

AMERICAN GI FORUM OF THE U.S.

January 27, 1971

HECTOR P. GARCIA, M.D. FOUNDER 1315 BRIGHT STREET CORPUS CHRSTI, TEXAS 78405 AC 512 • TULIP 3-3982

Mr. Julian Samora Department of Sociology University of Notre Dame Notre Dame, Indiana

Dear Mr. Samora:

Before beginning, let me first introduce myself as a former Civil Rights Specialist and Texas State Coordinator for the Office For Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of H. E. W. In that former position, I was basically responsible for obtaining compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 from school districts in the State of Texas. In the process of doing my work with that Office, I feel I obtained a good understanding of the discrimination as practised against Mexican-Americans by the educational systems in the State of Texas. I feel that I also obtained a good understanding of the people and the organizations who fought hard to obtain equal educational opportunities for Mexican-Americans in Texas.

I write this letter in response to your charge that the American G I Forum is and has been a letter-writing organization. In writing this letter, I want it understood that there were other persons and other organizations that also fought hard for the equality of Mexican-Americans. However, I think you should become aware of the contributions of Dr. Hector P. Garcia and the American G I Forum in this area.

In Texas, Mr. Samora, historically there was no difference in the treatment of the blacks and the Mexican-Americans. On the one hand, there was a law that segregated blacks in schools, and on the other hand, there was a state policy that permitted school districts to segregate Mexican-Americans in public schools. If there was a difference it was that the blacks had their own college, their own high school and their own teachers, whereas the Mexican-American had no college, no high school and no teachers. Up until the mid-forties, in Texas, there was a 100% drop-out rate of Mexican-Americans. Today there are still many towns with substantial percentages of Mexican-Americans and without one single Mexican-American high school graduate resident.

On June 15, 1948, a Federal Court in a case styled <u>Delgado, et al v.</u> <u>Bastrop Independent School District</u> held that it was unconstitutional to segregate Mexican-Americans in public schools. One of the persons instrumental in the filing of this suit was Dr. Hector P. Garcia. I say one of the persons because there were several other persons involved also. As the result of this decision, it was Dr. Garcia and his American G I Forum that

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went from district to district here in Texas and pressured school districts to eliminate their "Mexican" schools. It was as the result of this suit that the state education superintendent, Mr. L.A. Woods issued new state guidelines prohibiting segregation of Mexican-American students. It was also the pressure put on the state superintendent by the American G I Forum that caused this new policy. It should be emphasized that this decision was made six years before the now famous <u>Brown vs Topeka Bd. of Education</u> case which held that segregation of blacks was unconstitutional. The <u>Delgado</u> decision must then, have certainly been used as a basis for the <u>Brown</u> decision.

Perhaps, however, the most important landmark decision in the area of Mexican-American discrimination was the case of <u>Pete Hernandez vs. the State</u> <u>of Texas</u> (347 U.S. 475) in which the Supreme Court held that Mexican-Americans were protected by the 14th Ammendment and that said ammendment did not contemplate only two classes - black and white. Did you know Mr. Samora, that once again Dr. Garcia and the American G I Forum played a part in this case? Did you know that it was "tamaladas" made by Forumeers that partly helped to pay the costs of this case?

The American G I Forum, through its "tamaladas" and other sources, was once again instrumental in the filing of a suit against the Driscoll Independent School District in 1957 and against the Odem Independent School District in 1967. Again these cases were landmark cases because not only did the Court hold that you could not segregate Mexican-Americans in separate schools, but it went further and stated that you could not segregate Mexican-Americans in separate classes.

That was not the end. This very past year - 1970 - the American G I Forum played a part in the filing of a suit by Jose Cisneros against the Corpus Christi Independent School District. Again this case is a landmark case because it holds that you cannot eliminate segregation by combining blacks with Mexican-Americans. James De Anda, the attorney in this case, is the attorney for the American G I Forum. Dr. Garcia was one of the witnessess in this case.

I worked for the Office for Civil Rights of H.E.W. from April 1968 until June, 1970. During this time, it was a most difficult task to get the Department to even consider the area of Mexican-American discrimination. It seems that H.E.W. was only concerned with black and white problems.

However, we made our breakthrough in Sonora, Texas. We proved a most serious case of discrimination against Mexican-American students. And do you know who helped us prove our case? Do you know who pressured H.E.W. and the Justice Department to take appropriate enforcement action? Today, schools in Sonora, Texas are totally integrated because of the courage of Pete Gomez, Cesario Martinez and the other members of the local G I Forum of Sonora. Oh yes, and when H.E.W. began to stall in this case, Dr. Garcia personally went to Washington, D.C. and demanded action. These were the pressures that made Sonora, Texas a place for better opportunity for our children. Dr. Julian Samora

After Sonora, the Government moved successfully against Ozona, Lyford, and Bishop, Texas. Again, the success of these efforts was due largely to the assistance of the local G I Forum members from these towns. Again, ultimate success was due largely to the pressure exerted by Dr. Garcia and the state-wide G I Forum.

As I stated above, the Government has been extremely delinquent in taking enforcement action against school districts which discriminate against Mexican-Americans. Enclosed please find a letter dated October 2, 1970 mailed to the Office For Civil Rights of H.E.W. listing some 300 districts that are in apparent violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The American G I Forum will not rest until appropriate enforcement action is taken against each and everyone of these school districts.

The American G I Forum is in the process of analyzing school districts from every other state in the country. A similar letter will be sent to H.E.W. with a similar list of school districts. The Forum will not rest until justice is obtained against these districts. Our aim is to eliminate all vestiges of discrimination against our children in the hopes of providing a better opportunity for tomorrow.

As you can see, Mr. Samora, the American G I Forum has been and is a very active organization. Progress has been without burning buildings or bombing bridges or breaking the law. The Forum will continue to push for this progress until complete justice is won for all Mexican-American citizens.

As a fellow Mexican-American, I am proud of your accomplishments. I feel strongly that you are an asset to our cause. However, I feel that the record should be corrected. Perhaps you were unaware of these accomplishments. Now you are not. I invite you to work with us as we strive together for a greater, more meaningful America.

Sipcerely. Carlos F. Vela

Education Chairman American G I Forum of Texas

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