

Avalos was "the kind of professor that we all wish we were, and that we hope that we are."

Lucía Suárez

Director of the Latino/a Studies Program at ISU

Hector Avalos' life included many experiences with death and dying because of his personal battles with disease.

But **Avalos** defined his life by what he could achieve in the time he had. The longtime professor at Iowa State University left a big imprint.

Lucía Suárez, director of the Latino/a Studies Program at ISU, told the Tribune that **Avalos** was "the kind of professor that we all wish we were, and that we hope that we are." She described him as generous, positive and thoughtful.

Avalos founded the Latino/a Studies Program in the 1990s, was a renowned religious studies scholar and a celebrated figure in atheist and agnostic communities.

Avalos' death at age 62 last week was caused by cancer, but he also suffered most of his life from an autoimmune disease known as granulomatosis with polyangiitis. The disease inflames blood vessels, primarily affecting a person's respiratory system and kidneys.

"I'm not an embittered atheist ... I became an atheist before I got sick," **Avalos** said in a 2016 lecture titled "Life and Death as an Atheist."

Avalos was speaking at a symposium of the Humanists of Linn County and the Iowa Atheists and Freethinkers called "Death and Dying Beyond Belief."

Avalos said he grew up steeped in the Pentecostal Christian faith in Nogales, Mexico, and then across the border in the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona. He said he was even a child evangelist and faith healer who mowed lawns to raise the money needed to buy books so he could teach himself the biblical languages of Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic.

"The ultimate result was that Bible study made me an unbeliever. After studying a lot, trying to defeat every argument atheists could throw at me, I eventually realized I don't have any better evidence than anyone else," **Avalos** said.

That did not deter him from wanting to be a biblical scholar, however. **Avalos** authored or edited at least 10 books, on topics ranging from slavery, abolitionism and biblical scholarship; to disabilities in biblical studies; health care in biblical times; and Latino and Latina communities' relationships with religion.

The autoimmune disease interrupted **Avalos'** college education and his life going forward, necessitating extended hospitalizations and periods of recovery from intense symptoms, tumors in his throat or trachea, difficulty breathing and walking, and surgery without effective anesthesia because his airway was too constricted for doctors to provide it.

Through it all, **Avalos** completed three years at the University of Arizona in three semesters, finished a doctoral program at Harvard and took a job at ISU in 1993 — where he was soon asked to create the Latino/a Studies Program.

Avalos in 2016 was awarded the Regents Award for Faculty Excellence, particularly for his role in founding the program. He had chaired the program from 1994 to 1998, and directed it twice, from 1998 to 2000 and from 2002 to 2007.

His nomination packet for the faculty excellence award included this recommendation from Anne Clifford, then-chairwoman of Catholic studies in ISU's philosophy and religious studies department: "Although he had no formal education in Latino/a Studies and no experience in starting a new academic program, nor much knowledge of the curriculum at ISU and the university's budgeting procedures and policies, he willingly accepted the challenge to start the program."

Elizabeth Hoffman, an ISU economics professor, wrote that **Avalos** was "respected by his students as a caring instructor who makes the Bible come alive."

Hoffman also described how **Avalos** took it upon himself to recruit students when low enrollment initially threatened the Latino/a Studies Program's continued existence.

"Over the next semester he mounted an aggressive marketing campaign and doubled the number of students," she wrote.

Suárez was hired in 2017 as the Latino/a Studies Program's director and called **Avalos** an excellent mentor.

"I'm really grateful for his support and also for his honesty," she said.

Suárez also said **Avalos** was always a joy to speak with, and someone who only had good things to say about the program, the institution and his students.

Avalos also co-founded ISU's student organization for atheists and agnostics, and received statewide and national recognition from similar communities, including the Hispanic American Freethinkers association.

He was inducted in 2019 into the Iowa Latino Hall of Fame. In an interview for his induction, **Avalos** said: "This award means that I have brought a lot of understanding and a lot of intimacy with Latinos in Iowa, so it's one of those awards that mean a lot to me."

Avalos gave numerous media interviews, not only for the Tribune — for which he had also been a columnist since 2010 — but also for the Des Moines Register and USA Today, in radio, TV and

other national outlets.

Avalos said he was diagnosed in 2012 with bladder cancer, and his experiences with disease solidified his beliefs about death, dying and who might be of help to him.

"People help you," he said.

Memorial donations in honor of **Avalos** can be made to the Vasculitis Foundation, which represents people who suffer from blood vessel diseases including the autoimmune one **Avalos** lived with.

ISU's cemetery will be home for **Avalos'** cremated remains, and a memorial service is planned for early fall, according to his obituary.

"I don't spend my time working on an afterlife that I don't know exists. I live to improve the world that I live in and that I do know exists," he told his lecture audience in 2016.

"I try to enjoy every minute I have, instead of lamenting the years that I've lost. You can't get those back."

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