



# News Release

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## **Park honoring historic Mendez v. Westminster case to open on Dec. 1** City of Westminster, OCDE invite community to attend ribbon-cutting ceremony

WESTMINSTER, Calif. — The City of Westminster, in partnership with the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE), will host a grand opening ceremony on Thursday, Dec. 1 to celebrate the completion of a new park and monument honoring the historic Mendez v. Westminster case, which led to the desegregation of California's public schools 75 years ago.

The event, free and open to the public, will begin at 10 a.m. at 7371 Westminster Blvd., where community leaders and special guest dignitaries will deliver welcoming remarks and officially open Mendez Tribute Monument Park to the community with a ceremonial ribbon cutting.

"We're excited and honored to have built the first public space that commemorates this landmark civil rights case," said City Manager Christine Cordon.

Located on the northeast corner of Westminster Boulevard and Olive Street, Mendez Tribute Monument Park will prominently feature statues of two parents — Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez — who were at the heart of the famed civil rights case. Nearby will be sculpted figures of students holding books to symbolize the 5,000 children represented in the legal action that laid the foundation for the U.S. Supreme Court's Brown v. Board decision. The statues were crafted by internationally renowned sculptor Ignacio Gomez, whose work is featured in the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC. In addition, the landscaped, quarter-acre park will feature a large, inscribed textbook monument and interpretive panels with insight on the case, the historical figures who were involved, and its far-reaching impacts.

The park, designed by landscape architects with the firm MIG, Inc., also incorporates innovative technologies to enhance the experience of visitors. Stations will display special markers that enable users of smartphones and other devices to access augmented reality visuals, photographs, and audio narrations. The educational content will be available in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Free Wi-Fi service will be provided by the City.

“I am thrilled this day has arrived and grateful beyond words for the work of the City of Westminster, the Orange County Department of Education, and other community leaders who made this park a reality,” said Sylvia Mendez, whose family fought for the right to send her and her two brothers Geronimo (Jerome) and Gonzalo, Jr. to their neighborhood school. “This case is an important part of our country’s history. It transformed the lives of generations of schoolchildren. At last, we have a public place to learn the story of Mendez v. Westminster and to celebrate its legacy.”

Construction on the park began in October 2020 with \$1.5 million in funding from California State Parks and private donations. The City of Westminster partnered with OCDE to develop content for the installations and curriculum for educators. Funding was also provided by the office of State Senator Tom Umberg to support the City's Mendez programs.

“The case of Mendez v. Westminster broke new ground not just for Orange County but for our entire nation thanks to families who wanted nothing more than a quality education for their children,” said Orange County Superintendent Dr. Al Mijares. “Now and forever, this park and monument will serve as a space to gather behind our shared values, to reflect on a watershed moment in our history, and to learn about the local families who made it possible. But make no mistake: In the United States, their legacy is everywhere.”

### **Mendez v. Westminster**

The case of Mendez v. Westminster dates back to 1943, when Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez sought to enroll their daughter, Sylvia, and sons Geronimo (Jerome) and Gonzalo, Jr. at 17th Street School, which had been designated for white children. Despite being local residents and U.S. citizens, the Mendez parents were told their children had to attend the less desirable Hoover Elementary, known as the “Mexican school.”

Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez hired attorney David Marcus and teamed up with four other Mexican-American families to pursue justice through the court system. Their lawsuit, officially known as Mendez, et al v. Westminster, et al, argued that 5,000 children throughout the county were harmed by unjust discrimination policies. Under the U.S. Constitution’s 14th Amendment, the plaintiffs argued equal protection meant citizens could not be treated differently based on their race.

In 1946, U.S. District Court Judge Paul J. McCormick ruled in favor of the five families. Although the decision was appealed, it was upheld by the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals on April 14, 1947, one day before Jackie Robinson played his first major league baseball game with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

The Mendez case ultimately laid the foundation for the U.S. Supreme Court to declare forced segregation unconstitutional in its landmark 1954 decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Still, the Orange County lawsuit was not widely known until Sylvia Mendez began raising awareness at the request of her mother.

### **Commemorating the case**

In recent years, the case has been covered in news articles, books, and documentaries; and it has been commemorated with a postal stamp and a Google Doodle. Meanwhile, several local

school facilities have been named in honor of Sylvia Mendez and her family members, starting with Gonzalo Felicitas Mendez Fundamental Intermediate School in the Santa Ana Unified School District, which opened in 2000.

In 2019, the Westminster School District rededicated its central office with a new marquee that now reads, "Westminster School District, In Honor of La Familia Mendez." In 2021, Westminster High School in the Huntington Beach Union High School District formally dedicated a new Sylvia Mendez Learning Pavilion.

The Mendez Tribute Monument Park is the first of two public spaces in Westminster set to highlight the Mendez v. Westminster decision for future generations. To the east, the Mendez Freedom Trail will consist of a bicycle and walking trail along Hoover Street that will also feature four interactive stations, which are expected to begin construction in 2023.

"The City of Westminster is committed to providing high quality, meaningful projects to our residents and visitors," said Assistant City Manager Adolfo Ozaeta. "No longer is the Mendez v. Westminster case just a footnote in textbooks to preface Brown v. Board of Education. Together, the park and trail will host many generations of students who will visit the site on school field trips, ensuring continued awareness of the case and recognizing the efforts of the Mendez family and the history here in Westminster."

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