

**UNSUNG HEROES**  
of Hispanic Heritage

# SYLVIA MENDEZ

A PIONEER FOR EQUALITY IN EDUCATION



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# CHAPTER ONE

## BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS



**“Congratulations, my sweet Sofia!”**

“Thank you, Abuela,” Sofia said as she hugged her beloved grandmother. The eighth-grade graduation ceremony had just ended. Sofia’s family now gathered outside the middle school to take photos and celebrate with her.

“Have you chosen any of your classes yet for fall?” her grandmother asked. Like everyone else, Abuela assumed that Sofia would be attending the public high school just down the road. But Sofia had other plans.

“Actually,” she announced, “I have applied to Hayden’s school.” She took a deep breath and let it out. It felt good to finally tell everyone. She had no

idea how her parents would respond to this news. Hayden was Sofia's older brother. The school he attended was ranked among the best high schools in their state. It also had a strict boys-only admittance policy.

"Good for you, sis," Hayden said and raised his hand for a high five. Hayden knew his younger sister could do anything she set her mind to accomplishing. Her grades were even better than his, and he was an excellent student. Her parents stood with their mouths open. They clearly hadn't expected this development.

Before anyone could remind her of her odds of getting into the school, Sofia added, "I've already received my first rejection letter. I realize that getting in won't be easy. I just think that it's wrong to refuse to admit students on the basis of their gender. I'm ready to fight this policy, and I would like your help."

"You remind me of Sylvia Mendez," Abuela said. "Do you know who that is?"



**In the 1940s, Mexican American children did not receive the same education as other American kids.**

“I sure do,” Sofia replied with a smile. “In 1946, a California school turned her away because it only accepted white students,” she told the rest of her family. “Sylvia’s father was an immigrant from Mexico. Her mother had come here from Puerto Rico like Abuela. They helped Sylvia fight for the right to the same education that white students could receive.”



***Brown v. Board of Education* remains an important ruling in U.S. history. Many families whose parents or grandparents came to the United States as immigrants teach their children about the Supreme Court case.**

“That’s right,” her grandmother said. She was obviously proud that Sofia already knew the story. Most people knew about *Brown v. Board of Education*. This 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case ruled that separating students by race was unconstitutional. What many people didn’t know is that the Mendez court case in Los Angeles was a stepping-stone to that important ruling. The Mendez family broke down barriers for other minority students in the United States.

“We will help you in any way we can,” Sofia’s father responded. She couldn’t help but notice a tear in his eye. He turned to his son. “I’m so proud of all the hard work you put into school, Hayden. Now it’s time to help your sister get that same opportunity.”

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