly. There are probably political reasons why they don't want to touch that, but we continue to advocate for that. I think it would help those owners in the long run and also help everybody else," Tito said.

Tito said the city can do good work when it sets its mind to doing so.

"When the city gets busy doing good stuff, they really do a good job, like when they invested in the storm sewer down Bridge Street. It literally closed us down for months, and pictures taken during the construction are unreal. But, ultimately, it was a very good thing — buildings stopped flooding. We might all complain from time to time, but sometimes we have to take the inconvenience until some of the real problems are fixed," Tito said.

Tito said that while many things have improved over the years, there is still much to be done. He is on the board of MainStreet and co-president of the Las Vegas First Independent Business Alliance — the organization that came out of the Old Town Commercial Club.

Tito said the westside group wants to expand to include all Las Vegas businesses.

"Let's be a business organization for independent businesses citywide, and that's what we're doing, Tito said. "If people spend money at local stores, most of the money stays here."

Tito warned that money spent in chain stores and franchises go out of town. However, he said if people are going to shop at those kinds of businesses, they should do it locally because some of that money stays in small towns through salary and benefits.

"There are certain businesses that can't really belong to our group, even if they wanted to because most of their profits go out of town," Tito said.

The Chavezes have been affiliated with Kiwanis, Boy and Girl Scouts of America, the Las Vegas Arts Council and and the Rough Rider Museum.

"There must be a million silent auctions in this town, and we give to all of those," Tito said. "For 25 years, we've been supported mostly by local customers, and while the tourist trade is growing, we still depend on local business."

Mary said, "But people often come in and say, 'You donated to this or that cause, and I want to give you some of my business.' And that's nice."

The couple says they aren't world travelers, but they go where they need to, places like Tucson and California, where they have family.

"We have invitations to go all over the world, we could go to Bosnia, Poland, France, Italy, England, China or Russia," Tito said. "It would be neat, but finding the time is another matter."

Tito and Mary have been married 32 years and have a son, William Carlos, a graduate of MIT in Cambridge, Mass., working for Boeing. Daughter **Anita Francis** graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont with degrees in international politics, economics and German [, in May 2008 married Daniel Berry, and they now live in Frankfurt, Germany.]