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Obituary: Larry T. Baza – Union Tribune and California Arts Council

Larry T. Baza: titan of San Diego arts, dies from COVID-19 at 76

Larry Baza, chair of the California Arts Council and a lifelong San Diegan, has died. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

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A lifelong advocate of the arts, Baza served as chair of San Diego's Commission for Arts and Culture before being appointed to the California Arts Council in 2016 by then-Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins

By [MICHAEL JAMES ROCHA](#)

FEB. 22, 2021 12:15 PM PT

Larry T. Baza, a native son whose lifelong pursuit of championing the arts made him a cultural titan in San Diego, died Saturday due to COVID-19.

Baza, who died at UC San Diego Medical Center in Hillcrest, would have turned 77 on Wednesday.

As a high school student, Baza found a place where he felt like he finally belonged: the arts community.

San Diego's theater and visual art communities "opened new worlds for me as a student at San Diego High School," he said in a 2016 Union-Tribune interview. "My first arts and cultural experiences took place in Balboa Park, where my summer job was working at the concession stand in Balboa Park and at Starlight (Bowl) performances."

Those formative years laid the foundation for a deep-rooted career in — and passion for — the arts. He served as chair of San Diego's Commission for Arts and Culture before being appointed to the California Arts Council in 2016 by then-Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins (D-San Diego), marking the first time in five years the state agency had a San Diegan. Last December, he was elected chair after previously serving as vice chair.

"I am truly honored that Speaker Atkins has acknowledged my work and entrusted me with the appointment to serve on the California Arts Council," Baza said in 2016. "As a native San Diegan, I have been proud to be part of and an advocate for San Diego's arts and cultural organizations for nearly 40 years."

In a Facebook post Saturday, Atkins remembered Baza, praising his work fighting for LGBTQ+ rights: "I am devastated to hear of the passing of my dear friend, Larry Baza, due to COVID. From his early work with [San Diego Pride](#), the [San Diego LGBT](#)

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[Community Center](#), my home Democratic club, and [California Arts Council](#), Larry helped build the San Diego LGBTQ Community I know and love. He and his husband Tom Noel have been pillars in the arts community.”

“Activist, artist, volunteer, leader, changemaker,” San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria said in a social media tribute. “Larry Baza’s life and work made a difference in San Diego and across California. His kindness and warmth will be sorely missed. The deepest condolences of our city to his husband Tom and loved ones. Godspeed my sweet friend.”

Fighting for equality

Larry Tito Baza was born Feb. 24, 1944, at the old Naval Hospital, across the street from the famed Centro Cultural de la Raza, an institution that rose from the grassroots community movements of the era and one he would later lead. He was the eldest son of Tito Cepeda Baza, a Guamanian who served in the U.S. Navy, and Hortencia Celaya Baza, a third-generation Mexican American. In 1962, he graduated from San Diego High School, where as a senior he began to show an interest in civic matters, influenced by the work of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez.

“It was his parents’ example of community involvement that inspired Larry to commit his life to the fight for social justice and arts advocacy,” Noel said Monday. “He was a kind and effective force in our world, and he had a huge impact on many lives. I am only now learning of some of this impact after 37 years of being by his side.”

Baza, in a 2011 interview with the San Diego Gay and Lesbian News, said of his social justice awakening: “The racism and prejudice endured by Mexicans was no secret. I was very well aware from the time that I was a child that I was different and didn’t fit into mainstream White America. Naturally, I gravitated towards civil rights in high school, but really got more involved with the Chicano movement in my early 20s” while attending San Diego City College.

For more than four decades, Baza used his voice advocating for San Diego’s artistic and cultural community at the local, state and national levels. He served on countless panels, boards and commissions, including the National Endowment for the Arts,

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California Association of Local Arts Organizations, Chicano Federation of San Diego County, National Association of Latino Arts and Culture, San Diego Community Foundation and Diversionsary Theatre.

Professionally, his artistic influence went far beyond the Little Italy gallery he ran with Noel, Noel-Baza Fine Art Gallery. Over the years, he had long-standing affiliations, often in a leadership capacity, with many San Diego arts organizations, including Centro Cultural de la Raza, where he served as executive director from 1990 to 1999. Before that, he was associate director for Sushi Performance and Visual Art and executive director of San Diego County's Public Arts Advisory Council. He was most recently a trustee at the Museum of Us, formerly the Museum of Man, in Balboa Park.

But his zest for advocacy wasn't focused solely on the arts. In San Diego and beyond, he was known as a champion for the Latino and LGBTQ+ communities, fighting for issues of equality and social justice.

In 1995, as the Centro Cultural de la Raza emerged as one of the most important Chicano, Mexican and Indigenous American cultural centers in the Southwest, Baza said the weight of being at its helm wasn't lost on him.

"I've been very assimilated in a lot of ways," he said in a Los Angeles Times interview. "But when you work in the eye of the storm, in the house that was built upon the struggle to make it possible for people like me to make certain advances or reach certain levels of ability and education, everything becomes a part of that struggle. We can't forget what we're not a part of, what we've not had access to and how much further we have yet to go."

In 2010, as the gay community worked to repeal Proposition 8, which barred gay marriage in California, he acknowledged it was a battle that needed to be fought, but it wouldn't be easy.

"I know how long and hard-fought the battles were to get to the place where Mexican-Americans have gotten," Baza told the Union-Tribune. "Civil rights doesn't happen overnight."

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'Iconic leader'

Still, he persisted, and on Saturday, tributes celebrating his legacy began pouring in from all across San Diego — from arts leaders, activists, politicians and groups like the San Diego La Raza Lawyers Association and the Lambda Archives of San Diego, which hailed him as “a fierce advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, and for the arts and artists — especially BIPOC artists.”

In a Facebook post, the Lambda Archives of San Diego shared what he had to say in 2011 after being honored at its Heroes, Pioneers and Trailblazers gala, where he addressed LGBTQ+ youth: “The civil rights struggle never ends. The more we know about the struggles of the past, the more prepared we are about the struggles for the future. Civil rights are a lifelong struggle. I am counting on all of them (youth) to take a little bit of what we have done and make it their own, moving the LGBT lifestyle forward.”

Fernando Z. López, executive director of San Diego Pride, said on the organization’s Facebook page: “Today our world has been dimmed by the loss of an iconic leader, Larry T. Baza. A champion for Latinos, the arts, social justice, and the LGBTQ movement. Our hearts are heavy today, but our lives, our community are richer, more vibrant, and stronger because of his life. We are all products of his legacy. He has always been a hero and a mentor to me and many. Rest in peace, mi hermano. Te amo por siempre.”

Matt D’Arrigo, director of Creative Youth Development for The Clare Rose Foundation and founder of South Bay’s A Reason to Survive (ARTS), called Baza “an icon, champion and trailblazer,” saying his death was a “huge loss for the arts and culture community.”

“Larry has been in the ethersphere here as long as I’ve been in the arts,” said local arts consultant Victoria Plettner-Saunders, who most recently worked with Baza in the San Diego Unified School District’s Visual and Performing Arts Foundation. “What’s hard is that Larry had such energy and love for the community. He wasn’t just an advocate locally, he was an advocate and leader at the state level with the California Arts Council. His voice, his work touched so many. His resume is long, and it’s rich with everything he

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was most passionate about. It's hard to imagine our arts world without Larry. He was everywhere."

"Larry was gentle, but oh so wise," said Patricia Frischer of the San Diego Visual Arts Network. "He was politically astute without being a politician. I believe that is why he had the respect of so many people."

Alan Ziter, executive director of the NTC Foundation, on Sunday recalled first meeting Baza when he arrived in San Diego in 1986: "He helped me learn about the diverse arts scene in San Diego and wisely imparted on me the importance of connecting the arts to other community causes."

William Virchis, co-founder and producing artistic director of San Ysidro-based Teatro Máscara Mágica and a longtime friend, said: "It's a sad day. So many of our colleagues are dying. Just a couple months ago, we were just talking about how he was going to help us navigate the California Arts Council grant process. He was always such a helpful person."

On his Facebook page, Virchis remembered Baza: "Just heard that one of the most wonderful human beings that ever was on this planet went to heaven today. Larry Baza, a friend of mine for over 50 years, passed away today. ... If there was ever a wonderful, wonderful soul on this planet, (it) was Larry. Our deepest condolences goes to him and his partner ... and his extended family. He is now telling the angels all about the power of the arts. He was a true activist and an angel. ... Vaya con Dios mi Amigo."

'Champion for progress'

Baza's unwavering commitment to advocacy went back decades, often marked by history-making milestones.

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In the late 1980s, Christine Kehoe recruited him to join a committee with San Diego Pride, eventually becoming co-chair with Vertez Burks in 1992 — a pairing that made history as the first time San Diego Pride was led by two people of color.

In a statement, Ryan Trabuco, president of San Diego Democrats for Equality, praised Baza, who served as the organization’s president from 2009 to 2011: “Larry was a respected voice and advocate for inclusivity and a champion for progress. ... Larry leaves us a legacy of advocacy and culture to aspire to, live up to, and continue fighting for.”

San Diego City Councilman Stephen Whitburn, who recalled Baza as “a wonderful friend for 20 years,” said on Facebook: “Today, COVID-19 claimed a giant. Many in San Diego and beyond will always be inspired by Larry Baza’s compassion, courage, and commitment to social justice and the arts. ... Rest In Peace, Larry. Your leadership made our world a better place.”

“We lost an incredible leader today, Larry Baza,” County Supervisor Nathan Fletcher said in a tribute on social media. “He was not only a fierce advocate for the LGBTQ+ community but was also an ardent supporter of the arts, the Latino community and social justice. His work paved the way for a more equitable and accepting world. He will be missed by so many. Rest in power, Larry.”

Late Saturday, San Diego artist RD Riccoboni celebrated Baza’s legacy, calling him “a powerhouse in the arts and the LGBTQ community.”

Anne Bown-Crawford, executive director of the California Arts Council, recalled Baza on Monday, saying “the news of Larry’s passing brings a deep and tremendous sense of loss for those of us at the California Arts Council, both professionally and personally. Larry was a leader to our council, a fierce arts and social justice advocate, an inspirational mentor, and a dear, dear friend.”

She continued: “Through his own journey, Larry had the unique ability to understand the work, the dedication, and the passion of our state’s arts community from a point of view that made us all feel seen. With his deep commitment to public service, Larry left an

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indelible mark on the council, on the agency, and in our hearts, and a legacy that will not be forgotten.”

Lilia Gonzáles-Chávez, vice chair of the California Arts Council, said: “Larry’s vision of universal inclusion and access to arts and culture engagement was the driving force behind his remarkable career in the arts. His values are reflected in the trajectory of our council’s work, made better by his care and commitment. We will continue to honor his life and his legacy through our work, today and for many years to come.”

Baza is survived by his partner of 37 years, Tom Noel; brothers Ronald and Mark Baza; nieces Kimberlee Baza Petersen of Lakeside, Carolyn Baza of Lakeside and Ibetta Baza of San Diego; nephew Marc Baza of Fallbrook; and many grandnieces and grandnephews.

A private service will be held at Glen Abbey Memorial Park in Bonita. A public celebration of life will be held when COVID-19 protocols deem it safe to gather. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to the San Diego Food Bank.

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In Memory of Larry T. Baza, California Arts Council Chair

February 22, 2021

Lifelong cultural leader, arts advocate, social activist, and appointed official dies at 76

It is with profound sadness that the California Arts Council acknowledges the passing of our dear friend and colleague, Larry T. Baza, who **died Saturday, February 20, 2021 due to COVID-19.**

Larry Baza was a professional arts administrator who spent his career advocating for the arts at the local, state and national level. Baza was appointed to the California Arts Council by Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins in February of 2016 and reappointed by Atkins as Senate Pro Tem in January of 2020. From January 25, 2018 to December 31, 2019, Baza served as Vice Chair of the Council. He was elected Council Chair on December 2, 2020. On January 26, 2021, Baza presided over the Arts Council's public meeting for the first time as Chair, a role and honor that he was immensely proud of as the culmination of his career of service in the arts. The California Arts Council joins countless community members from across the San Diego region, the state, and the nation in celebrating Larry Baza's life, and in honoring the lasting legacy of his caring, passion, dedication, kindness, and generosity that he shared with all who knew him.

"The news of Larry's passing brings a deep and tremendous sense of loss for those of us at the California Arts Council, both professionally and personally," said Anne Bown-Crawford, Arts Council Executive Director. "Larry was a leader to our Council, a fierce arts and social justice advocate, an inspirational mentor, and a dear, dear friend. With a wealth of experience tied directly to arts administration, Larry held a special place on the Council for our CAC family and those in the field we serve. Through his own journey, Larry had the unique ability to understand the work, the dedication, and the passion of our state's arts community from a point of view that made us all feel seen. With his deep commitment to public service, Larry left an indelible mark on the Council, on the agency, and in our hearts, and a legacy that will not be forgotten."

"We are devastated by the untimely loss of Larry Baza, our friend, Council colleague, and newly elected Chair," said Lilia Gonzáles-Chávez, Vice Chair of the California Arts Council. "With five years of service to the Council, including two years as Vice Chair, and decades more as a community leader, Larry's leadership and advocacy will have a lasting impact. The enthusiasm with which he assumed the role of Council Chair was a joy to witness. Larry's vision of universal inclusion and access to arts and culture

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engagement was the driving force behind his remarkable career in the arts. His values are reflected in the trajectory of our Council's work, made better by his care and commitment. We will continue to honor his life and his legacy through our work, today and for many years to come."

As a leader on the California Arts Council, Baza worked tirelessly to champion the development of new programs as a member of the Council's policy committee, informed by his own personal and professional experiences in the arts. He was a devoted mentor to many, and through his service on the Council, he was committed to supporting the next generation of California arts leaders.

In his most recent public statement as Chair, on January 14, 2021, for the announcement of the California Arts Council Administrators of Color Fellowship Program, Baza said *"California is the most diverse state in the country, and it is essential for the leadership at our arts and culture organizations to reflect our communities. The urgency for arts organizations to invest more in our artists and arts leaders of color is greater than ever. ... As a native Californian and arts administrator of color whose career spans more than 40 years in our state, it gives me, my colleagues on the Council, and the CAC staff great pride in providing this career pathway for the next generation of California's arts administrators of color."*

Baza is survived by his partner of 37 years, Tom Noel; brothers Ronald and Mark Baza; nieces Kimberlee Baza Petersen of Lakeside, Carolyn Baza of Lakeside and Ibette Baza of San Diego; nephew Marc Baza of Fallbrook; and many grandnieces and grandnephews.

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