



## TRANSCRIPT

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### **Title: Mendez Tribute Park Virtual Groundbreaking**

- Welcome to the Mendez Tribute Park groundbreaking. I'm Sergio Contreras, and a councilman who helped work to put this park and monument together. We're standing on the corner of Westminster Boulevard and Olive Street in Westminster, California, the city that is the seat of one of the most significant events in the history of California. During this groundbreaking, you'll learn more about the Mendez vs. Westminster case and how the city of Westminster is planning to honor ordinary people who changed history for the better. This project began as a way for Westminster to acknowledge our past while building a brighter future. The case of Mendez vs. Westminster impacted us all, yet most residents have never heard about it. This historic court decision paved the way for later rulings that would end school segregation once and for all in our nation. By building the statues and park, we hope to further solidify Westminster's civil rights history in the minds of residents and visitors alike. This park will serve as a location to remind us all that everyone deserves a right to a quality, free education, because it is through knowledge of our history that we can avoid repeating the mistakes of our past. This park and monument will also serve to remind people that equality ultimately leads to the end goal we seek, a society where people succeed and are judged based on their merits rather than their skin tone or affluence. Today we break ground to begin construction of the Mendez Tribute Monument Park. Today we begin to commemorate Westminster's place in civil rights history.

- [Narrator] Sylvia Mendez and her two brothers were early elementary school students when they were turned away from Westminster, California's 17th Street School because of their Mexican heritage.

- Well, my father thought, he couldn't believe it. He thought it was a mistake, that the teacher, the clerk that said we couldn't enter to that school, it was a mistake, because we lived right close to that school.

- [Narrator] Gonzalo Mendez Sr., his wife, Felicitas, and all three of the children were American citizens and spoke English fluently, but the district told them the children would have to attend Hoover School, a Mexican school. The Mendez family and four other Orange County families challenged the segregation of their schools. Mendez vs. Westminster resulted in the integration of schools in Orange County, California.

- I'm proud that at least we had the courage to do it, you know, to fight for, not for our children, but for the other children, their children, and their children, you know, and for all the communities.

- And seven years before Brown vs. Board of Education, integration here in California was the very first state to be integrated.

- [Narrator] Mendez vs. Westminster set a legal precedent that in 1954, helped Thurgood Marshall successfully argue before the Supreme Court that segregation violated the U.S. Constitution. 64 years after the Mendez case was decided, Sylvia Mendez received a Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama for her leadership and advocacy

in the civil rights movement. She continues to advocate for equality and opportunity for all Americans.

- It had to be done. Someone had to be the first one to step out and say wait a second, things aren't right here.

- To understand that that case had such an impact on history was an eye opening experience for me, to say the least, that Brown vs. Board of Education wasn't the precedent, that this case was actually the precedent.

- As a first generation Mexican American, it's very important to me, the Mendez story. During the course of my life, I was given many educational opportunities, and it wasn't until I learned about the story that I realized that those opportunities were made possible because of Sylvia Mendez, her family, and the courageous struggle that they took on many years ago for social injustice.

- And as a student, I am a second generation American. My parents were immigrants. I see this impact, I probably am the living, breathing impact of Mendez vs. Westminster. It's a good feeling to know that where I come from, something big happened.

- It's very important for people to know that we were not a backwards little county, that we were a county that was visionary in terms of courageous people.

- Particularly for the city of Westminster, I think the park is going to be a source of community pride. The idea that somebody from Westminster changed the world is a very powerful reality, and unfortunately, it's a reality that many folks in our community were not aware of.

- While the Mendez family was very humble, and they weren't doing it for the fame and the recognition, it's important for us all to thank them. Everybody in the country should be thanking the Mendez family, because what they did had such far reaching impacts. The monument is definitely gonna change this.

- It's important as a symbol, as a symbol of a group of people that worked together for one purpose, and that was to make sure their kids got a good education. That's what it came down to, so to me, that's what we want people to see is when you pass this, that we know here how important education is for our kids.

- It takes a lot of collaboration to honor an event this important to the history of our city, our state, and our nation. The City of Westminster asked the Orange County Department of Education to partner with us to make this park and monument a reality. It is because of their support that we are breaking ground here today. Let me introduce one of our key partners from the Orange County Department of Education, Dr. Jeff Hittenberger.

- Thank you so much sir, Joe, and thanks to all of you for joining us for this historic groundbreaking. I'd like you to imagine this park a year from now, full of children. Imagine a family coming here to the corner of Westminster and Olive Streets for a family visit to the Mendez Park, and walking down a walkway under shady trees, surrounded by beautiful grasses and flowers, and having a time together as a family to think about and discover the Mendez vs. Westminster case. The first thing the family will find in walking down this shaded path is two statues of children on their way to school, holding books. These children represent the 5000 children who were represented in this class action lawsuit, and because of Mendez

vs. Westminster, these children had freedom and equality in Orange County schools. These statues were created by Ignacio Gomez, a famous California artist and sculptor, who is actually creating those right now. As the family continues down the walkway, they'll arrive at statues of Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, the courageous people, the parents who brought this case, with other Orange County families and changed California history. As they continue down the walkway, they will arrive at a great big monument that is in the shape of an open book, and on this open book will be written the history of the Mendez vs. Westminster case. There will be audio elements throughout the park, so the family could choose to listen to the story in English or in Spanish, or in Vietnamese, representing the diversity of this community. So after they've read the story on the book or listened to it on the phone, they'll be able to walk over to a series of beautiful, colorful, interpretative panels that'll be all along the side of the park, and these panels not only will have pictures and text for them to look at and read, but they'll have augmented reality elements, so picture one of the children holding up their phone to a picture of Sylvia Mendez, and having Sylvia come to life, and start talking about the story in her own words. And all along the side of the park, you'll have these interpretive panels. In short, the family will have an opportunity to explore and discover Orange County history in a deeper way than they've ever done before. And it will be just the beginning of their exploration of Orange County history and of the Mendez case, because from the park they can go to a number of sites in Westminster that are significant for the Mendez story. For example, just a block to the east of here is the site where 17th Street School was located, and where the children were turned away, and then four blocks down Olive Street from here is the site of Hoover School, where the children had to attend, the so-called Mexican school, while the case was being tried, and then about a mile to the west is the site of the Munemitsu farm, where the Munemitsu family lived and raised crops until the time that Executive Order 9066 was written, and Japanese American families from the West Coast were removed to internment camps and incarcerated, including the Munemitsu family, and it was because of that that the Mendez family came and leased that land, and today, all these years later, there is now a school on that site of the Munemitsu farm. And speaking of the farm, this shovel is very significant. This is the shovel that's being used for the groundbreaking today, and it is a shovel that actually was used on the Munemitsu farm. This shovel was loaned to us by Janice Monemitsu, who is the daughter of Tad Monemitsu, who was the owner of that farm at the time that it was leased to the Mendez family. This shovel represents the productivity, the cooperation, the courage of the Muenmitsu and Mendez families. One of our key leaders in Orange County today is the Orange County Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Al Mijares. Think about this for a minute. 77 years ago, a Mexican American family was turned away from an Orange County public school because of their heritage. Today our elected leader of the Orange County education system is an American of Mexican heritage, Dr. Al Mijares.

- Well, this is a very exciting day for me personally, and obviously not only myself, but to the county, the state, and perhaps the country. You know, every once in awhile, God chooses a person to profoundly impact society, and that person happens to be Sylvia Mendez, who to this day serves as the face of the Mendez vs. Westminster lawsuit. She and her family, Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, challenged the doctrine of separate but equal. It is profound in the sense that all of us today live more equal lives and have better opportunities. As the first Hispanic superintendent for the Orange County Department of Education I really credit much of not only my success, but the fact that this opportunity was afforded me because of what the Mendez family did, so this is a very exciting day for me, and soon there will be a monument here to pay tribute to the Mendez family, and not only to the Mendez family, but to four other families that fought with Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, and the students that we teach in this great county and their families will derive many benefits as a result of this monument, and we intend to connect the monument itself to teaching and learning so the instructional process will

be enriched. We'll talk about matters of desegregation. We'll talk about matters that challenge equity in the classroom, and I truly believe that what we're doing here today will be far more than just a memorial. It will also weave itself right into the classroom at the fore of the instructional program.

- It's gonna be wonderful, I think. It's gonna be a lesson for whoever goes and sees it. I think my father would be so proud. There's his picture right there on the wall. He would be so proud because when he-- After this case was won, nobody even said, "Gracias, Gonzalo." Nobody even said, "Thank you, Gonzalo, for what you've done." It was just like forgotten, and what I tell the students, they say well, what happened? I said well, if it would have happened like in the South, where the police came and they had to bring in the infantry to make sure that you got into-- But nothing, you know, it was just-- It was written in the registry, you know, about the case, and then it was just forgotten, you know? And so nobody knew about it, and so later in life, my father would talk about it, you know, and nobody even said, "Gonzalo, you did a great thing," you know, and so I feel that this monument, that's where he grew up and was minister. He would be so proud, you know, to know that at last he was being acknowledged for what he had done at one time in his life. I hope the monument will inspire the students that come, or whoever sees it, whoever sees the monument and know about how great our country is, and how here in the United States you can accomplish anything you want. If they fought at that time, so many years ago, they were fighting against injustice and they won, it can happen. Anybody that wants to fight against evil or something that's injustice, people will join you, just like they joined my father, Gonzalo and the other families, and so that monument is gonna stand for justice and for education. That's what I want it to stand up for, and for whoever sees it, it's just a symbol.

- The Mendez vs. Westminster decision didn't just change life, you know, in the county. It profoundly changed the United States.

- And yet for decades, there has been no public space to commemorate the case and its impact on generations of students. But that's about to change.

- Today we break ground on a new park that will honor the Mendez family and all those who had the courage to stand up for the American principles of truth, civil rights, equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

- This will be a place to learn about the history of the case and to reflect on the fact that ordinary Americans can unite to do extraordinary things.

- This will be also a place to affirm and celebrate our shared values, including access to public schools that are safe and equitable.

- It will be a place to be together with friends, family...

- And neighbors from all backgrounds.

- It will be a place to share our story.

- A story about Westminster.

- A story about America.

- A story about us, all of us.

- All of us.

- All of us.

- All of us.

- All of us.

- Thank you for joining us for this historic groundbreaking of the Mendez Tribute Monument Park. I want to thank all of those who have helped make this possible, the Orange County Department of Education, the City of Westminster, sculptor Ignacio Gomez, all the residents and teachers, and organizations that spoke in support of this legacy project, and of course, the Mendez family. Your struggles changed the world forever, and we are all grateful you had the strength to put up the fight. Thank you for caring about our community and for your commitment to making Orange County a caring and inclusive city. Please join us again in 2021 for the grand opening and ribbon cutting of the Mendez Tribute Monument Park. We look forward to seeing you then.

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