

Presenting Presidential Medal of Freedom Winner, Sylvia Mendez

By Miranda J. Ross

A young Mexican-American girl named Sylvia Mendez was at the center of the famous *Mendez v. Westminster* case from 1947, which led to the desegregation of schools for Latino children on the U.S. West Coast. This important desegregation victory helped pave the way to the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which sought to end nationally all segregation in the United States.

In an effort to enroll Sylvia, her brother, and her cousins in school, Sylvia's aunt, Soledad Vidaurri, brought the children to the Westminster School in California in September 1943. Because of their fair skin, Vidaurri's children were accepted for enrollment by the Westminster School. Sylvia and her brothers, however, were turned away. School officials instructed Vidaurri to enroll the children at Hoover Elementary School, which was exclusively for Mexican Americans, as they could not be enrolled under local school board policies due to their darker complexions.

Sylvia and her parents, Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, took on the challenge of organizing a community effort to transform California and establish a legal precedent for ending segregation in the United States. At first, the Mendezes received little support from local Latino organizations to fight against segregated education for children of Mexican descent in southern California. Gonzalo Mendez hired civil rights attorney David Marcus, and together with four other Mexican-American families, filed a lawsuit in federal court against four Orange County school districts on behalf of 5,000 Hispanic-American children.

The lawsuit alleged that the school districts colluded to prevent the petitioners "and all others of Mexican or Latin descent from attending and using and receiving the benefits and education furnished to other children" and to segregate Mexican-American children "solely for the reason that [they] are of Mexican or Latin descent." On February 18, 1946, Judge Paul McCormick issued his decision, concluding that the school districts conspired to discriminate against Mexican-Americans based on their ancestry in violation of the students' constitutional rights and enjoining the school districts from segregating Mexican-American children in the future.

The decision was upheld by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco (covering the U.S. West Coast states, in addition to some of the Rocky Mountain West), and the state of California outlawed all segregation in its public schools a few months later. *Mendez v. Westminster* represented significant progress in the United States and helped prepare the country for the seminal 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Mendez, now in her 80s, dedicated her life to continuing her family's commitment to equality. Mendez retired after 30 years as a nurse and began traveling the country giving talks about how her family's struggle paved the way for desegregation. In 2011, President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her civil rights work.