

SYLVIA MENDEZ

Civil Rights Activist

Medal of Freedom Recipient 2011

Civil rights activist Sylvia Mendez is the oldest daughter of Gonzalo Mendez, a Mexican immigrant, and Felicitas Mendez, a Puerto Rican, who challenged segregation so that she and other Latino children could be provided the same quality education provided to white students. Her parents were plaintiffs in the landmark *Mendez v. Westminster School District* (1947) case that paved the way for *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and ended school segregation in California.

In 1943 in Westminster, California, students of Mexican descent were required to enroll in segregated and inferior schools known as "Mexican Schools." When Sylvia was in the third grade, she and her brothers, Gonzalo, Jr. and Jerome, were denied admission to the "white" school near their Westminster home. The Mendez family, along with four other Latino families, fought to integrate the school. Mendez won in the Federal court in 1946, then again in appeal 1947, and helped make California the first state in the nation to end school segregation. Seven years later, Mendez served as significant precedent for the NAACP in its US Supreme Court school desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education*

Miss Mendez, who still resides in Orange County, attended Cal State Los Angeles, earning a BS in Nursing. She worked 33 years as a nurse at the Los Angeles USC Medical Center, becoming Assistant Nursing Director of the Pediatric Pavilion. Since Miss Mendez retired, she has traveled to all seven continents and visited over 60 countries.

Miss Mendez and her family have received numerous awards and recognitions, including a US Postage stamp commemorating the 60th anniversary of the appellate victory; two public schools are named after Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez; a Lifetime Achievement Award presented by the National Parent Teacher Association; the US Congress Civil Rights Champion Award; two books written about the life of Sylvia Mendez and another about the lawsuit; and two documentaries: the Emmy-winning film *Mendez v. Westminster: For All the Children/Para Todos Los Niños* by Sandra Robbie and *Mendez v. Westminster: Families for Equality* by Erica Bennett.

On February 15, 2011, President Barack Obama presented Sylvia Mendez with the *Presidential Medal of Freedom*, the nation's highest civilian honor.

In 2012, was invited to Mexico City where she received the "Premio Internacional" award Por LA IGUALAD Y La NO DISCRIMICION.

In March 2013 Brooklyn College honors Sylvia Mendez with the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, for inspiring a court case that stirred a nation to revisit its segregation policies, and for tirelessly working to have these efforts known.

On May 23, 2018 the Berkeley School Board unanimously agreed to rename the former Le Conte Elementary School in honor of education advocate and civil rights icon Sylvia Mendez. The approved new name to be, **Sylvia Mendez Elementary School**.

Sylvia continues the legacy left by her parents by fighting for quality education and by encouraging students to stay in school.

Currently Sylvia and her family are among the participants in the story of "Courage: The Vision to End Segregation. The Guts to Fight For It". This unique exhibition, which includes 'Para Todos Los Niños /For All the Children' is at the Museum of Tolerance located in Los Angeles, CA.