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**Wrap-up of the 2020
CPRS Conference & Expo**

**Park Created As
A Tribute to Social Equity**



Mendez Park and Freedom Trail: A Tribute to Social Equity

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Now more than ever, people are aware of the power of parks. Parks and trails are critical to our quality of life. They are focal points for our diverse community. They bring greenspace to our built-out cities. They support our health, fitness and wellbeing. Some even memorialize the challenges we have overcome, and the values we still work to achieve. This is true of the City of Westminster's Mendez Tribute Monument Park and the Mendez Freedom Trail, being built to honor Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez in their fight for civil rights.

Mendez v. Westminster

*“As a child, Sylvia Mendez thought her parents’ court case was all about a playground. That’s because in 1944, the school bus would drop her off at the white school, which had ‘manicured lawns’ and a ‘beautiful playground,’ but she wasn’t allowed there. Instead, she would have to keep walking down the street to the Mexican school — two wooden shacks on a dirt lot next to a cow pasture. . . . But it wasn’t a playground that Mendez’s parents, Gonzalo and Felicitas, were fighting for. It was racial equality.” (C.Y. Kandil, *The Daily Pilot*, April 2016).*

Many people know that Thurgood Marshall, in 1954, successfully argued before the U.S. Supreme Court that racial segregation in public schools violated the U.S. Constitution. However, few people know that seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, two parents from Westminster, California, helped establish a legal precedent for that case.

In 1943, when Sylvia Mendez was in the third grade, she was not allowed to attend Westminster’s 17th Street School. She, her siblings and friends were turned away and told to go to Hoover Elementary, a segregated school for students of Mexican heritage. Her parents, Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, thought there had been a mistake, especially since Sylvia’s fair-skinned cousins were accepted. Sylvia’s father talked to the school principal and superintendent, who eventually agreed to admit Sylvia and her brothers. That wasn’t good enough for Gonzalo, however. Sylvia clearly remembers her father’s response: “No. I’m not fighting just for my children. I’m fighting for all the children.”

Mr. Mendez recruited four other families and filed suit. According to Sylvia, the idea came from an L.A. Times article about park segregation. A local lawyer had recently won an anti-discrimination case in Riverside, where Latinos were not allowed in parks. “He

was so smart,” she said, speaking of the lawyer. “He had a Latino businessman, a professional and a priest try to enter the park, and he took photos when they were turned away. They were all citizens, professionals born in California, and they weren’t allowed to use the park! My dad read the article and said, ‘Go get that lawyer!’”

The 1947 victory of Gonzalo and Felicitas in *Mendez v. Westminster* marked a pivotal point in California’s history, eventually leading to the integration of public schools across the State.

Mendez Park and Freedom Trail

Now almost 75 years since that victory, the City of Westminster is developing a tribute park, monument and trail honoring Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, plaintiffs in the historic *Mendez v. Westminster* civil rights case. Development of the Freedom Trail was made possible through a \$2.3 million

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grant from the California Natural Resources Agency Urban Greening program. In addition, California State Parks recently awarded a \$1.29 million grant to the City for the design and construction of the monument and park.

The 0.2 acre site will feature sculptures and art pieces created by artist Ignacio Gomez, a park plaza with seating, and an interactive station with interpretive panels and augmented reality features to share the Mendez story to visitors. The park, designed by MIG, Inc., has been a collaborative effort between the artist, the City of Westminster, Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) and the community. The design incorporates recycled materials for the site furniture, drought tolerant plantings, accent and security lighting, water-saving irrigation technology, as well as a dry creek bed and depressed planting areas used to capture on-site stormwater.

“Growing up in Westminster my whole life, I never heard about the Mendez case until I was in college,”

The most recent \$1.29 million grant is part of the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68), which directed \$254.9 million to State Parks for competitive grants to create new parks and enhance recreational opportunities for all Californians. City of Westminster Transportation Manager/City Traffic Engineer Adolfo Ozaeta served as the grant writer and applicant for the project. Including the State grant and donations, a total of \$1.64 million has been raised for the park portion of the Mendez Freedom Trail and Tribute Monument, with fundraising continuing to support the educational components.

noted Sergio Contreras, founder of the Westminster Heritage Memorial Committee and a member of the Westminster City Council. “The park will bring this case to life and immerse students in the experience of learning about the Mendez family.” The site will include life-like statues of both Mr. and Mrs. Mendez looking towards “two students that are marching towards equality.”

The students, a young boy and a girl, could be anyone. That’s intentional, explains Sylvia Mendez. “That way, when people see the monument, they’ll know it wasn’t just Latinos that

were fighting for equality and inclusion. It was everybody joining in.”

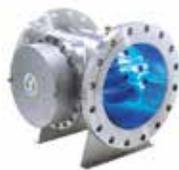
Together, the Mendez Tribute Monument Park and Freedom Trail will include five interactive stations spanning the path along Hoover Street, near the site of the former Hoover Elementary. These stations will honor a variety of leaders who have fought for social justice, including Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, Abraham Lincoln, and Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez. As part of the partnership, OCDE is creating content and curriculum for the park and the trail. OCDE envisions an immersive



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learning experience for those who walk or bike the 2.5 miles along Hoover Avenue onto Westminster Avenue toward the monument. People will be able to read the interpretive panels, see themes captured on banners hung from light poles, read messages embedded in the sidewalks, and access audio and internet content on their smartphones. Groundbreaking is scheduled for this spring.

Equity in Parks and Recreation

While the landmark case *Mendez v. Westminster* was about equal access to education, it's interesting that what Sylvia Mendez remembers, what all kids would likely remember, is wanting a great playground. "Sitting in court, I just kept dreaming about swinging on those swings and going up and down on the teeter totter," she said. Fittingly, the Mendez Tribute Monument Park and Freedom Trail remind us that we all deserve great schools, great parks and playgrounds, and great public spaces that are inclusive and accessible to all. These are the things we value.

In these unprecedented times where parks and recreation are recognized as vital to our communities and critical to our health, it will be important to remember what we value. Why? Because these next few years will be challenging for park and recreation agencies. Professionals and residents across California are ready to take on this challenge, fighting for great parks and convincing city and State leaders to prioritize this investment.

"It is so important to remind people that the pursuit of equality does not always come easily, but it is essential to building a society where people can succeed based on their merits and character, not their skin tone or country of origin," said Councilmember Contreras. That's an important message not only for Westminster's newest park and trail, but for the City's entire park system and the entire State.

The City of Westminster just adopted their first Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan. As documented through a comprehensive needs assessment conducted by MIG, the City has less park space per capita (1.1 acres per

1,000 residents) than most cities in Orange County, Southern California and the nation. Sixteen neighborhoods—approximately one-third of city residents—do not have access to a park within a 10-minute walk, a national guideline for public park access championed by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and Trust for Public Land (TPL). Few trails exist, making it difficult to walk or bike to parks, schools and community destinations. There are many opportunities to better meet the needs of a multicultural community that is 48% Vietnamese and 24% Latino.

However, the City of Westminster has a long history of overcoming challenges. The new Master Plan, Mendez Tribute Monument Park and the Freedom Trail together remind us that we must be strategic, passionate and committed to our efforts to ensure that all residents have access to welcoming and inclusive parks and facilities now and for years to come.

The actions of Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, who in 1946 challenged



segregation in local schools, continue to inspire us. The City of Westminster is developing a tribute park and trail in their honor.

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Joseph "Joey" Lopes Park, West Sacramento, CA



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