Not one to sit still, Tom Lopez reaches out to community

By LESLIE LAYTON TARPAN

A

Il his life, Tom Lopez has been a leader. Born to Isaac and Isaac Lopez in McNeil in 1917, he is the oldest of 10 children. He was the first Hispanic male to graduate from Round Rock High School; he has been a city councilman; and he has participated in civic organizations, city boards, church and coached Little League.

And, he always has taken that role as a leader seriously.

"I was one of those that like to get involved," he said. "I had a job, but still I wanted to do more for the community.

That dedication earned him a 1997 Local Legend Award, presented by the Round Rock Historic Preservation Commission at the Jan. 23 city council meeting. Also receiving plaque and recognition that day were Harold Rutland, who has helped preserve the city's history, and Pete Correa, who also has served on the city council.

Local Legend Awards have been presented annually for six years. According to Historic Preservation Commission Chairman Bob Brinkman, they honor and thank people who have lived here for a long time, have been involved in community service and using horses — "citizens with positive and lasting impact" and who "exemplify the very essence of Round Rock.""Just community service — a long time familiar face" is how Lopez exemplified those qualifications, Brinkman said.

"To me, I feel very proud to receive this honor and being recognized as one of the local, loyal people who have been active in serving the community," Lopez said. "It's something to be proud of.

Previos recipients have included educators Xenia V arts and Noel Graham, David Carlin Sr. and the Old Settlers Association.

Lopez has encountered some leader- ship of his own, with his parents definitely being a big influence. But they weren't the only ones — his teachers and school administrators "would sit and talk to me and give me encouragement.

That encouragement helped him to continue past the sixth grade at the one-room McNeil School and finish his schooling at the middle and high schools in Round Rock.

"It was difficult when I first came here," he said, adding that at the McNeil School, students weren't taught at the same pace and he had to catch up. For that reason, most other students who moved didn't progress. This meant he was the second Hispanic student to graduate from Round Rock High School, with the first one a female student who graduated two or three years ahead of him.

He earned his diploma with the support of his father.

"He wanted me to stay in school," Lopez said. "With his efforts, I kept on going.

"I was glad to get the diploma," he added.

His brothers and sisters followed in those same footsteps.

After graduating, he married Linda Molina in 1949 at St. William's Catholic Church. Together, they raised three daughters — Gloria, Anita and Sophia — and one son — Carlos.

Shortly after their marriage, Lopez enlisted in the U.S. Air Force.

When he retired, he was sent to the rank of master sergeant.

"It was great," he said. "You stay 20 years, you gotta like it." Through the course of those 20 years, he was stationed in San Antonio, Alabama, Greece, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Taiwan. He also flew into Turkey, Iran, France, Spain, England, Italy, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and Korea. But he never forgets where he came from. "I always considered this my home.

After leaving the military in 1968 and moving to San Antonio, Lopez thought he might like a federal job similar to the one he had where his sisters lived. So he moved back to Round Rock to 1970 and became a tax examiner for the IRS accounting branch in Austin.

He retired from his second career 19 years later.

In that period, he became very active in Round Rock, serving three terms on the city council, which he left in 1980.

He served the city during a period of large growth, which was strained Round Rock's water supply. "We were going dry," he said. He said the city worked with the Brazos River Authority to get water from the lake in Georgetown.

"So, it was a start, and that's how Round Rock was able to manage growth," Lopez said.

Other accomplishments while he was on the council include paving the streets in the The Flats, at no cost to homeowners, through the use of grant and city money to increase drainage.

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Legend: Described as willing to give to others

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improvements.

His civic involvement doesn't stop there.

Lopez also has served on the Round Rock Recreation Board, the Community Services Council, El Amistad Club and American Legion Post No. 417. Plus, at St. William's he was an usher and participated in fundraisers.

Though Lopez has retired twice, that doesn't mean he has quit working. In fact, he has taken advantage of retirement to open new doors.

And the latest door he has opened is with the Round Rock ISD, for which he started working six years ago as a migrant recruiter.

He matched families with a federally funded program to assist migrant chil- dren with clothing, medical and dental care, and helping to keep students in school until they graduate.

His present position with the RRISD is as a lunchroom monitor at Bluebonnet Elementary.

"I want to keep active," he said.

One life-long Round Rock resident who has watched Lopez stay active is Mario Carlin, who himself stays active with the Historic Preservation Commission, the Lions Club, Knights of Columbus, Soroptimists and El Amistad. Carlin is the granddaughter of previous Local Legend recipient David Carlin Sr.

"I've known Tom all my life," said Carlin, 24, adding he's been a good role model.

The qualities that Carlin uses to describe Lopez include very honest, loyal and hardworking.

"He's always willing to give up his time — really willing to give to others," he said, adding Lopez takes time to help others.

"He has a lot of words of wisdom and encouragement," Carlin said.

Maybe Lopez is a victim of some of the progress and growth that he was able to bring to Round Rock. In November, he and his wife moved to Taylor because he wanted to get away from the traffic. But, his heart remains here.

"I miss the people that I know," he said, adding though he still comes back to Round Rock to keep up with El Amistad and the American Legion.

"I haven't left it completely.

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The Round Rock Historic Preservation Commission created the Local Legend Award in 1996, announcing the first recipients in 1997. The program recognizes citizens who have made a positive and lasting impact on the culture, development and history of Round Rock, and who exemplify the very essence of the community.

Nominations are accepted year round. To nominate a Local Legend, send the person's name, address, phone number, if available, a brief description of the person and his/her achievements to:

The Historic Preservation Commission
City Of The Department of Planning and Community Development
221 E. Main St.
Round Rock, Texas 78664.

The nominee's name is kept confidential. Recipients can be individuals or groups who have made an important, if not always prominent, role in the city's history.

Previous recipients include the Rev. Oliver Berglund; Mack and Lorenzo Rubic; the Domingo Players; Gernonova Reidson; Billie Sue Henna; and Lord and D'Perry, whose awards were given posthumously.

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