

## Standing Firm in Pursuit of the American Dream

[Voice of Narrator] From 1910 to 1920 many Mexicans sought refuge from the Mexican revolution in America's bordering states. Jose and Faustina Garcia arrived in Mercedes Texas in 1917. To counter the social, educational and political discrimination Mexican-Americans faced at the time, the Garcia's tutored their children at home and each received a college degree.

After the attack at Pearl Harbor, Hispanics enlisted en masse, including Jose's son Hector, who served in the infantry, Corps of Engineers, and Medical Corps. By 1945, Hispanics had become the most decorated ethnic group in World War Two. [Voice of Guy Gabaldon] I went on my own. In the course of four hours, I had 800 prisoners. [Narrator] Gabaldon's actions marked an unmatched feat for any single soldier in U.S military history yet he and other Hispanics returned home expected to resume their second-class citizenship. When Dr. Hector P. Garcia returned to Texas he had to treat Hispanic veterans in segregated hospital wards. For veterans that had been denied benefits Dr. Garcia treated them without charge. By 1948 he had had enough. On March 26th, Dr. Garcia took his first stand, founding the American GI Forum. [Voice of Dr. Hector P. Garcia] Basically it was organized to help the veterans with two problems. One problem being the fact that they were not giving us veterans hospitalization, so we got organized for that. Secondly, we got organized because the educational level of our people was so low we were not productive.

[Narrator] By 1949, Forum chapters spread throughout Texas, all taking a stand for veteran's rights. For the next half century, Dr. Garcia's face symbolized the stand for Hispanic civil rights in veteran and governmental affairs, in education, and politics. [Background music and opening credits]

An article in the Corpus Christi Caller Times catapulted Dr. Garcia onto the national stage when the body of Felix Longoria returned to Three Rivers, Texas, from the Philippines Beatrice Longoria wanted to use the Rice Funeral Home's chapel to hold her husband's wake. It's Director, Tom Kennedy, denied the request. [Voice of Patrick Carroll, History Professor Texas A&M] Because his white patrons wouldn't like it. As he put it, the whites wouldn't like it. [Narrator] Beatrice's sister contacted Dr. Garcia, who confronted Kennedy. Convinced that the denial was racially motivated, Dr. Garcia

telegraphed protest letters to Texas legislators and to US Senator Lyndon B. Johnson. Local coverage of the Longoria affair set off a firestorm in Texas that quickly spread nationwide. Three Rivers officials publicly condemned charges of racial bias and attempted to resolve the matter, but Senator Johnson had already arranged for Longoria to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. An arrangement Beatrice Longoria accepted.

Though riddled with controversy, the Longoria case drew national attention to Dr. Hector P. Garcia and it inspired Hispanics nationwide to take a stand for social change. By the mid-1950s, GI Forum chapters had formed nationwide throughout the United States. And by 1972, the US Congress had chartered the American GI Forum National Veterans Outreach Program, a community-based service provider specializing in services for veterans with special needs.

Hispanic veterans also faced unemployment. In 1942 Congress approved the Mexican Labor Farm Agreement, or Bracero program, providing thousands of Mexican nationals' temporary worker status for overcome the US labor shortage. Dr. Garcia considered this program a fundamental problem for unemployed Hispanic veterans, and Texas Forums partnered with the Federation of Labor to take a stand. Their report, titled "What Price Wetbacks?" exposed the agriculture industry's exploitation of Mexican laborers through poor wages and deplorable living conditions. Dr. Garcia used this report to lobby for the end to the program, but Congress bowed to the pressure of big industry which had become dependent on cheap labor. This failure hardened Dr. Garcia's resolve, and expanded his focus beyond the GI Forum and veteran's rights.

Dr. Garcia also utilized the courts, initiating two landmark stands that gained 14th Amendment rights for Hispanic Americans. The first was a Jackson County Texas case where an all-white jury had convicted Pete Hernandez of murder. Prior to this case, Dr. Garcia had tried to gain equality by noting that Mexican Americans were classified as white and should receive the same benefits that whites did. When the approach failed, he sought out the Hernandez case to prove that Mexican Americans were not white but a race apart. Working with the League of United Latin American Citizens, Dr. Garcia

raised funds to challenge Jackson County's exclusion of Hispanics from juries.

[Voice of Tony Canales, Nephew of Dr. Hector P. Garcia] Hector found that case, pushed it, got the lawyers involved. The man named Hernandez was indicted and charged for murder in Jackson County, in Edna Texas.

[Narrator] Forum attorneys contended that no Mexican Americans had been sought or selected for jury duty by that county for the past 25 years.

Therefore, they were excluded based on race. The defense countered that since Mexican Americans were classified as white, no discrimination had occurred. When Texas courts upheld the conviction, attorney Gus Garcia filed an application to the US Supreme Court. Hernandez v Texas became the first Supreme Court case argued by Hispanic attorneys and secured landmark status when Chief Justice Earl Warren handed down the Court's unanimous decision. [Voice of Earl Warren] It taxes our credulity to say that mere chance resulted in there being no members of this class among the over 6,000 jurors called within the past 25 years. The result bespeaks discrimination. The conviction must be reversed. [Voice of Tony Canales, Nephew of Dr. Hector P. Garcia] And it held, 1954, that separation of Mexican Americans for whatever purpose was unlawful.

[Narrator] Dr. Garcia was also thought that education was vital in elevating Hispanics in society, but Texas school districts segregated Hispanics from Anglos in separate dilapidated facilities called Mexican schools. Districts like (?) ISD segregated Hispanics based on language forcing them to attend three years in first grade. Between 1950 and 1960 Dr. Garcia filed over 100 complaints and supported legal and political challenges to local school districts and officials. Garcia himself recorded evidence of segregation conducting interviews and taking photos. Despite his efforts, segregation remained the norm, even after the Brown v Board ruling. Since birth certificates still classified Hispanics as white, schools paired them with black students to comply with desegregation orders. Anglo students remained isolated. Real change did not occur until the 1970s, when Dr. Garcia used the courts to take another stand in challenging Corpus Christi schools in Cisneros vs CCISD. [Voice of Tony Bonilla, LULAC past national president] The Cisneros decision was significant because there was a finding that the Hispanics were an identifiable minority group. [Narrator] This landmark case

compelled Texas schools to provide Hispanics with an equitable non-segregated education regardless of their home language.

Dr. Garcia's next stand was to eliminate the poll tax that restricted Hispanic voters. Forums conducted pay your poll tax drives and created fund raisers to create awareness, increase voter registration, and assist with poll tax fees. At the end of the drive, Hispanics became 53% of the voting population becoming the first time in history they constituted a majority. And by 1964 Dr. Garcia witnessed the ratification of the 24th Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting any poll tax for federal elections.

During the 1960 presidential campaign, Democrats reached out to Dr. Garcia since the GI Forum was a nonpolitical organization, Garcia established viva Kennedy clubs throughout the Southwest United States, traveling throughout the nation promoting Kennedy's election to the Hispanic voters. Garcia garnered 91% of Texas and 80% of the national Hispanic vote, helping Kennedy defeat of Richard Nixon by the smallest voting margin in the presidential election to date. After Kennedy's assassination, Dr. Garcia worked with the viva Johnson campaigns helping Lyndon Johnson maintain the presidency. By this time, the entire nation understood the significance of the Hispanic vote.

Dr. Garcia's stands granted him unprecedented access to the White House, which he used to solicit federal appointment to Mexican Americans from six US Presidents. Garcia himself served as special US Ambassador to Venezuela and the United Nations and was the first Mexican American to serve on the US Commission of Civil Rights.

TIME magazine christened the 1980s the decade of the Hispanic. To honor his stance for Hispanic civil rights President Ronald Reagan presented Dr. Garcia the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1984, making him the first Mexican American to receive that award.

Dr. Hector P. Garcia was a man who in the space of one week would deliver twenty babies, twenty speeches, and 20,000 votes. For almost 50 years he worked at the local, state, and national levels standing up for veterans. He organized Hispanics politically to change the laws that held them back in society eventually creating a formidable Hispanic voting bloc that continues

to influence American politics today. Dr. Garcia's footprints on the path to Hispanic civil rights altered American history and paved the way for Hispanics nationwide to achieve the American dream.