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Latino Legacy Foundation Debuts Multimedia Chronicle of San Diego's Hispanic Heritage



by JW AugustOctober 15, 2021



The Latino Legacy Foundation drew attention to the desegregation of Lemon Grove schools in the 1930s. Photo by JW August

If you asked most Americans where the first efforts against segregated schools took place it's a pretty good chance many would name states in the South.

But they would be wrong. It was in Lemon Grove. This was just one of the revelations that came to light during a press conference Thursday at San Diego High School announcing the launch of the [Latino Legacy Foundation](#)'s "Timeline-Milestones-Stories" project, as a tribute to the county's Latino heritage and accomplishments.

Gathered on the front steps of the school were individuals with a direct a connection to San Diego's Latino history, from the birth of California to the battle for civil rights and the Chicano movement and on up to the present day.



The mayor and her fighting relatives. Photo by JW August

Enlarged black and white photos ringed the area, showing faces from the past. Here was a photo of four of the family of Chula Vista Mayor Mary Casillas Salas, U.S. Army veterans from World War II. The Casillas men won two Purple hearts and a Bronze and Silver stars. In total, seven of her family members have served in the military.

The mayor acknowledged the people gathered and the history they represent, saying, “So many of us here today are community leaders because of the sacrifice and the struggle that our grandparents and our parents made.”

Leaders like David Villarino-Gonzalez, CEO of the [Farmworkers Institute of Education & Leadership Development](#), who spoke in tribute to his extended family in attendance and talked proudly about his grandfather, Juan Escobedo Gonzalez, a community leader whose political and organizational skills would lead to the historic 1931 Lemon Grove Grammar School lawsuit.

That lawsuit would influence future desegregation cases. Villarino-Gonzalez recalled how his grandfather “persuaded families in Lemon Grove to join together and eventually to win the campaign for educational equity and justice for the children of Lemon Grove.”

Sister Margaret Castro, also in attendance, serves at St. Rita Catholic Church with Sisters for Christian Community. She grew up in Old Town, and her neighbors were Mexicans, Chinese, Blacks, and “Okies” who escaped the Dust Bowl. Everyone got along, and she had no idea what segregation was, she says.

She recalled how her father loved the Lakeside Rodeo that they went to for years. When she was 10, she remembers asking her father why they always sat “where the hot sun is always in our eyes.” Her father hushed her and later told the young girl, “because the white people sit on that side and we sit on the other side.” She learned for the first time how segregation could effect ones life, in big and small ways.

Sister Margaret would choose a life to help those less fortunate than herself. At just 17 years old she went to Calcutta, India, and joined with Mother Teresa, staying with her order until she was in her early 30s. She believes her upbringing taught her resilience and compassion.

Latino Legacy began when Maria Velasquez, who previously worked at the San Diego Housing Commission and the City Attorney’s office, envisioned a multimedia project that would turn out to be “as simple as it was complex.” She wanted to share the Latino experience using multimedia storytelling.

“Let’s not forget our history and let’s celebrate our accomplishments” was the goal, she says. She credits six individuals as founding members of the foundation, each steeped in the knowledge of local history. Together, they helped her bring the project to life.

If you go to latinolegacyfoundation.org, you will find the first chapters of this story. They are written from the perspective of the community members, who share the stories of their lives and that of family members who came before them.

Velasquez says Thursday’s multimedia release goes through World War II, with the next phase of the project to cover the Chicano Movement in the 60s and the cultural renaissance. The final chapter will look at where we are now — “the national turmoil we are addressing, the outcome of the pandemic on the Latino community.”