

TRIBUTE TO CRUZ REYNOSO

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The following is a speech by Jose Padilla of California Rural Legal Assistance about Justice Cruz Reynoso. This speech has not been edited nor originally intended to be an essay. Mr. Padilla shared this speech to help better understand the life of Justice Reynoso. We asked him to allow us to share his words with our membership and the community.

It is both an institutional honor as CRLA's Director (speaking on behalf of CRLA) and a personal honor to be here [at this podium] this evening for this very special and merited tribute.

It is one thing to be a champion of "just causes" and be so recognized. Professor Reynoso is that champion. It is quite another to be a hero of those who— as public servants given to the law— strive to be such champions... Professor Reynoso is that hero.

But it is still yet another thing, a more extraordinary thing to be seen... a myth.

Before I met Professor, Justice Reynoso I knew of him. Where I come from, that rurality of place... more and more distant by the days passing... that place where I, we learned the racism of railroad tracks that divided small towns... and without hearing words to that effect... knowing "your place" because certain social truths were just understood. In that desegregated and divided place, in the late 50's came the Attorney Reynoso. Into a valley of small towns that had never known an attorney with a Mejicano last name. It was the late 50's and early 60's.... rural Imperial Valley, when one acting out of his place could still be "red-baited".

There, in that Valley, came my generation (next), who, for whatever social change reasons...came to believe that higher schooling was for us too... and when my high school friends (two of them) would speak about becoming "an attorney". Even in high school, a foreign word that I had to look up in a dictionary (because I didn't know it meant "lawyer"— the next sentence would say "Reynoso". Of the three, I became the lawyer.

El Señor Cruz Reynoso

When I asked my parents, about this man "Reynoso", they would say... ahh...

"el Señor Reynoso" *era*... was...

and then they would speak to his local reputation.

"Señor" in this context

- the same word of respect as if it had been "Don Cruz" in another generation.

- "Señor" as in "gentleman"... For Cruz, meant "gentle man"/ gentle soul

- Señor Reynoso as in "*hombre de palabra... de valor*" person of his word... a person who all see live by values (*educado*, my grandmother would say).

- always the humble man, despite the stature.

When spoken "of a person", that's when you learn what an ethnic culture, your elders... mean by those simple words: "*señor, educado y ser de palabra.*"

Before "Señor Reynoso" walked into that valley, those desert folk in that almost hinterland — I still and will always call "home"--- had the image of "lawyer" as a person of the law (not the police), who yet mediated between you, your family and the criminal justice system— the criminal lawyer only. Never the lawyer who assisted in other legal matters— in civil life. But Cruz showed those communities (in those few years), that civil law could be a "friend" of the poor, a tool to give that segregated community, a voice in the political and public discussion affecting their lives.

Before Legal aid came into that Valley in 1966, in the form of CRLA, Attorney Reynoso was "legal aid". Attorney Reynoso was "CRLA" before CRLA even was!

The myth... was that those Mexican folk of those Mexican neighborhoods- *colonias*— in the east sides- where we were living — when I was 7- 15 years of age — went to the Reynoso home to get their "legal aid". He dispensed law from Janene and his home.... maybe no different than the "rural doctor" of myth. He was the "rural lawyer" of myth. Cruz quickly became known in the community for serving anybody who showed up at their doorstep and for their home being open for people to bring community issues to his attention.

I don't know if he made "house calls" like the "rural doctor", but what the hell... let's just say for the sake of future myth... that he did and let him deny it.

But the Resume reads...

Cruz became a partner in the law firm of Reynoso and Duddy in El Centro, from 1959-68 and the community memory is that he took on those pro bono cases and worked with community groups, which included the Alinsky-inspired Community Service Organization (CSO), where he met Cesar Chavez... who joined him in 1966 on the founding Board of CRLA.

Seven (7) years into the El Centro practice, he was selected at the founding meeting of CRLA— May 14, 1966— as CRLA's first Board Chairperson.

Two years-later, in mid-1968, he became CRLA's Deputy Director when the CRLA Board recognized the need to include "Mexican-American" attorneys in CRLA's staffing and leadership.

Ten (10) months later -- March 29, 1969-- he was selected CRLA's State Director. That year (1969), when I was a junior in high school, our school organizing efforts to elect my schoolmate Lupe Sabala, as a "Mexican-American" Student Body President... led to violations of our First Amendment rights for wearing a "political" button with the words, "Mexican American Liberation"— this button, that the school felt "disrupted the academic process." Threatened with discipline, the student leaders who wanted to be lawyers, went to CRLA. CRLA, Cruz now

Director, won our case in **Ralph Marquez et al v. Brawley Union High School**. Lupe won the student election and I followed him the next year.

Cruz's concern for the welfare of poor communities, as well as his belief that the obligation of all lawyers was to become involved in community groups and politics, brought him to work for California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), where he served from 1969-1972 at the helm and guided it through most vulnerable, most political times, most notably the defunding (veto) threat of the State's Governor Reagan, later President Reagan. That "cause" was, in essence, a political challenge to the independence of a non-profit law firm, government funded (OEO funded) ...to litigate on behalf of the poor. It was CRLA's freedom to

-charge government with civil violations of law, defending the welfare recipient against big government; as in **Morris v Williams**;

- the independence to defend "invisible" labor — farm workers—against the rich, rural business using the labor as chattel... as in **Alaniz v. Wirtz**;

- the right for society's weakest, to have a lawyer capable of bringing a complex challenge in defense of a child's right to not be labeled "mentally retarded" because the child did not speak English... as in **Diana v State board of Education**.

You fought for our right, as a legal aid lawyer, to lose that case and defend it all the way up the system, and bring it before the highest courts. That political stand-off, the fight for that freedom from political interference led eventually to the passage of the **Legal Services Corporation Act of 1974**— the Federal law that governs National legal aid today.

Cruz was noted for his ability to mend strife both within the organization and in the community. His humility has always been disarming... the myth goes. He once shamed an unruly crowd at a town meeting into being "civil" by lecturing them on the example they were setting for their children. I was told that when CRLA community workers were picketing right outside his office over labor negotiations.... he took them out to lunch. "These were exciting times," Cruz said. CRLA won 99 percent of their cases, but Cruz said, "That in itself didn't prove we were great lawyers. It just proved the cases were winnable because the violations were so clear."

Maybe because of something in the way we were raised— many of us come to CRLA, with a very simplistic notion to serve... sometimes others call it "cause," and others "dreams." But that motivation reflects a single, simple legal task. That purpose was never told us more clearly than when you wrote, 38 years ago, in CRLA's first Annual Report:

"The law is meant to be a protector of the weak and of the common good. Society cannot exist without laws and without the enforcers of these laws."

-Cruz Reynoso, CRLA Director [1969]

And in that first 5-year history.... you set the standard for us, then saved it... saved that chance for us to be the single voice in those "rurality of places"... sometimes to be lone champions for those who raised us... with economic difficulty and only hard work. You saved it for the 35 years that have followed.

The German poet **Bertolt Brecht** once said.... speaking about being involved in "just causes".... "just struggles"...

**"Hay unos que luchan un año, y son buenos.
Hay unos que luchan mas años, y son mas buenos.
Pero hay esos que luchan toda la vida....
Esos son los imprescindibles. !"**

There are those who "struggle one year and they are good people... then there are those who struggle more years, and they are better people... But then there are those who struggle all of their lives... those are the indispensable."

Señor Reynoso... of the rural myth...

We thank you, as CRLA, for having been heroic in the pursuit, in the defense, in the sustenance of those rural justice causes... and given us... me... the mold that has guided our aggressive, unrelenting, almost free spirit, to serve the rural poor....

Through the thick and the thin of that service, and through the political interference that still continues... usted, Cruz, a sido nuestro imprescindible! [you, Cruz, have been our indispensable!]

I humbly thank UC Davis, for letting me be a part of this evening and this honor.