
Ordinary Americans who accomplish the Extraordinary: How was the Mendez Family an example?



Photo from OC Register Archives:
<http://www.ocregister.com/news/case-190159-mendez-school.html?pic=2>

Overview: Since the 1850 annexation of California from Mexico into the United States, the state was bicultural. In fact, the official language of California was both Spanish and English. By 1913, like most of the United States, California moved to segregating, or separating, most of its minority children in education. In cities across California, including Westminster, separation was the norm. While many citizens complained, or simply followed along, no one challenged this practice. Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, along with other families, decided to challenge the system so that their children would have a chance to attend the best schools. This DBQ asks you to explain why the Mendez Family are extraordinary Americans.

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The Documents

Document A: Timeline

Document B: The Parents Letter

Document C: Medal of Freedom Award Article

Document D: Sylvia Mendez comments on her father

Document E: Sacrificing for the children

Document F: Phone Interview

Hook Exercise:

Task One: Using the provided definition of *extraordinary Americans*, this is a list of characteristics that describe Americans who are *extraordinary*. Using the definition of the word, list any American (including people you know) who fit the characteristic.

extraordinary Americans are greater or better than usual Americans.

| <u>Characteristic</u> | <u>Definition</u> | <u>Extraordinary Americans</u> |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <u>humble</u> | <u>you do not think that you are as important as other people</u> | <u>George Washington</u> |
| <u>Courage</u> | <u>the ability to do something that frightens one</u> | _____ |
| <u>integrity</u> | <u>being honest and having strong moral principles</u> | _____ |
| <u>persistence</u> | <u>firm in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition</u> | _____ |
| <u>willing to sacrifice</u> | <u>give up for the sake of other considerations</u> | _____ |
| <u>clear goal</u> | <u>understanding what you want to achieve</u> | _____ |

Task Two: Using your characteristics, list the top three characteristics that can make an American extraordinary.

Characteristics

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Background Essay:

The Injustice

In the fall of 1944, American citizens Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez attempted to enroll their children Sylvia, Gonzalo Jr. and Geronimo, at the 17th Street School in Westminster, California. The Mendez family, of Mexican Heritage, was new to the area. Their children were refused admission because of their dark-skin, while their fairer skinned niece and nephew were allowed to attend.

For people of Mexican descent living in California and other Southwest states discrimination was part of everyday life. Many parks, hotels, dance halls, stores, eateries, pools, and barbershops were off limits. Mexican Americans were forced to sit in movie theater balconies and not in the main seating areas. The fact that the Méndezes were fairly prosperous farmers did not make them any more acceptable to the mainstream community. Despite their proximity to the 17th Street School, the family was expected to attend Hoover School, the town's "Mexican school" across town.

From Initial Petition to a New State Law

Realizing other Mexican American families in the community faced the same discriminatory treatment, the Mendez Family organized other Mexican parents to protest the **segregation** of their children in the shabbier school. Together, they sent a letter to the board of education demanding the schools be integrated. The request was denied. That denial prompted multiple Mexican American families to file a class action suit against four county school boards of education on behalf of the 5,000 Mexican American children forced to attend segregated and inferior schools.

During the trial, the **defense** argued that the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* gave legal sanction to racial segregation, provided the separate facilities for different races were equal. Furthermore, the defense maintained, there were sound educational and social advantages to segregated schooling. The "Mexican schools" gave special instruction to students who didn't speak English and who were unfamiliar with American values and customs. Under oath one Superintendent said he believed people of Mexican descent were intellectually, culturally, and morally inferior to European Americans. Even if a Latino child had the same academic qualifications as a white child he would never allow the Latino child to enroll in a White school.

The **plaintiffs** testimony proved no language proficiency tests were ever given. Rather, enrollment decisions were based on last names and skin color, as evidenced by the experience of children. The U.S. District Court Judge was appalled by the blatant racism against Mexican American school children. He ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. He pointed out segregation "fosters antagonisms in the children and suggests inferiority among them where none exists." He believed separate schools created social inequality and that the school districts were in violation of the students' constitutional rights. He concluded there was no sound educational basis for the segregation of White and Mexican students since research showed segregation worked against language acquisition and cultural **assimilation**.

The School Board was not ready to integrate its schools. The Orange County school boards filed an appeal. Despite this effort, the Court of Appeals upheld the lower court decision and the Orange County School Board did not appeal further. *Méndez v. Westminster* prompted California Governor Earl Warren to sign the law which ended school segregation in California, making it the first state to officially integrate its public schools in the nation.

Victory

In September of 1947, Sylvia, Gonzalo Jr. and Geronimo Méndez enrolled at the 17th Street School in Westminster without incident. Felicitas and Gonzalo Méndez quietly resumed their work and never considered the full impact of their legal victory. They were content just to have righted a wrong in their community and to have protected their children's future.

While most Mexican Americans in California and other southwestern states were excluded from "Whites Only" theaters, parks, swimming pools, restaurants, and even schools, most citizens were afraid to challenge such discriminatory treatment. In 1945, Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez won a significant victory in their struggle to secure the best education for thousands of Mexican American children. **This DBQ asks, How was the Mendez Family an example of extraordinary Americans?**

Background Essay Questions:

1. Why were the Mendez children refused admission into the 17th Street School?
2. List examples of discrimination towards Mexican Americans in California.
3. What famous 1896 court case allowed states to legally segregate, or separate, groups of people?
4. Explain what the US District Court Judge meant by segregation “fosters antagonisms in the children...”
5. What did the Mendez case inspire Gov. Earl Warren to end? Why was this unique?
6. Define each of the following words from the reading
 - a. segregation
 - b. defense
 - c. plaintiffs
 - d. assimilation

Document A**Timeline: Mendez v. Westminster**

Compiled from various sources.

1848: Mexico loses the Mexican-American War. California becomes an American territory.

1850: California is admitted into the Union.

1896: Plessy v. Ferguson- Supreme Court Ruling that legalizes segregation with the justification that “separate but equal” State Laws are allowed to separate the races.

1913: The practice of segregation in Public Schools becomes the norm for California.

1944: The Mendez children are turned away from the 17th Street School.

1945: Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, along with several other families, file the class action suit against the Westminster, Garden Grove, El Modena, and Santa Ana School Districts..

1947: The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, in Mendez v. Westminster School District, orders an end to segregation in California schools. Gov. Warren signs the law.

1954: The U.S. Supreme Court outlaws the “separate but equal” doctrine with its decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. The Mendez case is cited in the Brown case by NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall, who would later join the Supreme Court.

1964: Gonzalo Mendez dies.

1998: Felicitas Mendez dies.

2001: The first Mendez Schools is dedicated in Santa Ana.

2011: Felicitas and Gonzalo’s daughter Sylvia Mendez receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

1. How many years was the practice of segregation in effect in California?
2. How many years did it take for the Mendez Family to be recognized for their efforts? Were Gonzalo and Felicitas recognized during their lifetime?
3. Which hook exercise characteristic helps explain how the Mendez Family members were extraordinary Americans?

Note: This letter followed the school's refusal to enroll the Mendez children. A group of parents (headed by Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez) petitioned the school board to desegregate the schools. On September 8, 1944, the group sent a letter to the school asking for an end to segregation.

Document B

Source: *The Parents Letter to the Westminster School Board*. From Gilbert Gonzalez, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation*, 1990, pp. 150-151 (as quoted in the Westminster Herald).

Dear Sir

We, the undersigned parents of whom about one-half are American born, respectfully call to your attention to the fact of the segregation of American children of Mexican descent is being made at Westminster in that the American children of non-Mexican descents are made to attend Westminster Grammar School on W. 17th Street at Westminster and the American children of Mexican extraction are made to attend Hoover School on Olive and Maple Street. Children from one district are made to attend the school in the other district and we believe that this situation is not conducive to the best interests of the children nor friendliness among either among the children or their parents involved nor the eventual thorough Americanization of our children. It would appear that there is racial discrimination and we do not believe that there is any necessity for it and would respectfully request that you make an investigation of this matter and bring about an adjustment, doing away with the segregation above referred to. Some of our children are soldiers in the war, all are American born and it does not appear fair nor just that our children should be segregated as a class.

1. What reasons do the parents give for opposing segregation?
2. Americanization can be defined as someone who has become part of the American culture or country. Why would the parents, such as Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, want their children to become *Americanized*?
3. What purpose would a complaint serve, such as this letter to the School Board?
4. Which hook exercise characteristic helps explain how the Mendez Family members were extraordinary Americans?

Document C

Source: Article by Fermin Leal, "OC Civil Rights icon Mendez awarded Medal of Freedom in *Orange County Register*, February 15, 2011.



WASHINGTON – Sylvia Mendez smiled through tears Tuesday as President Barack Obama draped the Medal of Freedom around her neck, overcome as she remembered the desegregation fight her parents waged on her behalf. "I never could have imagined as a child battling segregation that I would end up one day meeting the president and receiving such a tremendous honor," said Mendez, 74, of Fullerton. "My parents just wanted what was best for their children. So I have made it my life's work to spread their message."

"She has made it her mission to spread her message of tolerance and opportunity to children of all backgrounds and all walks of life," Obama said during the annual Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremony... "This year's Medal of Freedom recipients reveal the best of who we are, and the best of who we aspire to be." The Medal of Freedom is presented to individuals who have made "especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States, to world peace, or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

Obama kissed and hugged Mendez after giving her the award – part of what Mendez said ... "What an amazing day. I feel very blessed." For years, Mendez has traversed the country, speaking to students about the history and importance of the Mendez case. Mendez said she hopes her story will serve to inspire students to continue their education into college and beyond. Mendez, who will return Wednesday to Orange County, said she plans to use her Medal of Freedom to further educate and inspire students about the historic case.

"I'm going to show students that no matter your race or background, anything is possible," she said.

1. How does President Barack Obama define the Presidential Medal of Freedom?
2. Why is Sylvia Mendez being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom?
3. Which hook exercise characteristic helps explain how the Mendez Family members were extraordinary Americans?

Document D

Source: The Sylvia Mendez Website <http://sylviamendezinthemendezvswestminster.com>
Sylvia Mendez, eight years old at the start of the Mendez v. Westminster, comments about her father's actions:

"It was during the war when people were accused of being a *Communist* if you didn't follow what was right, but he wasn't scared. He knew that what he was doing was the right thing to do. He was going to right a wrong."

Note: A *Communist* is a person who is a supporter of the Soviet Union's Economic/Political/Social System of complete equality. At this time, a "Communist" accusation included serious consequences, such as: losing jobs, jail or prison time, and the credibility of your name.

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1. What is a Communist?
 2. Who would be able to accuse Gonzalo Mendez of being a Communist?
 3. What were some consequences that Gonzalo Mendez faced?
 4. Which hook exercise characteristic helps explain how the Mendez Family members were extraordinary Americans?

Document E

Source: “Fighting For *All* Their Futures” Teaching Tolerance Background Essay

The Méndezes threw themselves into the trial preparations. Gonzalo took a year off work to organize Latino men and women and gather evidence for the case. Every day, he and David Marcus drove across Orange County's patchwork of vegetable farms and citrus groves, stopping in the *colonias*. They knocked on doors and tried to convince Mexican American parents and their children to testify in court.

It was no easy task. Some workers feared that their Anglo bosses might fire them if they testified. Or worse, they might be deported. But slowly the plaintiffs built their case. Gonzalo offered to pay the transportation costs and lost wages of anyone willing to travel to Los Angeles and appear in court during the trial.

Meanwhile, Felicitas took over the daily operation of the farm. In the little spare time she had, she organized a group of local Latino parents to support the five plaintiffs in the lawsuit.

Note: The word *colonias* is used to refer to the heavily populated Mexican neighborhoods of the city. Often times these were the poorest parts of the city.

1. Who lived in the *colonias*? Why?
2. What risks did the families risk if they testified against the school board?
3. How did Gonzalo Mendez convince the workers to testify?
4. Felicitas ran the farm during the years of the trial. What risks might she have faced?
5. Which hook exercise characteristic helps explain how the Mendez Family members were extraordinary Americans?

Note: *hospice care* takes place when a person is sick or terminally ill.

Document F

Source: Phone interview with Sylvia Mendez on March 5, 2013. Recorded by Monique Flores.

"When my mother was in hospice care, I had the opportunity to have several conversations with her regarding some of the details of the case that were never recorded on paper. There is one point I did not know about my father. After my father and the Westminster Committee for Mexican American children had decided to legally challenge segregation, he decided to keep us from attending school. A school board member came out to the farm to inform my father he had to send the three of us (Sylvia, Gonzalo, and Geronimo) to school. After my father refused, the board member then offered to allow us into the white school if he dropped the proceedings. My father refused him yet again. The board member left very agitated."

1. What is the punishment for not sending children to school?
2. A bribe is to persuade someone to act in a particular fashion, by a gift of money or other inducement. What bribe did the school board member offer Gonzalo Mendez?
3. Why did Gonzalo Mendez refuse the school board member's offer?
4. Which hook exercise characteristic helps explain how the Mendez Family members were extraordinary Americans?