

Civil rights pioneer Sylvia Mendez speaks to Etiwanda students

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RANCHO CUCAMONGA - Sylvia Mendez looked out across a sea of fourth and fifth-grade heads in the multipurpose room at Etiwanda Colony Elementary School on Friday morning.

"This is such a diverse class, it's wonderful," she said.

Blonde-haired Colony Cubs sat next to black-haired students who sat next to redheads with long straight hair who sat next to students with dark, kinky hair.

When Mendez was 8 years old, and her parents sought to enroll her in school, she'd been told that she and her siblings couldn't attend the white students' school.

Her family's unwillingness to accept the Mexican students' school next to a cow pasture with an electrified fence serving as the border between the two, would ultimately led to California desegregating seven years before the rest of the nation.

In 1943, her family had moved to Westminster in Orange County, to rent and work a farm owned by a Japanese-American family that had been forced into an internment camp during World War II.

"I was so excited to go to school," she told the students. Mendez, now 76, recalled her mother had bought her a new dress for school, covered in ribbons. But Mendez's family was told that she and her siblings were obviously Mexicans, and would have to attend Hoover Elementary, a two-room wooden shack with dirt floors, instead of 17th Street Elementary, a nicely landscaped school with a beautiful playground and other amenities.

"What did it feel like, when you didn't get to go to the school you wanted," a girl asked.

"I was so sad, so sad," Mendez said. The school was "all dirt. ... The flies used to come next to where we were eating."

Her family fought back, first going to the school board to protest, and then ultimately taking the case to the court on behalf of thousands of Hispanic-American children in four Orange County school districts.

"It's not just about Mexicans, it's not just about Anglos. It's about everyone coming together," she said.

An Orange County judge decided in favor of the Mendez family in February 1946, but the Westminster school board appealed, and civil rights groups from across the nation got involved.

Future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who would argue for the plaintiffs in the later *Brown v. Board of Education*, filed friend-of-the-court briefs on behalf of the Mendez family, using arguments that he would later revisit in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

In 1947, after the Westminster school board lost its appeal, then-governor Earl Warren, who would later serve as the Chief Justice of Supreme Court when *Brown v. Board of Education* was heard and wrote the majority opinion in the case, moved to desegregate California's schools.

"It was nothing like what happened (during the civil rights struggles) in the South," she said. "Integration in California was very peaceful."

And Mendez finally got to attend 17th Street Elementary school, at the same age as the children in Etiwanda Colony's multipurpose room were on Friday.

"One little third grade girl, who wasn't famous, didn't have rich parents, changed the world," Principal Darlene

Carlmark told the students.

"We were so excited because we could go to that beautiful school," Mendez said.

Her family were the only Hispanic students to attend school there that year.

"Was it hard when you went to the white school?" a boy asked.

It was: Early on, a boy told her that she didn't belong there, that Mexicans didn't belong at their school. She went home in tears.

"Don't you understand that's what we were fighting for?" she recalled her mother asked her.

The prejudice passed, and Mendez ultimately had a great time at the school and at the playground she had once only had to envy from afar.

"If I hadn't gone on to those schools, I wouldn't have become a registered nurse," which ended up being her career for 33 years.

Mendez came to the school after her name came up on a test fifth grader Raina Robinson brought home last year. Her mother, Rosalind, works with Mendez's niece at the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Norco.

In 2010, She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, which she wore to the school on Friday.

"Anybody can get the Medal of Freedom if you're doing what you think is right," she said.