

Entre Amigos: SOU President's Medal goes to outstanding Guanajuato couple



Juan Carlos Romero Hicks and his wife, Frances "Faffie" Siekman, as posted on Facebook in March 2018.

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Noted Mexican politician's family life began while he was a grad student in Ashland

By Kernan Turner

Juan Carlos Romero Hicks and his wife, Frances "Faffie" Siekman, who are to receive Southern Oregon University's prestigious President's Medal next week, have connections with the university and Ashland dating back 44 years.

They moved to Ashland in 1978 when Juan Carlos began studies through the Amistad student exchange program between the University of Guanajuato and what was then called Southern Oregon State College. They had agreed when they married to spend two years in the United States.

"My oldest daughter, Marta, was born on Sept. 20, so I actually went the same day from the

Ashland Hospital to register for my classes,” Juan Carlos said in an interview.

Marta was the first of 10 children for the Romero Hicks.

“That was our second agreement,” he said. “Faffie wanted a large family and she wanted the kids to be born in the U.S.”

When Romero received a master’s degree in psychology in 1979, the couple returned to Guanajuato for a year before coming back to Ashland for Juan Carlos to earn a second master’s in science and business.

They had met in Guanajuato when Faffie was teaching English as a second language. She had first been to Guanajuato in 1971, participating in a program of Lawrence University, where she graduated with a degree in Spanish, and returned to Mexico in 1973.

Faffie grew up in Appleton, Wis., where her father was the chairman of the board of a significant paper manufacturing plant. Juan Carlos says her story parallels that of his mother, Joan Hicks, an American and Wheaton graduate from New Jersey who went to Guanajuato to teach English, got married in 1953 and has lived there ever since.

“The family story is they both went down to Mexico looking for husbands and they settled for us,” Juan Carlos said.

Years later, when as wife of Gov. Romero Hicks she was First Lady of the State of Guanajuato, Faffie told a Mexican reporter, “It was not love at first sight, above all because he is five years younger than I and I saw him as a child. I was 23 he was 18.” She added, “Later I fell in love because he was a very attractive boy and he helped me understand what it is to be Mexican ... because he spoke English perfectly, he helped me communicate and get to know Guanajuato, to know the people.”

In Mexico, Juan Carlos became a professor at the University of Guanajuato and served as its rector (president) from 1991 to 1999. He was elected governor in of the State of Guanajuato in 2000, a federal senator in 2012, and a congressman in 2018. He is the minority leader for the opposition National Action Party in the lower chamber of the bicameral Congress of Mexico. In the senate, he chaired the education committee and was secretary of the Science and Technology and North American Foreign Relations committees. He has been director-general of the National Council of Science and Technology and president of the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education and the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration.

Romero Hicks campaigned unsuccessfully to be president of Mexico in 2018 and is seeking his party’s backing again for the 2024 elections.

Besides raising 10 children, Faffie is a generous philanthropist, advocating eye care for people in Mexico, and animal care — including a burro rescue program near Guanajuato.

When Juan Carlos was governor, she headed the state's participation in the National System for Integral Family Development, known by its initials as DIF. It seeks to boost the welfare of low-income families. She also organized a collaboration of regional DIF systems and municipalities that provides building materials for impoverished people living in shacks to construct better homes for their families.

In 1997, Faffie helped fund the formation of the Ashland Amigo Club Endowed scholarship administered by the SOU Foundation. She also matches donations raised at the club's annual Guanajuato Nights dinner/auction. Ten students from Guanajuato and Ashland have received scholarships so far.

Juan Carlos said the positive experiences of living and learning abroad stay with a person forever.

“When I look back, I see four areas of growth during that period of my life at Southern Oregon University: personal, language, cultural, and academic,” Juan Carlos said. “Being bicultural is especially important to me. I think of being bilingual as like having two hands, but being bicultural is like playing the piano.”

The Romero Hicks have been strong supporters through the years of Sister City relations between Guanajuato and Ashland and have maintained strong personal relations with many Ashlanders.

“There is nothing in my life that I can disconnect from Ashland,” Romero said. “Ashland changed my life. When you are starting a family and you are starting a professional career, this is the ideal place. You can think, you can relate to people, you become very sensitive to other people's needs, you're at peace with yourself, with Nature, with God. It's just a fantastic setting.”

Amigo Club's Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears monthly. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club member.