

THE LEGACY OF JUDGE JOHN F. MENDOZA

BY SYLVIA TISCAREÑO, ESQ.



On October 22, 1951, Las Vegas native John F. Mendoza became the first Hispanic attorney to be licensed in Nevada.¹ His career would ultimately become a litany of “firsts:” first Hispanic deputy district attorney, first Hispanic justice of the peace, first Hispanic North Las Vegas city attorney, first Hispanic Clark County district attorney, and first Hispanic district court judge, just to name a few.² As attorney Tony F. Sanchez III noted when delivering his eulogy, Mendoza’s “... legend preceded him ... the way lightning precedes thunder.” To obtain a better understanding of Mendoza’s amazing climb to professional success, it is best to start at the beginning.

Born in 1928, Mendoza was the grandson of Mexican immigrants. His grandparents arrived in the Las Vegas valley in 1916.³ As a Las Vegas native, Mendoza not only witnessed first-hand the small western town blossoming into a large metropolitan area, but he also played a direct role in shaping its legal landscape. He would later recall that one of his elementary school teachers, Ms. Barselo, instilled in him the concept of thinking about one's future and focusing on one's goals.⁴ Holding onto that focus during his senior year, Mendoza went on to make an impression on the field as captain of the football team for Las Vegas High School's '44 Dream Team; he would later become the first Nevadan to earn a scholarship to the University of Notre Dame.⁵ While football provided Mendoza with an opportunity to earn a scholarship, he credits his high school football coach, Harvey Stanford, with teaching him about morals, ethics and the importance of community involvement.⁶ After serving in the United States Army, Mendoza would later become the first person in his family to attend college, graduating from the University of Notre Dame with his juris doctorate, cum laude.⁷ After graduation, Mendoza returned to Las Vegas to dedicate his professional life to his legal career and the community.

Mendoza went on to hold many positions in both the private and public sectors, and was actively involved in his community. In addition to practicing law with private firms, he served as Clark County deputy attorney, justice of the peace for the Las Vegas Township, North Las Vegas city attorney, Clark County district attorney, Eighth Judicial District Court judge, chairman of the Nevada Public Service Commission, chairman of the Transportation Service Authority, president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges; national director and president of the Las Vegas "Aid to Adoption of Special Kids," co-founder of the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program, and president of the Latin Chamber of Commerce.⁸ Years into his career, after becoming a district court judge, he started the first Latin American Bar Association (LABA), with 10 members.⁹

It is no surprise that such a successful, tenacious, motivated and exemplary legal professional would ultimately become the first Hispanic Nevadan to have an elementary school named after him; incidentally, of all his countless accomplishments, Mendoza was most

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Judge Mendoza swearing-in newly elected officers of the Latin American Bar Association in 1986. From left to right: Eva García Mendoza, Frank Ponticello, Richard Avila, now Judge Valorie J. Vega.

Photo courtesy Judge Valorie J. Vega.

proud of the school named in his honor.¹⁰ One can only suppose that the school reminded him of Ms. Barselo challenging him to dream big and focus on future goals. In 2006, Mendoza received the Latin Chamber of Commerce’s Lifetime Achievement Award for his service to the Hispanic community; posthumously, the award was renamed the “Judge John F. Mendoza Lifetime Achievement Award.”¹¹

Developing Groundbreaking Programs

In 1975, Mendoza started the arduous process of organizing one of the first state-run court interpreter programs in the country; he would ultimately succeed in securing a grant in order to fund the program.¹² His motivation for creating such a program stemmed from a personal courtroom experience: he was sitting in the courtroom when a Hispanic woman entered with her attorney and young son – unbeknownst to the judge, the young boy would serve not only as a witness, but also as his mother’s interpreter.¹³ Mendoza realized at that moment that the court system needed interpreters.¹⁴ Today, the court interpreter program has been codified in the Nevada Revised Statutes.

During the 1970s, Mendoza realized there was a problem with the amount of work inundating the district court judges.¹⁵ In classic Mendoza form, when there was a problem, he developed a solution. Knowing that funding for more district court judgeships would not be provided, Mendoza developed a training program for law clerks within the county’s district court system.¹⁶

As if being the first Hispanic to serve as the president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges was not accomplishment enough, Mendoza went on to start the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program,¹⁷ in an effort to fight for the rights of abused and neglected children. On the 30th anniversary of the CASA program, Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada recognized Mendoza on the senate floor, remarking that “[d]uring his career, Judge Mendoza recognized the desperate need for skilled and timely decision-making in the lives of abused, neglected and abandoned children, not only in Nevada but across the country ... [h]e held caseworkers responsible for the children they represented and answerable to the court for the decisions they made.”¹⁸

For a kid who started out selling newspapers and went on to earn 88 cents an hour digging ditches at

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Las Vegas High School's 1944 "Dream Team"

Photo courtesy of the Southern Nevada Sports Hall of Fame.

the Basic Magnesium plant in Henderson,¹⁹ the legacy Mendoza created is truly humbling. All the more amazing is the fact that, during such a tumultuous time in this nation's history, while people of color were fighting for equality and civil rights, Judge John Mendoza "...transcended racial politics..." and was able to create an amazing legal career, "...not because he was Hispanic..."²⁰ but because he had the initiative and desire to leave his community a better place than he found it. ■

1. Tom Rodriguez, "Latino legend passes away," *Comunicación* (Volume 18, Winter 2012). Retrieved from <http://www.lvlcc.com/newsletter/pdfs/0018.pdf>.]
2. *Ibid.*
3. Andres Moses (Interviewer), oral history of Judge John Mendoza, *An Interview with Judge John Mendoza*. (Las Vegas, Nevada:

- University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Special Collections, 2005), 1.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
5. *Ibid.* 1..
6. *Ibid.* 3, at 51-52.
7. *Ibid.* 3, at 100.
8. Obituary, Judge John F. Mendoza. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Retrieved from <http://obits.reviewjournal.com/obituaries/lvrj/obituary.aspx?pid=154541467#fbLoggedOut>.
9. *Ibid.* 3, at 122.
10. *Ibid.* 1.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.* 3, at 149.
13. *Ibid.* 3, 147.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.* 3, at 153.
16. *Ibid.* 3, at 155.
17. *Ibid.* 3, at 168.
18. German, J. (2011, November 8). Former District Judge John Mendoza Dies at 83. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/crime-courts/former-district-judge-john-mendoza-dies-83>].
19. *Ibid.* 3, at 16-17, 28.
20. Eulogy of Tony F. Sanchez, III, November 2011.



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