

TEJANO LEGENDS

By

Daisy Wanda Garcia

Editor: The following text was written by Wanda for the upcoming GI Forum Texas State conference.

Welcome to the 2010 AGIF State Conference. My father Dr. Hector P. Garcia wrote a column called Message from the Founder for every convention booklet. It is my pleasure to follow his example by writing this article for the State Conference.

We have all heard the expression, "There are no accidents." The truth is all that we experience is by plan, and so is what we attract to our physical world. I have always believed that God sends special people to this earth to accomplish specific work on this earth and the right people and circumstances turn up to help with the effort.

My father Dr. Hector P. Garcia belonged to this category of special people.

Papa's mission was the liberation of the Mexican American people from their oppressive reality. Early on, he knew he had a mission to help his people.

In the 40s and 50s, the quality of life was dim for Mexican Americans. They attended segregated schools, rarely completed grammar school, could not hope to get a fair trial by jury, and could only aspire to hold menial jobs. The poll tax kept low-income Hispanics from voting. Even Mexican American students who spoke English were placed in segregated schools. This is the world my father was born into and these conditions provided him with the impetus to make the world better not only for him but for his people.

My Papa was not the only one chosen for this mission. Among the Tejanos were Dr. Clotilde Garcia, Gustavo Garcia, Dr. George I. Sanchez, Cristobal Aldrete, Ed Idar, and James DeAnda. Vicente Ximenes who met my father in Corpus Christi, Texas returned to his home and blazed a path in New Mexico by working on desegregation

issues. These men had special skills needed to meet challenges in the areas of health, education and law.

Dr. Hector P. Garcia

Dr. Hector worked tirelessly on his mission to improve the lot of the Mexican American People. He attended segregated schools in Mercedes Texas. Graduated at the top of his class at the University of Texas at Austin and UTMB in Galveston. He joined the U.S. Army and served in the European theatre in the infantry, the Corps of Engineers, and in the Medical Corps. Dr. Garcia earned the Bronze Star with six battle stars for his bravery during the war. Later after being honorably discharged he returned to Corpus Christi, Texas to begin his private medical practice. He became a doctor for the Veterans Administration where he soon learned about the plight of the veteran to obtain benefits. He was instrumental in desegregating the Nueces county hospital system and the Naval Air Station hospital. Dr. Garcia organized the American G.I. Forum to help the veterans. Later, the AGIF became involved with desegregating the school systems and the obtaining equity for Mexican Americans in the court system. The American G.I. Forum is a national organization.

Dr. Garcia was recognized world wide for his work. The lists of honors are so numerous, that I will not mention them. The award that meant the most to him was the Medal of Freedom award given to him by President Ronald Reagan. He told the President, "Now I feel that I have truly arrived as an American." Dr. Garcia is a model for us all and the embodiment of the American Dream.

Dr. Clotilde P. Garcia

When Dr. Cleo came into my life I was a child. Cleo was pursuing higher education and raising her son Tony Canales. She wanted to attend Medical School but did not know if she could afford it. Dr. Hector, her brother inspired her and she applied. Cleo graduated at the top of her class and returned to Corpus Christi Texas to practice medicine. During the span of her long career she delivered 10,000 babies.

Cleo actively promoted the research, collection and development of genealogical data on Spanish/Mexican settlers of South Texas. She amassed a huge collection of genealogical books from Spain from the about one thousand volumes she used during research. She donated the collection to the library at Texas A&M University because she believed in the importance of taking pride in our roots and culture. Dr. Cleo was

a role model for us. She held traditional beliefs, yet was a trailblazer. Dr. Cleo served on the Del Mar Board of regents for 22 years. She served on various state commissions. She was an accomplished historian writing 10 books about the history of northeastern Mexico and South Texas. In 1990, United States Senator Lloyd M. Bentsen Jr. honored Dr. Cleo as "A Rediscoverer of Texas. Juan Carlos I, King of Spain presented Dr. Cleo with the order of Isabella the Catholica in honor of her work and contribution to our Spanish American heritage. In 1990, His Holiness Pope John Paul II awarded Dr. Cleo with the "Benemerenti" Pontifical Decoration Medal. Being a single mother and a pioneer in a field dominated by males inspires us to climb over the barriers. In 1984, Dr. Cleo was inducted into the first Texas Women's Hall of Fame. She was recognized for her service as a doctor for her concern for the needs of Mexican-American people. She is a pioneer for all women.

GUSTAVO GARCIA

When Attorney Gustavo Garcia "Gus" came in my life, he had a long and distinguished list of accomplishments in the work of desegregating schools in Texas and other states. He became first lieutenant in the United States Army, and was stationed in Japan with the judge advocate corps.

In 1949, he represented the family of Pvt. Felix Longoria. From 1951 to 1952, he was the legal advisor for the AGIF. In 1952, Garcia was an attorney in the case of *Hernandez v. State of Texas*. The case eventually went before the Supreme Court. Gustavo argued that Hernandez was denied a fair trial because an all white jury decided the trial. Garcia presented such a brilliant case that Chief Justice Warren allowed him an extra 15 minutes to present his arguments. Gustavo Garcia died before his time. A brilliant career cut short because of personal demons. As I reflect on Gus' life, I wonder whether his life might have ended differently if he had not dealt with issues degrading his people. His memory will always haunt me.

DR. GEORGE I. SANCHEZ

Dr. George I. Sanchez dedicated his life to improving the educational opportunities for Hispanics. He questioned school funding, the use of standardized tests, segregation based on non-proficiency in English and other discriminatory practices against Spanish speaking schoolchildren.

While in New Mexico, Dr. Sanchez challenged the use of standardized tests with Spanish-speaking children and equalization of school funding in the school system. His success came at a personal price, though. The opposing side used their influence to withhold a tenured position at the University of New Mexico. One door closed and another door opened. In 1940, Sanchez accepted an invitation from the University of Texas at Austin to teach Latin American Studies where he remained until his death in 1972.

CRISTOBAL ALDRETE

Papa always said that Cris single handedly desegregated the Del Rio ISD. In fact, Cris had a long history of being involved in school desegregation cases. In 1949, he lodged a complaint with the Texas Department of Education against the segregated Del Rio school system on behalf of the Alba Club founded by Cris. Ultimately, the state required that public schools in Texas end segregation based on national origin by September of 1949. Cris was involved in the case of *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District*. Aldrete was one of five attorneys representing Hernandez on behalf of the AGIF and LULAC in *Hernández v. State of Texas*. Cris soon found Dr. Hector. In August 1952, he and Dr. Hector P. García, traveled throughout the Southwest promoting the organization to make the organization national in scope. They traveled through four states and organized AGIF chapters in 19 cities in two weeks. Cris served for many elected officials throughout his distinguished public service career.

I became acquainted with Cris while he served in the **American G.I. Forum (AGIF)**, as State Chairman in 1953. Later I had the honor of working with Cris for several years when he worked for U.S. Senator Lloyd M Bentsen Jr. We lost touch when he retired from the Senate office. The last time I saw Cris, he was battling liver cancer. Always the optimist, Cris said he was looking for a job. He died 5 months after I saw him in 1991.

ED IDAR

I never became close to Ed, but remember seeing him at the AGIF conventions. He served as State Chairman. Later I would hear his name in conversation. Ed was born into of a family of political activists.

Idar's father, aunt and grandfather were both newspaper printers before and after the Mexican Revolution. In 1938, Idar served as a civilian employee and soldier of the U.S. Army, working in England, India and China in the 1940s. While in China, Idar earned both the Bronze Star and the Army Commendation Medal, and rose to the rank of Technical Sergeant. He was honorably discharged from the service in 1946.

Idar earned his Bachelor of Arts in journalism at The University of Texas at Austin in 1949. At UT, he was a member of the Alba and Laredo clubs, and began to work with Hector P. García during the founding of the American G.I. Forum (AGIF). Idar served as both chairman and secretary of the AGIF in Texas. There, he and others worked towards increasing the Mexican American influence in the political arena, and fought against segregation in the schools. Idar graduated from the University Of Texas School Of Law, and eventually set up his own legal practices in McAllen and later San Angelo.

In 1970, Idar became an attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). While with MALDEF, he worked on several civil rights cases, including *Regester v. Bullock*, a case that brought about single-member legislative districts in Bexar County. In 1974, Idar took the position of Assistant Attorney General for the State of Texas, and assisted in several police brutality cases. Idar argued the landmark prison rights case in *Ruiz v. Estelle* on the side of the Texas Department of Corrections. In retirement, Idar stayed involved in various Mexican American interest groups and participated in talks and panels on education and civil rights. Idar died in on 11 October 2003, at the age of 82.

JAMES DEANDA

“Jimmy”, was what family members called him when he would come to visit us. He had this standing joke. He would hold his arm at shoulder level and then say the he would marry Cecilia my sister when she grew that high. His easy manner and jovial appearance concealed a razor sharp intellect, which made him succeed in legal battles. Papa met DeAnda while he was working for Carlos Cadena writing briefs for *Hernandez v. State of Texas*. Later, DeAnda served as legal council for the American G.I. Forum. Both Papa and DeAnda formed a lifelong friendship that lasted until his death in 1996.

DeAnda challenged substandard schooling for Mexican American children, voting rights, employment cases. He helped to establish, the

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. James DeAnda, served as one of the lawyers on the Hernandez v. Texas. This ruling was significant because for the first time gave Mexican Americans status as a distinct legal classification entitled to special protection under the Constitution. Later, Mr. DeAnda handled a series of important school desegregation cases, among them Hernandez v. Driscoll Independent School District in 1956. It challenged a school system that required children from Spanish-speaking families to spend three years in the first grade because of a presumed need to learn English.

In 1979, Mr. DeAnda was appointed by President Carter to the federal bench in the Southern District of Texas. He was the nation's second Mexican American federal judge and served for 13 years, including four as chief judge. DeAnda died in 2006.

The sacrifices and work of all these men opened many doors for Mexican Americans. Let us never forget them and let us ensure that history does not. As my father used to say, "Que Dios los bendiga."