

Excerpts from the exhibit guest book for “A Civil Rights Milestone: Kennedy’s Visit with LULAC in Houston” on display September 15, 2023 - January 25, 2024.

“Thank you for all the hard work toward keeping our history and heritage alive and present” – Celeste Zamora

“Very well done!! It has sparked many memories for me indeed. Keep memories of this historic visit alive.” – Thomas H. Kreneck

“What a great exhibit! So many memories, so many things I’d never seen or heard before. Thank you for this! I look forward to your next presentation.” – Gustavo y Debra Mayorga, and Carolina Vazaquez

“An important exhibit. Suggest an on-line version since new & key documents used.” Dr. Cynthia E. Orozco

“Very interesting to read and view an important part of history. I thought the exhibit did a good job of capturing the importance. Learned a lot! Thank you! – E

“This is my 2nd visit and on the anniversary of the event, the Houston Chronicle featured the exhibit. My father’s quote is on the doorway banner, and it was featured in the article in the Houston Chronicle. It was a poignant moment in my parent’s life. My uncle was a detective to guard the president and my parents attended the visit with the LULAC at the Rice Hotel. A proud recollection! – Lynda Zermeno McFarland

“Yes, I was there! Very emotional, exciting, and moving. Great exhibit. They should make it permanent! I can’t believe it has been 60 years. – Rosalie Solis Sharkey

“Thank you for this amazing retelling of a sad part of American history.” – Ana Lopez Cajigas

“My dad told us the story of my grandmother taking him to the Rice Hotel to see the President. She had already met Mrs. Kennedy earlier – she visited my grandmother’s place of work – Christie’s Seafood. Mrs. Kennedy spoke to the kitchen staff in Spanish.”

Draft of remarks given at public apology by Police Chief Troy Finner and City of Houston to the family of Joe Campos Torres on June 27, 2021. {My presence was requested by the Torres family to “put this history in context and talk about police and Mexican American community relations”}

It is an honor to be part of such a meaningful event. I want to begin by saying thank you to the Torres family for creating this moment and showing us this path forward. I know it isn’t easy. As a Mexican American, born and raised in Houston’s East End, I have known the name Joe Campos Torres for much of my life. I am overwhelmed by this moment. Over the span of my eight years

as an archivist and public historian I have come to understand Houston's Hispanic, Mexican American, Chicana, and Chicano history through the documents and photographs, and through the people: the researchers, activists, artists, and all the Houstonians I have met along the way.

What I have learned is that if we picture Houston's Hispanic history on a timeline, we will find a million markers representing beautiful, painful, and complicated moments. The brutal death of Joe Campos Torres on May 5, 1977, at the hands of five police officers is a giant marker on that timeline. In the archive he is named and referenced countless times. Whether it is in a newspaper article, a poster, a flyer, or spoken of in an oral history interview. His name is on my list of questions for our community elders along with "Where were you when President Kennedy was shot?" And when I ask for thoughts on George Floyd, Houstonians reflect and continue to say the name of Joe Torres.

That moment in history has multiple threads coming off it, moving sideways and forwards and all around. Historians tell of the domino effect in a million directions. There is a thread of course that belongs to the Torres family and speaks to how the absence of one person changes everything and impacts generations. Pieces of those other threads can be found in the archive. I'm thinking of one scholar who spent years researching, trying to answer the question How did we get to that moment? What brought Houston to that day in 1977? She showed me how that thread moves backwards, or perhaps more accurately that there is a thread that runs to and through that moment on the bayou that day. This is a thread of a long, frustrating, and documented history of injustice that has shaped the Mexican American and Mexican experience in Houston and in Texas. I want to provide some brief context for this history.

In 1937 Elipidio Cortez allegedly resisted arrest and officers struck him numerous times with a blackjack. Cortez later died on the police station floor. The two officers who caused his death were acquitted. In the 1940s the city's juvenile delinquency problem was labeled a Latin American problem and by the 1950s, profiling, and excessive force was focused on this community. An attorney and leading member of the League of United Latin American Citizens, John J. Herrera described what he saw as a "crusade against an entire people" and he warned that this would only hurt police relations with the Mexican community. This was despite a major win in 1950, when the city hired the first Mexican American uniformed officer.

In the 1960s, the situation was such that the local *Papel Chicano* newspaper warned Mexican Americans to "stay in their homes after dark...[because] law officers had declared 'open season'" on them. In 1970, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission recognized and reported that there was widespread practice of police misconduct against Mexican Americans throughout the Southwest. Leading up to the Torres case Houstonians would have read about people like Richard Rincon who was beaten while standing on his mother's porch. No crime having been reported. By the time of Torres death even the mayor at that time recognized the severity of the issues and described police brutality in Houston as "the practice rather than the exception."

There is also, of course, a thread of resistance and activism that runs through this history that cannot be overlooked. The Torres family and the many organizations and community activists who have worked tirelessly throughout the decades to speak out against injustice. This activism in Torres' name has taken on a wide spectrum of forms from letter-writing campaigns to the Moody Park uprising.

What happened at Moody Park reflected the damaged relations between police and the Hispanic community. History shows that what followed was series of unprecedented actions on the part of community activists and the city. The tragedy of Joe Torres is part of a larger narrative of injustice and a catalyst for changes in Houston.

I see today as a continuation of that thread calling for justice. Not all agree on the path forward, as there is so much hurt and anger. Still, this is a moment on that timeline and what happens here and tomorrow determines what threads evolve and what histories we might tell in the future.

I am honored that the Torres family invited me to share in this moment, in what I can only imagine is filled with a mixture of emotions. It is a significant moment in Houston's history which will be both documented and very much remembered. As a Mexican American, Houstonian, all of this brings me hope.

Thank you.

Excerpt from *forthcoming publication*. “Old Timers, Hawks, and Gold Medals: Stories from the Latin American Tournament in Houston” National Latino Baseball History Project

Sylvia Ortiz

In the 1950s, a few years after the founding of the Rusk Athletic Club, Houston would see a significant improvement of parks and recreational offerings on the eastern side of the city. The transformation would impact countless Mexican American youth, including future Olympic Gold Medalist, Sylvia Ortiz.

It began with the hiring of Esther A. Nieto, a major milestone in the city's youth league history. In 1951, Nieto was the first Latina to hold the position of park director with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. She was assigned to Magnolia Park, a historically Mexican American community on the eastern edge of Houston. Her son recalls, “Her only equipment was a softball and a baseball bat for the 181 registered students who showed up the first day.”

This community's recreation facility was housed in DeZavala Park, which measured roughly one city block and served approximately 5,000 residents. Within ten years, DeZavala Park

transformed from a neglected space, avoided by residents and police alike, to a space boasting countless sports and civic achievements. In fact, DeZavala Park earned more trophies in a ten year period than the combined recreation centers of the entire Houston Parks and Recreation Department. Nieto's husband was instrumental in this change. Santos I. Nieto joined his wife Esther as a volunteer, and later as a full time recreation center director. Together, for over twenty years, the Nietos would transform the recreation centers in several historically Mexican American communities including Hennessey Park in Houston's Fifth Ward, Eastwood Park, and Denver Harbor. The dedication of Santos and Esther Nieto Park by the City of Houston upon their retirement in 1978 officially recognized their accomplishments in improving communities through sports and recreation. The improvement of parks and recreational facilities in these neighborhoods would have a ripple effect on generations of Houston youth, including Sylvia Ortiz.

Ortiz began playing softball at age 9 on the playgrounds of Denver Harbor, a community located just east of Houston near the Ship Channel. Her coach was Santos Nieto. She played catcher for the 13 and Under Girls Playground Recreation League and very quickly turned heads as a competitor. Ortiz attended Stephen F. Austin High School and excelled in all sports. She led the primarily Mexican American volleyball team to a city championship in 1971 and ranked at the city level in tennis and badminton. Her family's support of her athletic pursuits as a young child was uncommon for Mexican American women in her family. For her older sisters, the opportunity to pursue sports was not an option. Her brothers were athletes but supporting the family came first, and all eventually replaced baseball with full-time work. As the youngest, she claims she "broke the mold" and credits her father for his support, saying simply "Dad was amazing."

After graduation, Ortiz attended the University of Houston (UH) and earned a degree in Health and Physical Education. While the UH athletic program would not include softball until the 1990s, Ortiz continued her athletic streak in other sports. She played on the UH Varsity Volleyball team that placed 5th in the nation and was then asked to play on the American National Volleyball team. In badminton, she placed second in the National Collegiate Championship. Luckily, there was organized softball at the city level.

Fresh out of high school, Ortiz was invited to play with the Houston Laurels, a city women's fastpitch team, where for the first time, she switched from catcher to the outfield. It was also the first time she would experience prejudice in the athletic world. She recalls the Laurels sent team photos to Birmingham, Alabama for an upcoming game. Reacting to the photo of Ortiz, the Alabama team asked the Laurels not to bring the "black player." She was the only Mexican American on the team. In an act of solidarity, the Houston fast-pitch team explained this was not an option. Either all, or none, would travel to the game. Alabama rescinded their request and allowed all team members to play. Ortiz recalls they won that game. It was the first time she

witnessed such blatant prejudice first hand. Admittedly, she didn't initially know what to make of the situation and was confused by what occurred.

It is unclear if Ortiz's Mexican American heritage was made known to the Alabama team, thus allowing a sort of "pass" in this situation. Although Ortiz does not describe this as a defining, or even characteristic moment of her time playing for the Houston Laurels, what she experienced was the sort of case-by-case discrimination all too common for non-white athletes. It speaks to a long and complicated history of racism in American sports. In a 2017 oral history interview with Houstonian, Felix Fraga, co-founder of the Rusk Athletic Club, he tells of a similar experience. Fraga was one of the first Mexican American players on the UH Cougar Baseball team in the 1950s. While playing at an away game in Oklahoma, attendees mistook Fraga for an African American player and protested his participation. The team explained that he was actually Mexican American and the issue was "resolved." Fraga was unaware of the incident until after the game and, like Ortiz, was uncertain of the situation. At the time of the interview he was almost hesitant to share the experience at all.