

OBITUARY

Alejandro Villagomez

Travis Kinchen

This past spring, the cavers of Texas lost a great friend. While on holiday in Real de Catorce, Alejandro Villagomez slipped from the top of a cliff and was fatally injured. We will never know exactly what transpired, because he was alone there after dark. We do know that his last evening was spent having a good time with friends in a place that he loved. I imagine that he walked out to the cliff edge to admire the beautiful view. By all accounts, the spot is a good one for such musings. I hope that he was at peace, and smiling.

Many of us knew Alex and will miss him dearly. He was many things to many people, and he was a bright spot in many lives. To some he was a teacher. To many more he was a friend. To a few he may have been a rival. I cannot begin to tell all of those stories, but will tell a few bits of my own experience.

I don't recall where I first met Alex. Perhaps it was one of those Colorado Bend State Park weekends, or maybe another TSA event. I remember that he struck me as quite a character, striding around in rubber Wellingtons and a Mexican serape. I remember the laughter that signaled his presence, both his own and that of those with whom he spoke. I can still hear that laugh.

Some time later I first went caving with Alex. We went to investigate Puberty Pit at Colorado Bend. I was impressed with his knowledge, and with his willingness to teach. One of the other people on that trip was struggling with some Spanish vocabulary, and Alex spent his time alternating between teaching Spanish and teaching vertical rigging to the new cavers

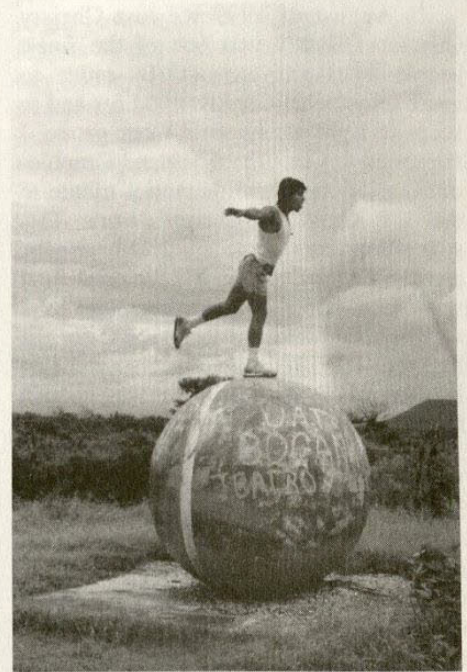
with us. I think he managed to pick up some more English while he was at it.

It was Alex who first took me caving in Mexico. A motley crew of seven cavers, with nary a female to temper the craziness, headed for San Luis Potosi with a goal of reaching the very bottom of El Sotano de las Golondrinas. Many tale-worthy adventures occurred on that trip, and a few even involved caving. We didn't quite make it to the bottom of the cave, although we got close. I remember standing in the loop at the end of our very last rope, swinging in space somewhere near 500 meters underground, shining my headlamp at the floor of what seemed to be the very last drop, an unreachable 30 meters below.

Over the course of years, Alex was a role model and a friend. We shared many adventures, some great and some small. The ranch where he and Katherine McClure lived was a place to escape the cares of life and just kick back with good friends. I know that others feel the same.

Two scenes stand out as I think about Alex. The first is on the floor of the first big drop in Golondrinas, where we had set up camp after returning from the lower part of the cave. Alex was so overjoyed to be there that he was dancing on top of his sleeping bag. It was his ninth or tenth trip to that cave, but he wasn't a bit bored. His zest for life just poured out into all those around him.

The second scene is in the living room at the ranch. I remember Alex standing by the fireplace with a cold drink in hand, telling stories and making plans for future trips. That was the last time I saw him. The common element in both scenes is Alex smiling and laughing.



Alejandro at the Tropic of Cancer.

telling his corny jokes, surrounded by good friends and just having fun.

Like most of our caving community, I will miss Alex dearly, but I am glad to have had a handful of years to know him. He taught me a number of things, but I think that the most important lesson to take from Alex is to live each day with joy and excitement, always looking for the good, the funny, and the worthwhile things in life. He leaves behind family and friends who will grieve his passing for a long time to come. The important thing to remember, though, is that we are not diminished by his absence. We have been enriched by his presence.

SLP

his picture taking many times next to the various cave formations for Joe and Oscar. This cave was very enjoyable and well worth the little effort.

Our group spent the next few days in the town of San Luis Potosi, relaxing, seeing the many sites, visiting friends and family, and of course taking care of personal business. (We won't go there - too much information.) I had a wonderful time, and would recommend caving in this area to everyone. I would also like to thank Joe, Vico, and Oscar for making the trip so much fun and exciting.

CONNECTION

piece of yellow flagging in my pocket. Then I climbed back up. It took several attempts, but was not overly difficult. Frank, in the meantime, had been preparing for contingencies by measuring off the length of rope lying at the bottom of the drop. He was prepared to cut off what we could spare if I needed it to get back up. But I didn't, and after finishing the survey measurements, we were soon back in Hidden Canyon.

As Frank was climbing the rope out of the canyon, I decided to check out the hole on the other side of the breakdown

pile. I slid down about a meter between blocks of rock, and then there was a passage coming in at right angles from the right. I crawled ahead about four meters and was looking down a long slope of canyon passage that was unobstructed for 15 to 20 meters. The walls were solid, clean, and white. Passage like that I haven't seen in Martas before. Passage like that will stay in my head until I can't stand it anymore and have to get back out there and chase it to the end.