

We ARE CHANGE MAKERS

Hispanic Heritage Month

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo (1988-)



Marcelo Hernandez Castillo is an author, poet, essayist, and immigration advocate who was born in Zacatecas, Mexico and immigrated to the California Central Valley. He graduated from Sacramento State University with his B.A. and went on to become the first undocumented student to graduate from the Helen Zell Writers Program at the University of Michigan. Castillo was a graduate of the Canto Mundo Latinx Poetry fellowship. Passionate about breaking barriers, he devotes much of his time to teaching writing and poetry workshops to vast audiences, including (but not limited to) incarcerated young people in California.

Notable Highlights:

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- Castillo was a founding member of the UndocuPoets campaign, a movement that eliminated citizenship requirements from all major first poetry book prizes in the United States.
- Castillo was a recipient of the Barnes and Noble Writers for Writers Award.
- He was a winner of the A. Poulin Jr. Prize published by BOA Editions.
- Castillo was a winner of the Golden Poppy Award from the Northern California Independent Booksellers Association.
- His very first chapter book (DULCE), won him the Drinking Gourd Poetry Prize published by Northwestern University Press, and he has went on to publish several notable works after the creation of this groundbreaking text.

Sylvia Mendez (1936-)



As an 8-year-old girl of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent, Sylvia's parents fought hard for her right to attend a segregated school. Her journey went on to become a class action

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lawsuit (Mendez vs. Westminster) filed on behalf of thousands of Mexican American students in California, namely Orange County. In 1947, seven years before the landmark case Brown vs. Board of Education, this case was successful in ending segregation in the public schools of California.

Notable Highlights:

- Currently a civil rights activist, Mendez earned a degree in nursing, a certification in public health, and served as a pediatric nurse for upwards of 30 years.
- An elementary school was named in her honor in Berkeley, California in 2018, in honor of her passion and work in advocacy, equitable educational opportunities, and the empowerment of all students.
- Mendez received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama for her many efforts.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (1989-)

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Ocasio-Cortez, also referred to as AOC, began her journey as a resident of the Bronx, New York. During childhood, her family relocated a short distance away for better educational opportunities. It was then that AOC developed a passion early on to never give up in working to achieve her educational goals. She went on to study economics and international relations at Boston University. Upon becoming an intern to the late Senator Ted Kennedy, AOC was able to see firsthand the ways in which ICE separations completely destroyed families. As a result, she developed a passion for helping [undocumented] youth to prepare for roles as community leaders and as future generations of college graduates. AOC became the Director of the National Hispanic Institute in an effort to forward this mission.

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- As of 2019, AOC became the youngest woman and youngest Latina to serve in the United States Congress. She went on to accept this role, and be sworn into her second term in January 2021.
- AOC continues to advocate for increased funding and support for community and educational enhancement in areas such as: 1) head start programs, 2) preschool expansion efforts, 3) students loans, 4) support of TRIO students, and related college initiatives.
- AOC continues to devote her time and energy into focusing on enhancing opportunities for social, racial, and economic justice for all people, especially youth residing in and around the Bronx area of New York.

Sonia Sotomayor (1954-)



Sonia Sotomayor is an active lawyer, jurist, and associate justice of the Supreme Court. Born in New York City, she grew up in public housing projects in the Bronx, known as the Bronx Dale-Houses. Sotomayor not only saw but experienced firsthand the ways in which poverty, crime, and other societal ills impacted her family, as well as those around her.

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Despite these challenges, she went on to graduate from both Princeton University and Yale Law School, earning degrees from two of the nation's most prestigious institutions of higher education.

Notable Highlights:

- In 2009 Sotomayor became the first Latina to serve on the Supreme Court. It is important to note that she was also the third woman in the nation to fulfill this role.
- As a justice, Sotomayor continues to make rulings that uphold the right to affordable health care for all people.
- She consistently rules to uphold the legal right of all same sex couples to marry, despite continued opposition faced in this domain.
- Justice Sotomayor consistently advocates for equality and justice for all individuals despite differences.

Cesar Chavez (1927-1993)



Chavez was a first-generation American hero. Known also as a Latino and farm labor leader, he fought for civil rights and equal opportunities for not only farm workers but all individuals. A community organizer, nonviolent social change advocate, and a social entrepreneur, Chavez worked relentlessly for environmental and consumer rights.

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During the Great Depression, Chavez and his family lost their farm. As a young child, he watched those around him become farm workers. After the completion of middle school, Chavez took to farming full-time to support his family. No stranger to hard work, Chavez saw and felt firsthand how difficult life could be for farm workers, despite their daily dedication and continuous efforts to create a better life for themselves and their families.

Notable Highlights:

- Chavez joined the U.S. Navy in 1946 after WWII and served in the Western Pacific.
- He was trained by Fred Ross, a community leader who formed the Community Service Organization (CSO, San Jose Chapter).
- Chavez spent years coordinating voter registration efforts and working to educate societal members about the importance and power of their votes.
- He was passionate about ending discriminatory acts toward farm workers and consistently fought to improve conditions in California (and beyond).
- More information about Chavez can be found at chavezfoundation.org

As we round out our highlighting of just a few of so many amazing Latine individuals, Chavez represents the greatness that each of us should aspire to achieve. He made not only ripples but waves of positivity during his lifetime. His legacy, and that of all the individuals highlighted during this week will forever live on in not only our country, but in our world.