

**Justice Cruz Reynoso: A Life of Resilience, Humility, and Inspiration**  
*by Presiding Justice Kathleen O’Leary and Associate Justice Maurice Sanchez*

*Being challenged in life is inevitable, being defeated is optional.*  
~ Roger Crawford

**Introduction: A Trailblazer’s Legacy**

In the heart of Orange County, the courthouse for the Fourth District Court of Appeal, Division Three now bears the name of a remarkable individual: Justice Cruz Reynoso. His story is one of resilience, dedication, and an unwavering commitment to justice. A trailblazing lawyer, jurist, and law professor, he left an indelible mark on the legal landscape, championing the rights of the underserved and exemplifying the profound impact one person can have on society. This article celebrates his life, achievements, and the enduring legacy of a beloved native son of Orange County.

The Honorable Cruz Reynoso faced many challenges during his lifetime, and he took all of these challenges in stride, with humility and a steadfast commitment to public service. He never allowed any setback to define or defeat him and he consistently



continued to do what he felt in his words, “needed to be done,” for the people of his community, the state, and the nation. We are all better for it. That is perhaps his greatest legacy, and it is why the Judicial Council of California decided to name the appellate courthouse located in Santa Ana, the county seat of Orange County, after him.

Considering Orange County’s Latino population easily exceeds one million people (constituting one-third of the county), there are very few buildings named for prominent Latinos here. But that is starting to change. There is a building named after Cesar Chavez at Santa Ana College and a high school in Santa Ana named after former Postmaster Hector G. Godinez, along with a few intermediate and grammar schools named after well-known Latinos. A Post Office in Santa Ana is named after the Honorable James O. Perez, Orange County’s first Latino Superior Court judge.

On October 13, 2022, Fullerton College kicked off a campaign both to establish a scholarship fund in honor of its distinguished alumnus, Justice Cruz Reynoso, and to rename its Student Services Building after him. The rededication ceremony took place during Hispanic Heritage Month, 2023. Similarly, naming our appellate courthouse after Justice Cruz Reynoso is a much needed and significant acknowledgement of his contributions to all of us in general and to the Latino community in particular.

Justice Reynoso spent a lifetime fighting the prejudices he first encountered during his childhood in Orange County. He serves as an extraordinary example of how a Latino child from the community can make a difference, while becoming an icon in his or her profession.



When the future Justice Reynoso was seven years old, his family moved from Brea, where he was born, to a barrio outside the City of La Habra, also in Orange County. At that time, the United States Postal Service refused to provide Rural Free Delivery service to homes within the barrio, even though non-minority families living nearby received the service. This did not sit well with the young Cruz Reynoso. He circulated a petition demanding the service, and sent it off to the Postmaster General's office in Washington, D.C. To his amazement, the Postmaster General responded to his petition and ordered that mail delivery be provided to the barrio. When the boy went to thank the local postmaster for supporting his cause, he was stunned to learn that the postmaster had instead opposed it. Nevertheless, Justice Reynoso was quoted in the 2009 California Bar Journal, saying this boyhood success helped motivate him, "to keep doing things that needed to be done," despite any opposition. For his entire life, he did just that.

### **Early Life and Education: Overcoming The Odds**



Born on May 2, 1931, Cruz was one of eleven children in the Reynoso family. His early life in Orange County laid the foundation for his lifelong fight against injustice. From the age of eight he toiled in the local orange groves with his family, led by his father, from whom he learned the value of hard work. In La Habra, he attended Wilson Grammar School, a segregated school for children of Mexican descent. He later graduated from Fullerton Union High School and Fullerton Community College. At that time, a dean from Pomona College, impressed upon meeting Cruz, offered the young man a scholarship—on the condition he apply and be

admitted to the school. Cruz took advantage of that opportunity and graduated in 1953, after which he joined the U.S. Army, serving in the Counterintelligence Corps for two years. Upon completing his military service, Cruz enrolled at UC Berkeley School of Law—the only Latino in the graduating class of 1958. Under a Ford Foundation fellowship, he studied constitutional law at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México from 1958 to 1959.



### **Challenges and Triumphs: A Life of Public Service**

The future Justice Reynoso began his legal career in private law practice in El Centro, California, serving the poor and indigent. He later served as a legislative assistant in the California State Senate from 1959 to 1960, and he was an Associate General Counsel for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1967 and 1968. He subsequently became the Director of California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), the first Latino to hold that position. His work with CRLA gained him national

recognition. Justice Reynoso later recalled that, during his tenure, CRLA was “mentioned not infrequently as being the leading legal services program in the country.”



Cruz Reynoso was serving as a professor at the University of New Mexico School of Law in June 1976 when Governor Jerry Brown offered him an appointment to the Third District Court of Appeal in Sacramento. With his characteristic humility and thoughtfulness, Justice Reynoso made sure his students would be taken care of and able to complete their courses before he accepted the position. He served on the court of appeal for six years. In 1982, he was appointed by Governor Brown as the first Latino Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court. Shortly after receiving his appointment to the high court, he faced a retention election that same year, along with Justices Otto Kaus and Allen Broussard (the second African American Justice on the Court). All three justices (labeled by the opposition as “Jerry’s Judges”) were retained on the Supreme Court in that election, with Justice Reynoso receiving the lowest margin of victory at 52%.



While on the California Supreme Court, Justice Reynoso authored several important decisions, perhaps none more so than *People v. Aguilar*. In that case, Justice Reynoso, writing for the Court, held that a non-English speaking person must be provided with an interpreter during the entire criminal court proceeding. Justice Reynoso drew upon his experiences representing such clients to persuade a majority of his fellow justices that “basic fairness in the constitutional sense requires that there be an interpreter for that individual.” He continued, “In the ethnic richness of California, a multiplicity of languages has been nurtured. The people of this state, through the clear and express terms of their constitution, require that all persons tried in a California court understand what is happening about them, for them and against them. Who would have it otherwise?”

Justice Reynoso's last and most public setback came when he faced a retention election in 1986, his *second* such election in just four years. This time the electorate voted not to retain him, together with Chief Justice Rose Bird and Associate Justice Joseph Grodin. Justice Reynoso received 40% of the vote. The three California Supreme Court Justices had been labeled as "soft on crime," despite the fact (confirmed by the Attorney General) that the California Supreme Court either left in place or affirmed 97% of the criminal convictions coming before the court in the 1984/1985 fiscal year. Justice Reynoso was quoted as saying, "That doesn't sound at all like a 'soft on crime' record." The three justices left the court on January 5, 1987, when their terms ended, the only justices to be so removed in California history. When asked if he was disappointed in the results of the election, Justice Reynoso responded with his by-now-legendary humility and perspective, "with all of the people who voted for me, how can I be disappointed?"



### **Legacy and Recognition: Honoring a Champion of the People**

Rather than shy away from public life at that point, Justice Reynoso continued to serve in several capacities. In addition to working in private practice and as a mediator, he served as a faculty member at the UCLA School of Law for ten years, and then at the UC Davis School of Law for five years. He was voted Professor of the Year by the law students at UCLA in 1995. In May 2011, Chapman University School of Law, here in Orange County, conferred an honorary Doctor of Laws degree upon him. While the awards he received during his lifetime are far too numerous to list, they include the California State Bar's Bernard E. Witkin Medal (proclaiming him a "legal giant"), the UC Davis Medal of Honor (the university's highest award), and the Hispanic Heritage Award in Education.



Last, but certainly not least, in the year 2000 President Bill Clinton awarded Justice Reynoso the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States' highest civilian honor. The citation given with the Medal read, "Through his efforts to address social inequity in his rural community, his leadership of the pioneering California Rural Legal Assistance program, his tenure as the first Latino on the California Supreme Court and his service on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, he has been a strong force for change and a passionate voice for our nation's disadvantaged."

Cruz Reynoso, the boy who was born and raised in some of the poorest areas of Orange County, received significant and varied national recognition over the years for his talents and efforts on behalf of those less fortunate. President Jimmy Carter appointed Justice Reynoso to serve as a member of the Congressional Select Commission on Immigrant and Refugee Policy. As mentioned above, the United States Senate appointed Justice Reynoso to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in April 1993. President-elect Barack Obama appointed Justice Reynoso to his White House transition team in early 2009, as part of a justice and civil rights sub-team.

Justice Reynoso passed away on May 7, 2021, five days after his ninetieth birthday, having lived a life of service. Those of us who were fortunate enough to have met him and who heard his words of wisdom and kindness will never forget the experience.

Justice Reynoso's story is a beacon of hope and encouragement for all of us, particularly for the Latino community in our county and beyond. He proved that challenges in life need not result in defeat. Identifying the building that houses the Fourth District Court of Appeal, Division Three in Orange County as the Cruz Reynoso Courthouse serves to encourage those who come from limited means to achieve their dreams. Justice Reynoso's life journey began modestly in Orange County, reaching the highest echelons of justice and exemplifying the American dream. He continues to inspire those who seek to make a difference in their communities and in the broader society as well.



*Presiding Justice Kathleen O'Leary and Associate Justice Maurice Sanchez (both of the Fourth Appellate District, Division Three) wrote this article for the Orange County Lawyer magazine's October, 2024 issue to honor Justice Reynoso's legacy of pursuing justice and inspiring the best in others. They hope you will share his story.*