

Ruiz hopes 'life' returns to hometown of Superior

Manny Ruiz remembers when the town of Superior was full of life: When prizefights at the old Magma Club drew crowds of hundreds and dances at the Two Republics often resulted in their own "amateur" brawls, and when miners would imbibe with friends in one of the town's 20-plus barrooms or spend a more sedate evening with their families at the entertainment capital of the town—the movie theater.

Ruiz was born in Superior, taught high school and coached football in Superior, and raised a family of five (four daughters and one son) in Superior. He hopes that some day soon the town he loves so well will once again crackle with the energy and vitality of a thriving community.

And that vitality may return because of something that gave the town life when he was a young lad in the 1950s: copper mining.

"As long as I can remember, Superior was a place that anyone who knew how to work hard could get a job, because Magma Copper was always in need of a good, hard-working miner," recalls Ruiz, whose father, Manuel, worked for Magma for 42 years. "So they came here, and some stayed only for a little bit because it was hot, hard work, and some stayed forever."

Ruiz also put in his time in the mines, although it wasn't to be his passion or his career. "I knew when I was in sixth grade I wanted to be a coach," he admits, adding that, "I never realized I had to have a college education to do it. That's why I went to college. I didn't really want to be a teacher as much as I wanted to be a coach, but I couldn't be a coach unless I became a teacher, so I went into education for that one reason."

Ruiz, who was a promising athlete himself, earned a football scholarship to Northern Arizona University. After he graduated, he spent time teaching in San Manuel, until he returned home for good in 1966.

While he was a student at Superior Junior/Senior High School, he spent summers working at the Magma mine. That summer job continued, even during college and into his teaching career. In all, Ruiz spent 17 summers working for the Magma mine.

He worked on the surface for a year, and he didn't like it. "Being an underground worker was like being first string—it carried its own prestige," he explains. He pushed to be sent underground, even though he was a novice miner. But luck was with him as a spot on his team's underground crew opened up within the first month of his employment.

"It was a special privilege to be among those miners," Ruiz says. "Some of the best people I've known in my life were miners."

In the end, what brought him back to Superior was not mining but the thing he had wished for since he was a young boy: the chance to coach at his old high school. "When I came here in 1966, I was lucky to get a job," Ruiz says. "I became head coach of basketball the second year I was here. I coached football and basketball for 10 years." In all, his teaching career spanned 33 years.

Ruiz, much to his surprise, also found himself becoming active in local civic matters. "When I was in high school, I had one thing on my mind, and that was playing

ball,” he says. “I was never much involved in school government. I was president of the freshman class, but never did I have any real interest in that.

“When I came back from San Manuel, I came back with a different mindset,” he explains. “I wanted to better my community because I had lived here most of my life.” So when people started talking about incorporation, Ruiz joined the committee exploring the idea.

“We had an election in 1976 and became incorporated, and I was chosen as one of the first councilmen,” he says. And that wasn’t the end of his involvement in local politics. In 2001, Superior celebrated the 25th anniversary of its incorporation. Since first incorporating, Ruiz has served as mayor three times and has been a City Council member several times, ending his most recent council appointment in June 2005.

He has seen the town go from a bustling community boasting 23 bars, two drug stores and numerous grocery marts, to a place where people do most of their major shopping out of town.

“We don’t have a dry good store on every corner like we used to,” he says. “Life has changed considerably. The times changed and people changed. The memories I have now of the old days make me realize I was privileged to have lived here during that particular time.”

He says Superior has become more of a semi-retirement community, “where people wanting to get out of the Valley will come to be in the mountains with clean air to breathe.” The median age of a Superior resident, according to the 2000 Census, is 39 years; 43 percent of the town’s residents are over the age of 45.

“It’s a different lifestyle here than it is the Valley,” Ruiz says. “People are after that; they want to get out of the fast lane. This is a good, slow-paced, wholesome way of living. I treasure it.”

“Once you live in a small town like this it gets in your blood,” he emphasizes. “These are your roots. Everybody loves coming back to Superior. There isn’t one person who doesn’t remember the good old days.”

He’s hoping there will be just as many good times ahead for the sleepy town that he believes will be reawakened with new housing developments, a widened U.S. 60 freeway and perhaps new mining opportunities.

“When this town gets back to what it could be, those people will have good memories too,” Ruiz says. “I know what it could be.”