



## **STATEMENT OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS ON THE PASSING OF FORMER USCCR VICE CHAIR CRUZ REYNOSO**

**May 18, 2021**

The United States Commission on Civil Rights mourns the passing of Cruz Reynoso, former Vice Chair of the Commission and first Latino California State Supreme Court Justice. Born in Brea on May 2, 1931, Cruz Reynoso's family immigrated to the U.S. during the counterrevolutions in Mexico; he was one of 11 children. His decades long career in advocacy began as a teenager in rural La Habra, Orange County California when a young Reynoso petitioned the U.S. Postmaster to change policy and start delivering mail to Mexican families in their neighborhood. This change, he is quoted as saying to a historian, "was sort of a confirmation of what I was reading in our textbooks -- that we are a democracy."<sup>1</sup>

Reynoso rose from a child worker in the fields and orchards of southern California to become the first Latino California Supreme Court Justice. He earned an associate degree from Fullerton College in 1951 and a bachelor's degree from Pomona College in 1953. After two years in the Army, he entered UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall Law School and graduated in 1958. Cruz Reynoso was extremely well-known in California as co-founder of the California Rural Legal Aid, the first statewide legal aid in the U.S. While at CRLA, he served as Legal Director and was responsible for securing the rights of many low-income clients, including field workers seeking access to sanitary facilities, farmworkers exposed to carcinogenic pesticides such as DDT. He enforced state and federal laws and succeeded in litigation prohibiting the misuse of IQ tests conducted in English to segregate English-language learners in educational settings designated for the mentally challenged students.

The Honorable Reynoso was confirmed by the Judicial Appointments Commission to the California State Supreme Court in 1982. During his five years on the state Supreme Court, he earned respect for his compassion. He wrote the court's opinion in a case that gave homeowners the precedent-setting right to sue airports for jet noise that constituted a "continuing nuisance." And he penned the court's opinion in a case that ruled non-English-speaking defendants must be provided with interpreters at every phase of the criminal process. Residents of the Golden State "require that all persons tried in a California court understand what is happening about them," he wrote. "Who would have it otherwise?"<sup>2</sup>

Reynoso believed that all perspectives should be represented in the American justice system. He referred to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who was excoriated during her own

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<sup>1</sup> Column: History pegs Cruz Reynoso as a defeated judge. Let's remember him as a fighter, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-05-08/cruz-reynoso-legacy>

<sup>2</sup> Cruz Reynoso, California's first Latino state Supreme Court justice, dies at 90, <https://www.latimes.com/obituaries/story/2021-05-07/cruz-reynoso-california-supreme-court-justice-died>

confirmation hearings for a speech she made at UC Berkeley in 2001: “To me, it was perfectly logical that a wise Latina judge who may have had different experiences than other folk would have something to add to the court. That’s the way judges learn from one another. I was the only person on the Supreme Court who ever worked as a farmworker.”<sup>3</sup>

A staunch and highly decorated champion of civil rights, President Bill Clinton honored Cruz with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in August 2009, the highest honor given a civilian. An active member of local, state, and national bar associations, he volunteered as speaker and trainer, and testified before the Senate on pressing national issues, including immigration and refugee policy, school funding, and civil rights. Reynoso’s honors included the Hispanic Heritage Foundation’s Hispanic Heritage Award in Education and the American Bar Association’s Robert J. Kutak and Spirit of Excellence Awards, for his significant contributions toward increased cooperation between legal education, the practicing bar, and the judiciary; the UC Davis Medal, the university’s highest honor; and the Hispanic National Bar Association’s (HNBA) highest honor. UC Davis School of Law established the Cruz & Jeannene Reynoso Scholarship for Legal Access in his name to help students with financial needs.<sup>4</sup>

Messages of condolence were received by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights staff from former Commissioners who respected his guidance and mentorship when he was Commissioner and Vice Chair of the Commission from 1993 to 2004. Bringing more than three decades of legal experience to the Commission, Cruz Reynoso pressed for the vigorous examination of practices and policies regarding the enforcement of federal laws by federal agencies; among the issues the commission broached during his tenure was the disenfranchisement of minority voters in Florida during the 2000 presidential election. Chairperson Norma V. Cantu, who met Reynoso in 1974 when he was a visiting professor at Harvard Law School, described him as a “true genius as a community leader, litigator, and legal scholar.” She continued, “he will be missed by the thousands of people who heard his lectures on civil rights in town halls, community college lecture halls, on C-Span, and on YouTube.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> <https://law.ucdavis.edu/faculty/reynoso/>