

Latino Medal of Honor Winners

There have been several Latino Medal of Honor winners; their achievements have largely gone unheralded. The first Latino Medal of Honor winner was David Bennes Barkley. In WWI, Barkley, the son of a German-American father and a Mexican mother, was forced to disguise his Hispanic roots when he enlisted in the Army because of the belief that Latinos made poor soldiers. Barkley had asked his mother, "When you write to me, don't use your Mexican name." Tragically, Barkley died on a dangerous reconnaissance mission while swimming the icy Meuse River in France.

In WWII, Macario Garcia single-handedly assaulted two German machine gun nest and refused medical treatment until posts were taken. Shortly after he returned to home to Texas and not long after President Truman had draped the Medal of Honor around his neck, Garcia was refused service at a restaurant. Outraged, Garcia fought with the owner and was arrested. Although acquitted in a trial that garnered national attention, he later had trouble with finding a job despite his heroic deeds.

Eugene Obregon of Los Angeles gave his life while saving a fellow Marine in the Korean War. Obregon, who enlisted at 17, was awarded the Medal of Honor for saving his platoon mate and best friend, Burt Johnson of Grand Prairie. After seeing Johnson fall to enemy fire, Obregon raced to his comrade's position and used his own body as a shield. He alternated between treating Johnson's wounds and firing at the rapidly advancing North Koreans. Ultimately, Obregon was cut down by machine-gun fire.

Among the other winners are those who served in Vietnam. Roy Benavide finally was awarded the nation's highest military decoration in 1981 for saving eight fellow Green Berets more than three decades previous in Vietnam. As well, Richard Rocco was awarded the Medal of Honor for saving three fellow soldiers in Vietnam while wounded and exposed to enemy fire. (Based on a Houston Chronicle article by Mike Glenn)

Velma Montoya, Ph.D.

Velma Montoya, Ph.D. was born in Los Angeles in 1938. She received a Ph.D. in economics from UCLA in 1977. She was one of the first Latino women to earn a Ph.D. in economics. After teaching for some years, she became the assistant director for strategy for the White House Office of Policy Development. Afterwards she worked in several federal jobs and again as a professor. She was president of the Hispanic American Public Policy Institute from 1984 to 1990. Montoya was named one of the 100 most influential Hispanics by Hispanic Business Magazine in 1982, 1989 and 1997. She was named Woman of the Year by the Mexican American Opportunity Foundation in 1983. She has earned a place as a Marshall scholar and a Fulbright scholar. She also has made time to for children's organizations such as a local boys and girls club.

Roberto Clemente: A Beautiful Fury

Roberto Clemente grew up in Puerto Rico. He came to the Major Leagues in 1950s and was in the first wave of Latino ballplayers. He was named in the 1971 World Series as the Most Valuable Player. Baseball is now one quarter Latino. He was very involved

with sick children, saving their letters and trying to arrange visits when there was a game in the area. As soon as he heard about the earthquake, Clemente sent two plane loads of supplies then he heard about the corruption with the aid being diverted. Clemente decided to go himself to assure the fair distribution of aid. His plane crashed into the Atlantic and his body was never found.

Arizona Orphan Abduction

In 1904 a group of New York nuns brought 40 Irish orphans to a remote area of Arizona (Clifton-Morenci) to be placed with Catholic families there. They were, in fact, Latino Catholic families. Soon thereafter, the nonHispanic Caucasian town people, enraged at the interracial transgression, formed a vigilante squad to kidnap the children and nearly lynched the nuns and the local pries. Despite the relative prosperity and religiosity of the adoptive Latino families, they were deemed unsuitable. The Latino women were branded as sexually promiscuous. The families were thought be wear hopelessly shabby, dirty clothing and their housekeeping was considered poor. Although the Anglos had Mexican maids in their homes. The few Latino children in Clifton-Morenci were taught in segregated classes.

The Catholic Church sued to get back the children but the courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, ruled in favor of the vigilantes. (based on the book: The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction by Linda Gordon, Ph.D., Harvard University Press)

Dr. Luis P. Villarreal – Virologist

Luis Perez Villarreal grew up in east Los Angeles. He decided to go to a community college to catch up before going on to UCLA, majoring in biological chemistry He would go on to earn a Ph.D. in virology; he was the only one of his high school's graduating class to receive a doctoral degree. He works as a scientist at the University of California, Irvine; his work entails learning how viruses and molecules of viruses work. He's also involved in biological programming and re-engineering what cells do in an organism, like gene therapy. (Based on the autobiography on SACAS website)

Irma Vidal Santaella

Irma Vidal Santaella was born in 1924 and earned a J.D. in 1967 from the Brooklyn Law School. She started off in private practice and later worked for the NY State Human Right Appeal Board for which she chaired from 1968 to 1983. Santaella later became a justice on the NY State Supreme Court from 1983 to her retirement in 1994. She founded the National Association for Puerto Rican Civil Rights and sat on the board of directors of the Catholic Interracial Council from 1968 to 1981. Se was the founder of the New York chapter of Clinica Grillasca. She was the first Puerto Rican woman to be elected to the NY state Supreme Court. Santaella received a Life Achievement Award from the President of the Dominican Republic in 1991 and another such award from the National Council of Hispanic Women in 1991.

Josefina Carbonell

Josefina Carbonell immigrated from Cuba. She became active with community service in Florida, receiving the citizen of the year award in 1992 and the Monsignor Bryan Wash

Outstanding Human Service award. She has many other honors in community service and in health management. She was named a fellow in health management by the Harvard University John F. Kenney School of Government. She became the Assistant Secretary for Administration on Agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2001.

Antonia Novello

Antonia Novello was born in Fajardo, Puerto Rico in 1944. She received an undergraduate degree and M.D. from the University of Puerto Rico. She later received a Master's in public health administration from John Hopkins in 1982. Novello is the recipient of numerous honorary doctorates from the likes of Washington College and Central Connecticut State University.

Novello is a researcher with numerous articles in professional journals and chapters in books in the field of infectious diseases. She was a contributor to the World Health Organization. She received the Congressional Hispanic Caucus medal in 1991 and the Order of Military Medical Merit in 1992. Her other honors include the Elizabeth Ann Seton Award, Legion of Merit Medal, and the Hispanic Heritage Leadership Award. She served as the U.S. Surgeon General and is currently the New York State Health Commissioner.