

## For All the Children: Telling the Story of *Mendez v. Westminster* in Film

BY ALICIA RIVERA

The popularity of Ken Burns' sweeping documentaries (such as *The Civil War*, *The History of Baseball*, *Jazz*, and *The West*), along with the success of The History Channel, demonstrates the increasing interest of the public in history topics. Meanwhile, the longevity of television series such as *Law & Order* and *The West Wing* indicate that Americans remain fascinated by law and politics. It is no surprise, then, that documentary filmmakers are attracted to producing works that educate the public about cases that have changed American law and American lives in important ways.

Sandra Robbie, a producer for the Orange County PBS affiliate KOCE, has created an award-winning presentation based on the 1946 case *Mendez v. Westminster*, 161 F. 3d 774, which outlawed school segregation throughout the west for children of Mexican ancestry. (See "Foreshadowing *Brown v. Board*: The 1946 Case of *Mendez v. Westminster*," by Joy C. Shaw, in the Autumn/Winter 2004 issue of the CSCHS Newsletter.) Growing up in Orange County, Robbie was unaware that Mexican children had been denied equal access to educational facilities. Learning of the case via a more recent newspaper article, Robbie was inspired to bring an awareness of this forgotten aspect of California history to the public, by creating a documentary film for airing on PBS, a forum Robbie calls a "great equalizer."

As Robbie notes, "So many of us believe that the fight for civil rights is a black and white battle that was fought and won solely in the American South. *Mendez v. Westminster* is the story of people of many colors fighting for American equality right here in Orange County. Most of Orange County has no idea of the important contribution that was made here. In fact, most of the people I've spoken with [about the case], including teachers and lawyers, have no idea."

Dating back to 1890, the California Penal Code contained a statute that appeared to provide equal educational access to children in California. However, with Spanish being the first language of many children of Mexican ancestry, school officials segregated students on the basis of a claimed language barrier. But more blatantly racist assumptions and justifications were at work too: With their poor hygiene and lack of intellectual capacity, the argument went, these children were unsuited for anything more than the mechanical trades (for boys) or housekeeping (for girls), and thus, the argument continued, segregated, inferior schooling was not only adequate but preferable.



Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalo Mendez

Robbie's documentary captures the growing resistance to this Jim Crow ideology by focusing on the life of Gonzalo Mendez, a father who refused to settle for a segregated education for his children. By building the film around the recollections of Mendez' children, wife, friends, and neighbors, Robbie showcases the people who lived the experience of *Mendez v. Westminster*, and at the same time is able to develop the documentary around two themes, determined resistance and common (and sometimes, uncommon) solidarity.

The story of how the Mendez family came to fight for equal educational access begins with Gonzalo's daughter recounting a day when her aunt took her and her siblings, as well as her cousins, to school. The light-complected cousins were able to pass for Anglo and thus attended Westminster's nearby white school. With their darker skin, the Mendez children were taken to Westminster's more distant "Mexican" school. The daughters tell of their father's anger when he realized that his children, along with other Mexican children, were being forced to attend a segregated school.

But Gonzalo Mendez did not set out to fight this battle alone. Mendez' lawyers aimed for a class action lawsuit by involving the Mexican community across Orange County. Interviews reveal Gonzalo Mendez relying on his financial, intellectual, and emotional strengths to build the coalition, by reaching out to families in a number of different school districts. The documentary details how those in the Santa Ana school district turned Mendez away at first, sensing the possibility of repercussions from the powerful school board. Mendez' daughter explained the fear her own parents felt. Eventually, however, families in Westminster, El Modena, Garden Grove, and Santa Ana came to support Gonzalo Mendez' efforts.

In addition, Robbie showcases a more unusual solidarity that lay behind the *Mendez* case, between the Mendezes and their Japanese American neighbors. Like others of Japanese ancestry living in California during World War II, the Minumitsu family was forced to leave its home and report for internment for the duration of the war. Many of these families lost everything, including their homes, either because they had

no choice but to abandon their property or their property was taken via unscrupulous “safekeeping.” The Minumitsus leased their small farm to the Mendez family during their internment.

The trust was well-placed, and the Minumitsus were able to reclaim their home and livelihood after the war. Interviewed in the documentary, a Minumitsu daughter tells of this important cooperation between a Japanese family and a Mexican family during World War II. This theme of interracial solidarity in racially diverse California appears repeatedly in the film, and it is refreshing that Robbie chose to emphasize that aspect of the Mendez’ fight against segregation.

In addition to relying on interviews with those involved in the litigation of *Mendez v. Westminster*, Robbie incorporates analytical observations from scholars such as the University of California, Irvine’s Professor Gilbert Gonzalez. Professor Gonzalez is the author of *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Villages in a Southern California County, 1900 - 1950*, and the seminal study of the history of school segregation of Chicanos in America, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation*, and he devotes considerable attention to the Mendez case in his writings. Through Gonzalez, Robbie introduces and develops the background history of segregation, and Gonzalez provides a sense of the historiography of the subject.

Robbie also showcases Christopher Arriola, president of the Mexican American political organization La Raza. Arriola, presently the district attorney of Santa Clara County and a well-known Latino community leader, provides in-depth analysis of the Mendez case that contributes to the high quality of this documentary.

Robbie’s use of traditional Mexican music, along with historical photographs of the Mendez family, their friends, and the barrio in which they lived, allows viewers to gain a feel for the cultural environment of the times, making *Mendez v. Westminster* a visually and aurally rich documentary. Californians are indebted to Robbie for bringing to light an aspect of the history of the fight for equality and civil rights that has often been overlooked, even by historians of California. *Mendez v. Westminster: For All the Children/Para Todos Los Niños* is well-deserving of its Emmy and Golden Mike awards.

*Mendez vs. Westminster: For All the Children/Para Todos Los Niños. Written and produced by Sandra Robbie. KOCE Productions, 2002. 27 minutes. (PBS, Orange County, KOCE, 15751 Gothard St., Huntington Beach, CA 92647)*

*The DVD version of this documentary is a 2005 benefit of Society membership at the Judicial level and above. If you did not receive this benefit, please contact the CSCHS at [director@cschs.org](mailto:director@cschs.org) or (818) 781-6008. Additional copies may be purchased at \$15 each. Members at the Associate level may upgrade their memberships to receive the Mendez v. Westminster DVD.*

*Alicia Rivera holds a B.S.N. from the University of Costa Rica and a B.A. and M.A. in history from California State University, Fresno. Ms. Rivera was awarded the 2005 California State University, Fresno Social Science Dean’s Medal for her work. She continues to work in nursing while pursuing a Ph.D. in history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her areas of interest are labor history and segregation history in California.*

SPREADING THE WORD:  
*Mendez v. Westminster*

Sandra Robbie has recently been named “Community Outreach Producer” for KOCE, Orange County’s PBS affiliate. Her responsibilities include developing programming for KOCE that reflects the rich diversity and addresses the needs of the Orange County area, and working to promote the history of the *Mendez v. Westminster* case in California classrooms. Robbie has co-authored a children’s book on the Mendez case with Anaheim teacher Michael Matsuda that will be published in May, 2006.

Explaining her new position, Robbie notes, “It makes sense for California students to know the history that happened here that helped to change our nation. The American civil rights struggle continues to this day and involves all of us. Our students need to know how history really happens. They need to see the invisible connections between us all. It is time for our history books to reflect the contributions of many people in achieving the freedoms we have today.”

Robbie acknowledges the biggest challenge ahead will be to secure funding to bring the Mendez history to all California schools.

*For more information on the book, Mendez vs. Westminster: For All the Children, An American Civil Rights Story; Mendez presentations for schools or groups; or the Emmy Award-winning documentary, contact Sandra Robbie at (714) 895-0869 or [srobbie@koce.org](mailto:srobbie@koce.org).*