

Justice Reynoso Remembered As Humble But Fierce

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Cruz Reynoso, the first Latino California Supreme Court justice, was remembered on Monday by his colleagues, friends and family as a humble, but fierce advocate with an unwavering passion for challenging injustices.

“Cruz Reynoso was an icon for civil rights and social justice, a beacon for hope and optimism,” said colleague and friend Kevin R. Johnson, dean of UC Davis School of Law. “He fought for the rights of all and, to paraphrase the late John Lewis, made plenty of ‘good trouble.’”

Amagda Pérez, executive director of the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation and co-director of the UC Davis Immigration Law Clinic, said Reynoso “was a legal giant, a brilliant jurist, an engaging professor, and an even better human being. He devoted his life to law reform and righting the injustices that made his ‘justice bone’ ache.”

Born on May 2, 1931, Reynoso died Friday at the Angel Lite Elder Care facility in Oroville just a few days after his 90th birthday.

A dedicated advocate with a decorated career of many firsts that spanned over 60 years, Reynoso is known for making history as the first Latino justice when he was elevated to the Supreme Court from the 3rd District Court of Appeal by Gov. Jerry Brown in 1981.

During his five year stint on the Supreme Court, he wrote opinions that ruled homeowners have the right to sue airports for airplane noise, and non-English speaking defendants have the right to an interpreter throughout the criminal process.

His time on the bench came to an end, when he alongside Chief Justice Rose Elizabeth Bird and Justice Joseph Grodin were ousted by voters in 1986 after being accused of failing to enforce the death penalty. Some of their most vocal critics included then state Attorney General George Deukmejian, who would later become governor.

“I remember hearing him talk about how it was disappointing, obviously, for him,” said Rondall Reynoso, one of Reynoso’s four children. “But he focused on the next step, not the fact that they lost. He knew that it had become politicized in a way that it was never meant to be, but he tried to focus on the people that did vote for him.”

He added, his father had a resilient nature about him.

Reynoso was a son of Mexican immigrants and one of 11 children. Growing up in Brea, he was vocal on the injustices he saw even from a young age, challenging the school board for forcing him to attend a segregated school and circulating a petition to force the U.S. Postal Service to deliver mail to the rural barrio where he lived.

A graduate of UC Berkeley School of Law, Reynoso began his career as a small town lawyer in El Centro, but soon moved on to serve as the associate general counsel for the Equal Opportunity Commission and the first Latino director of the California Rural Legal Assistance, where he led efforts to improve the working conditions of farmworkers and to ban the pesticide DDT as well as defended the organization from the state's efforts to cut its funding.

In 1972, he joined the University of New Mexico as the first Latino professor of law and soon after was appointed to the 3rd District by Brown.

Following his time on the bench, Reynoso spent a number of years in private practice before re-entering academia as a professor at UCLA School of Law in 1991. At the same time, he served on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights for 11 years including as vice chairman. On the commission, he looked into a range of issues including the civil unrest that followed the acquittal of the Los Angeles police officers who were videotaped beating motorist Rodney King and allegations of voting irregularities in Florida in the 2000 presidential election.

In 2001, he joined UC Davis School of Law, where he taught civil rights, professional responsibility, constitutional law and appellate advocacy. He retired in 2006.

"The passing of Justice Cruz Reynoso represents for many of us practicing law in the public interest, the passing of a hero and a justice servant," said Jose Padilla, executive director of the California Rural Legal Assistance. "For Latino Lawyers he represented the example of how you break barriers in our legal profession and pave new roads. From humble farmworker roots he rose to be lauded by Presidents like Bill Clinton who awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom and as an advocate for just causes he followed a philosophy of life that inspired."

In spite of all his accomplishments, Reynoso never lost his humble spirit according to his family and friends.

"We were colleagues together at UC Davis School of Law for many years, and I witnessed first-hand his brilliance as a teacher and mentor to law students," said Bill Ong Hing, now a professor of law and migration studies at University of San Francisco. "He never said no to student and community invitations. One day he might be attending a hearing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in Washington, D.C.; and the next night he would be speaking with a group of parents at a public school in Merced. Humble, intelligent, respectful and a gentleman. That was Cruz Reynoso."

Reynoso is survived by his four children and two stepchildren, 17 grandchildren and three step-grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Memorial arrangements are pending. In lieu of flowers, his family asked for contributions to be made to the Cruz and Jeannene Reynoso Scholarship for Legal Access at UC Davis.

"The struggles he fought for and his accomplishments will continue to inspire generations of attorneys and jurists to continue his life-long mission for years to come," said Brian López of López Law Firm PC and president of Cruz Reynoso Bar Association, which changed its name from the Sacramento chapter of La Raza Lawyers Association in 2016 in honor of Reynoso.