Suzie Azar Still Reaches for the Sky
By Vicente Garcia, Tony Pinon, Aaron Rasmussen and Heather Coons

For most longtime El Pasoans, Suzie Azar needs no introduction. She was El Paso’s first, and so far, only, woman mayor. While that distinction alone elevates Azar’s importance to the Southwest, her other accomplishments have her soaring in the skies.

Suzanne Schmeck was born in 1946 to a family of German-Irish descent in Bay City, Michigan. Being the middle child taught her the art of diplomacy at an early age. In a personal interview with El Paso Community College student Vicente Garcia, she said, “Middle children have to negotiate. You have to learn how to get along. For me, that’s part of leadership training. ... You learn to be a team player when you’re in a middle child position.”

It was during these early years that Azar fell passionately for her first love: flying. As a youngster, she was a member of the Civil Air Patrol, flying around the perimeter of accident sites to look for victims. Wearing blue uniforms that resembled those of the Air Force and flying high above the ground and through the clouds convinced Azar that she wanted to become a licensed pilot. But money was scarce, and that dream would be put off for many years.

In 1970, Azar moved to El Paso with her first husband and family. She attended the University of Texas at El Paso, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in business management. During this time, Azar was awarded UTEP’s oldest honor for service to both the community and the university as a Woman of Mines, as well as membership in the Golden Key National Honors Society.

In 1972, Azar began working as a legal assistant for one of El Paso’s premier attorneys, Robert “Ray” Pearson, and then went on to become the community affairs director for Dickshire Coors, owned by Richard “Dick” Azar. Although staying on the sidelines of local politics for many years, it was during this time that Azar became involved in El Paso’s Women’s Political Caucus and the League of Women Voters.

From 1978 through 1985, Azar was a member of the Democratic Executive Committee, serving four terms as precinct chair. Azar also participated in the Leadership El Paso program, and served on both the City Charter Commission and Emergency Medical Service Board.

In 1982 she and Dick Azar were married. For more than 25 years, this high-profile couple was known for their love of aviation and El Paso in general. Dick Azar died in May 2009.

Being a wife and the mother of two girls, Michelle and Christine Coors, did not slow her down. In December 1984, Azar announced her plans to run for Polly Harris’ West-Central City Council seat. The area the vacated spot represented encompassed most of Central El Paso, as well as Chihuahuita and other parts of the border. At that time there were 23,292 registered voters in that area, 66 percent with Hispanic surnames.

On December 6, the El Paso Times reported that Azar’s campaign should be based on prudent government, because, Azar said, “They [people] don’t want to buy more government.” She spent three months campaigning door to door and on election day, Azar flew over El Paso pulling a campaign banner behind her plane.

Azar took the victory over four Hispanics without a runoff. Azar’s campaign manager, Susan Hatch, was quoted in an El Paso Times article written by Gary Scharrer on Dec. 9, 1986, that Azar’s victory occurred because “she’s honest, hard-working, and cares about the people.”

Campaigning wasn’t always smooth flying, though. Deliberate mudslinging and factual inaccuracies, like those perpetrated by challenger Richard Telles Sr., were typical of her campaigns for city representative. El Paso Times writer David Crowder reported on April 3, 1987, that Telles sent flyers out to most households in the West-Central District proclaiming Azar to be Arab-American, Republican and out to better her own interests. Personal information, such as age and birthplace, were also wrong. According to Azar, the only correct information was that she was indeed a mother of two children.

The comparative lack of women in politics also posed a setback. Reporter Gary Scharrer reported that of the 93 major political offices in El Paso in January 1988, women held only 17. Although women in El Paso constituted over 50 percent of the 184,717 registered voters, the traditional view of men making better leaders still dominated politics.

In 1989, Mayor Jonathan Rogers’ last term in office was coming to an end after four consecutive two-year stints. Six candidates vied for the position, including two city council members, Democrat Suzie Azar and Republican Ed Elsey. After the general election on May 6, 1989, Azar and Elsey battled in a runoff. On May 29, The New York Times declared Azar’s history-setting victory in politics to be a “landslide” with 65 percent of the vote. “I’m thrilled to death,” Azar said. “I’m ready to go to work.”

In June 1989, El Paso’s first woman mayor was sworn in. Azar propped open the mayor’s office doors with boxes, and then her first official act was to sign over the city’s former city hall to become the city’s museum of history. Azar also became a certified flight instructor. She described a checkpoint fly-in. At full open throttle and only 300 feet above the runway, planes make high-speed passes for the timers. “It is just so darn exciting,” Azar exclaimed.

The El Paso Commission for Women Hall of Fame inducted Azar under the public service category in March 2005. She was recognized for her focus on environmental issues and El Paso’s first water conservation initiative. Her administration funded the El Paso Zoo expansion, directed the building campaign for the El Paso Museum of Art, built the Painted Dunes Golf Course and Cohen Stadium and was responsible for many highway projects and safety initiatives, including the hiring of 100 additional police officers.

Azar also has been honored by many organizations, including the YWCA, the NAACP, HUD, the League of Women Voters and the El Paso Aviation Association.

For El Paso, Suzanne Azar is one of the highest flyers in our beautiful Southwest skies.