

## **BACKGROUND ON SYLVIA MENDEZ**

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Sylvia Méndez was born in 1936 in Santa Ana, California. Her father, Gonzalo Méndez, was from Mexico while her mother Felicita Gómez was from Puerto Rico. Felicita moved to Arizona and had participated in protests against cotton farmers paying Puerto Rican workers unfair wages. They were married in 1935 in California. A few years after Sylvia was born, the family moved to Westminster, CA, which was part of a segregated school district. There, they tended to a farm owned by a Japanese family that had been sent to an internment camp during WWII.

In 1943 the family tried to enroll their kids and nephews into the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Elementary School, which was the segregated, “whites-only” school. While the light skinned members of the family were allowed to enroll, Sylvia and her brothers were denied due to their darker skin color. The family then filed suit against Westminster and other Orange County school districts on behalf of 5,000 Hispanic-American school children, which began a lengthy legal battle that resulted in the desegregation of schools in California and eventually laid the groundwork for Brown v. Board of Education a few years later.

Méndez later became a nurse and served as the Los Angeles University of Southern California Medical Center’s Assistant Nursing Director for the Pediatric Pavilion. She retired in 1990 and has spent the rest of her life educating others on the historic contributions made by her parents and co-plaintiffs from the Mendez v. Westminster case.

Sylvia's parents have had two schools named after them. In 1998 Santa Ana named one of their schools the Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez Fundamental Intermediate School and in 2009 a school in Boyle Heights, which is part of Los Angeles, was named Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez Learning Center. In 2011, Silvia was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

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