



The State We're In: Latino History in Washington



Latino History in Washington is a companion to the League's civic education books: *The State We're In: Washington*, which are designed for grades 3-12.

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Middle School and up

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are available:

- Individually or in sets
- Online or in hard copy



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For additional information, visit

www.lwvwa.org

PHOTOS

Title page: Aerial perspective over Spring Cherry blossoms at the Washington State Capital building in Olympia. Depositphoto

Page 10: Poster art and photo of Alfredo Arreguin courtesy of Washington State History Museum

Civics is about who makes the rules.

When you're a kid, your parents make the rules, your teachers make the rules, and kids must do what they say. (You know they are making rules to keep you safe, to keep you healthy, and to help you grow up to be a good person, but still . . .)

Once you grow up, *you* get to make the rules, not just in school or at home, but the BIG rules – who gets to be president, what the laws are, who goes to jail, where houses get built, whether whales get saved – all that stuff.

Studying civics is how you learn how to be a good rule-maker. In a democracy, all the adults must work together to make the rules, and it gets complicated. There are rules about how to make rules. It's a big deal. And unless you want to spend your whole life letting other people make the rules you live by, you need to know this stuff!



The State We're In: Latino History in Washington

Jill Severn, author



Produced and published by

The League of Women Voters
of Washington Education Fund

Karen Verrill, project manager | Lee Doyle, publication design



OUR MISSION: The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

The League of Women Voters of Washington

Empowering all Washingtonians to engage in a more responsible and responsive democracy.

Mission Statement

Empowering Voters Defending Democracy

Vision Statement

We envision a democracy where every person has the desire, the right, the knowledge, and the confidence to participate.

Values Statement

The League believes in the power of women to create a more perfect democracy.

Rooted in the movement that secured the right to vote for women, the League has worked to foster civic engagement and enhance access to the vote since we were founded in 1920. Over time our work has evolved from efforts to gain and foster women's suffrage to ensuring that all eligible voters – particularly those from traditionally underrepresented or underserved communities, including first-time voters, non-college youth, new citizens, minorities, the elderly and low-income Americans – have the opportunity and the information to exercise their rights to vote.

The League believes knowledge is key to voting, so we educate and advocate on:

- Natural resources: clean air and water, energy, land use planning
- Social policies: education, health care, housing
- Governmental policies: open government, fair taxes, and more

**Be bold – make a difference –
join the League**

www.lwvwa.org

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Introduction:

What's in a name? It's complicated.

There are several terms to describe people from Latin America and the Caribbean. In many of these countries, the official language is Spanish, but many people also speak *indigenous* languages. *Indigenous* is a word for people who have lived in a place for thousands of years. Usually it refers to people who live in lands that have been conquered by people from somewhere else.

Places that were conquered and colonized by Spain became countries where Spanish was the national language.



Latino people come in all colors. “Latinos” include the descendants of formerly enslaved people from Africa, people from Spain and other European countries, and indigenous (native) communities.

(Not all Latin American and Caribbean countries were conquered by Spain; some were conquered by Portugal, France, England and the Netherlands. In Brazil, for example, the national language is Portuguese. You can guess why.)

For a long time, most people from Spanish-language Latin America and the Caribbean who lived in the United States preferred to be called *Hispanic*.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican Americans who were part of the civil rights movement called themselves Chicanos. Decades earlier, that term was considered an insult, but young civil rights activists used it proudly.

But by the beginning of the 21st century, people had begun to use the term Latinos to describe people from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Central and South America.

Some people also use the word *Latinx*, or sometimes *Latine*, because they want a term that is gender neutral. In Spanish, nouns ending in o are masculine and those ending in a are feminine. So, for instance, a boy is “niño”; a girl is “niña.”

Surveys show that in the early 21st century, the vast majority of people from south of the U.S. border prefer the terms *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Latina*.

Who were the first Latinos in Washington?

Explorers from Spain, who arrived in the 1770s, were the first non-Natives to visit the Washington coast. So Spanish, not English, was the first non-native language to be spoken in Washington.

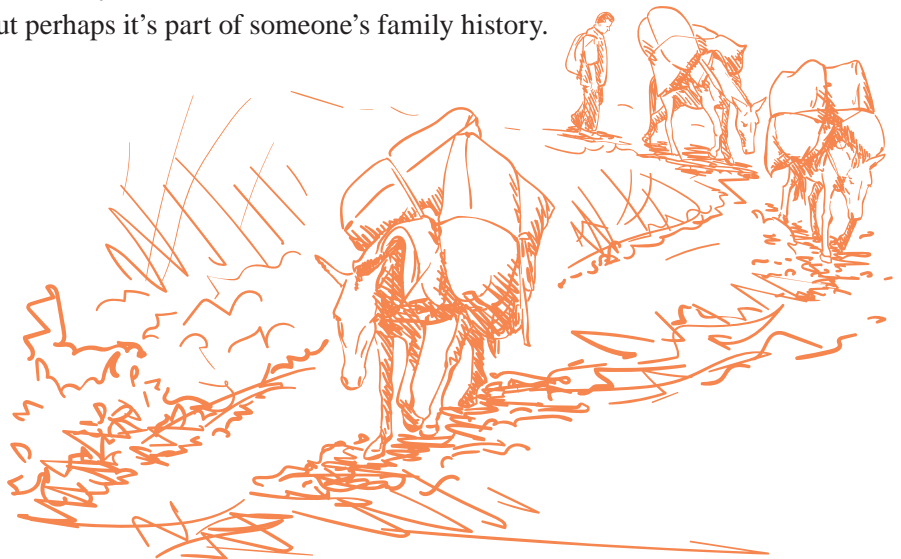
Some of the people on those ships were from a vast area of North America that had been invaded and conquered by Spain. The region conquered by Spain is now occupied by part of the United States, Mexico, Central America, and most of South America.

Many societies lived in this vast expanse for thousands of years before the Spanish came. The Indigenous people spoke many languages and had many distinct cultures. But the Spanish conquerors made Spanish the dominant language.

The Spanish explorers thought they might take control of what is now Washington State, but for many reasons, they didn't. If they had, Spanish might have become our state's language too.

Washington's first transportation system: Mexicans with mule teams

During most of the 1800s, before railroads came to Washington, teams of mules pulling wagons or carrying cargo on their backs were the main forms of transporting shipments from mines, farms, flour mills, and everything else. Mexicans who were experts at managing mule teams were the first Mexicans to work in Washington. It's not known if any of them settled here. That hasn't been included in any history books, but perhaps it's part of someone's family history.



1848: The Mexican border moved south

In 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain. In 1848 the United States won a war with Mexico, and took 55 percent of its land.

The states of New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, California, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming all went from being part of Mexico to being part of the U.S. That made everyone in those areas Americans. (The story of Texas is more complicated, but it had been part of Mexico earlier.)

Spain had ruled all that land, and all of the land in the Mexico of today, for 300 years. During those three centuries, many men from Spain had children with Indigenous Mexican women — sometimes against their will. Their mixed-race children, and all their mixed-race descendants, are called *mestizos*.

Many mestizos (and probably some people from Spain) lived in the area Mexico lost to the United States in the war of 1848. The descendants of those people are still sometimes regarded as Mexican, but that is a mistake. Their families have been American citizens since 1848. Many maintain some cultural traditions from Mexico, but this is not true of everyone. Some, but not all, still speak Spanish as well as English.

They sometimes describe themselves as Tejanos (from Texas), Californios (from California), and, of course, Americans.

Irrigation brings immigration

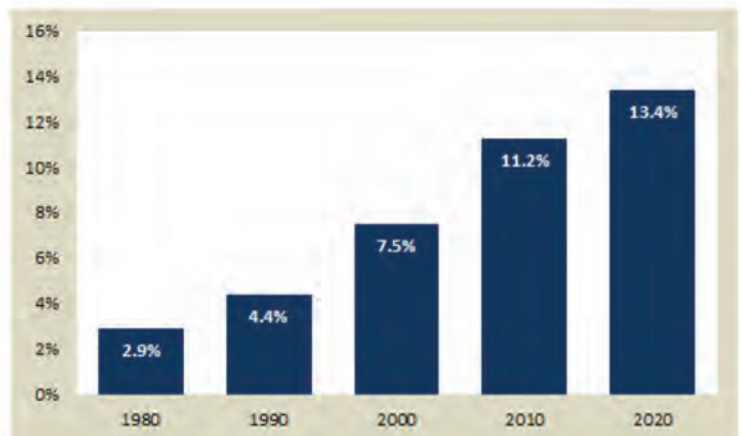
Starting in the early 1900s, the spread of irrigation (water moved through canals from rivers to farm fields) meant more land could be farmed. More farmland required more workers, especially to harvest crops. At harvest time, farmers needed a lot of people — but once the harvest was over, those jobs ended.

At first, local Native Americans, White people, and some immigrants from other countries did this work, but soon Mexicans and Mexican Americans helped fill the need for farmworkers.

Because farmers in several states needed so many people at harvest time, people traveled (migrated) from one state to another as crops were ready to harvest. Migrant workers became an essential part of farm country.

Hispanic/Latino population as a percent of total Washington population, 2020

Year	Population
2020	1,022,667
2010	755,790
2000	441,510
1990	214,570
1980	120,016





What farmworkers do

Farm work is very hard physical labor, especially when the weather is hot. It requires special skills to pick fruit without bruising it, or to cut asparagus in just the right way so that the roots will keep growing more, or to harvest berries when they are ripe enough but not too ripe. Picking tree fruit requires climbing and balancing on ladders and stretching into the trees. Picking berries or asparagus means stooping and bending over for many hours at a time—a sure recipe for a very sore back.

Farmworkers also risk injuries, such as falls from ladders, sicknesses from chemicals sprayed on crops, and illness from extreme heat. As the climate gets hotter, protection from heat-caused illness and death is becoming ever more important.

The majority of farmworkers are men, but many women also work in the fields, and for many years, children did too. (Some people say there are still kids working in the fields, even though it's illegal.) Women and men also work together in the packing houses where food is processed—for instance, in big sheds where apples are sorted to keep out any fruit that is damaged and then packed carefully in boxes for shipment or storage. Some also work in businesses that prepare food to be frozen or made into packaged or canned products.

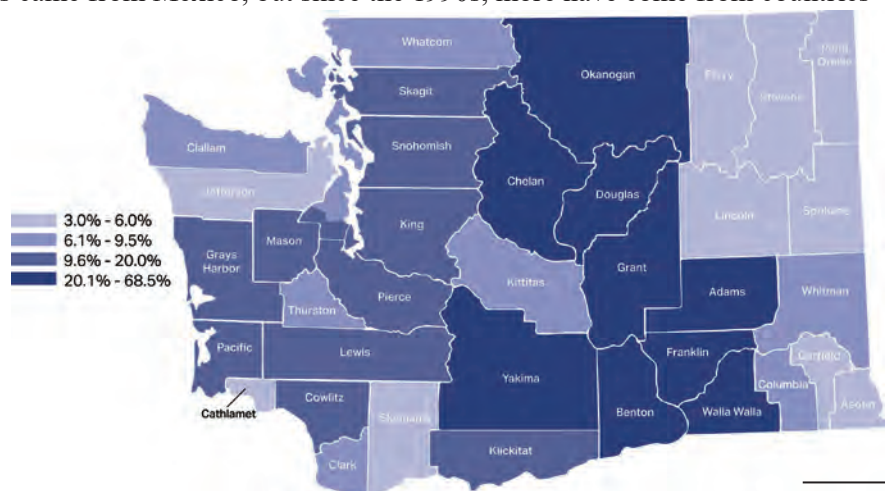
Over time, more and more farm work was done by machines that plow, water, and spread chemicals. But as the amount of irrigated land grew, farms grew ever larger, and more workers were needed to do the jobs machines still can't do.

Farm work is important in the Central and Eastern Washington, where vast amounts of grains, fruit, and vegetables are grown. The west side of the state has large blueberry farms, giant fields of tulips and daffodils, as well as many strawberry and raspberry farms. Anywhere there is agriculture (farming), there are likely to be Latino farmworkers. Some of them work only during harvests, but some work all year round, often in dairy farms.

Many Latinos also work in forests, replanting trees after an area has been logged. Some also harvest ferns and other plants that grow in the woods and which florists use in bouquets. In the spring and fall, people also pick and sell wild mushrooms.

In the past, most farmworkers came from Mexico, but since the 1990s, more have come from countries in Central America.

**Percent of Hispanics
in each county in
Washington state**



Phyllis Gutiérrez Kenney

Retired Washington State Representative

Phyllis Gutiérrez Kenney, born in 1936, was one of eight children in a migrant farmworker family. Her parents came to the U.S. from Mexico in 1919. Because they followed the crops from one state to another, the children in the Gutiérrez family were all born in different states. Phyllis's mom called her the "sugar beet baby," because that was the crop they were working when she was born in Montana.

Phyllis's family was among the first Latino families to settle in Wapato. At first the whole family did farm work, but eventually her father got a job in a business owned by another Latino. Her mom started a restaurant—the first Mexican restaurant in town. All the kids worked in the restaurant.

They were able to get a house, so, as Kenney says "When we went to school, we could give them a real, legal address. That was nice. And it was nice to have that stability."

When Phyllis and her brother started school, her brother's name was Juan, but the school changed it to John. Phyllis's name was Felipa, but they changed it to Phyllis. "Now I wish I had changed it back," she once said in an interview.

As a young adult, she moved to the Tri-Cities, where she helped establish farmworker health clinics, education programs, and a childcare center for rural families. Some of the programs she started still exist today.



She later moved to Seattle, and in 1997, she was elected to the Washington State Legislature, where she served until 2012. She was a pioneer in passing new laws to improve conditions for

farmworkers, including housing, pay, and education.

She also became chair of the House Higher Education Committee, which is in charge of state laws about community and technical colleges (usually two-year programs) and universities (usually four-year or longer programs).

She got a lot done. Just two examples of laws she helped pass:

A law to create a program where students at community colleges learn job skills and English at the same time, in the same classes. This helps them get through school faster and get good-paying jobs.

A law to make money available to college students whose families are undocumented – that is, they don't have the federal government's permission to be in the U. S.

She retired from the legislature in 2012. She was later appointed president of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, which governs the state's 34 two-year colleges.

Latinos in Washington towns and cities

Many migrant farmworkers and their grown-up children looked for opportunities to pursue dreams of a better life. Over many decades, Latinos found jobs on the railroads, in timber harvesting, or in cities, where they do landscaping work, cooking, child care, and other jobs. Latinos started many small businesses, such as restaurants, bakeries, and barbershops.

Latinos from many countries also immigrated directly to cities and suburban communities, or came to Washington from other U.S. states.

Mike Sotelo, for instance, came to Washington State from Los Angeles, was briefly homeless, then got a job as a laborer for a big construction company. He rose to become a co-owner of the company and chair of the Washington State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. He also developed and owned small shopping malls to provide spaces where new businesses could get started. He can trace his family's presence in the U.S. to 1611, during the early years of Spain's conquest.

He is one of many highly successful and highly educated Latinos in Washington.

Some Latinos started small businesses that grew into big businesses. Gene Juarez, for example, grew up in Wapato, the son of farmworkers. In 1971, he opened a high-end hair salon in Seattle. Now he employs 1,000 people in ten salons and spas, and an academy that trains new beauty professionals.

Pedro Celis, from Mexico, is a retired distinguished engineer from Microsoft who was

Alfie Alvarado-Ramos



Director, Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, retired. Governor Jay Inslee recognised her service stating, "Alfie's contributions reflect the best characteristics of America: courage, strength and sacrifice."

Chief Justice Steven C. González

Washington Supreme Court



named one of the 100 most influential Hispanics in the United States. He served on the U.S. President's Information Technology Advisory Committee from 2003 to 2005.

Their paths to success took hard work and thick skin. For instance, Mike Sotelo says that when he first got an office job at the construction company, some of his co-workers referred to him as the "lettuce picker." He simply refused to let that stop him.

Apart from prejudice and insults, Latinos faced other obstacles too. Doctors from other countries are not allowed to practice in the U.S. unless they get degrees from an American medical school. Other professionals are sometimes required to retrain here for jobs they already know how to do. Sometimes highly skilled professionals ended up in lower-paying jobs that had nothing to do with their education or the profession they practiced before they came.

Here is just a small sample of important and successful Latinos in our state:

Ana Mari Cauce, president, University of Washington

Eduardo Peñalver, president, Seattle University
Edgar Martínez, former Mariners baseball player, elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame

Alfredo Arreguín, beloved artist, whose paintings are in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. He passed away at the age of 88 on April 24, 2023.

María Sigüenza, Executive Director, Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs

Bending over all day is very tiring, especially in the hot sun.



Farmworkers struggle with low pay

From the beginning, farm work paid very low wages in spite of how hard it is. In the American South, farm work had been done without any pay by enslaved Africans for hundreds of years. After slavery ended, most Black people were penniless and landless, and many were kept in near-slavery working for plantation owners. This was one reason Americans ended up with a farm economy that depended on cheap labor.

Another reason for low wages for farm work is that Americans became used to food prices that depend on farmers keeping their costs low. Paying farmworkers more would make food more expensive at the grocery store.

The result is that farm work and the people who do it are not respected or paid very much. Our grocery stores shelves would be empty if it weren't for their labor.

Being a farmworker also makes it very hard to get the education or job training that better-paying jobs require. This is especially true for new immigrants who don't speak English yet. Some farmworkers are afraid that if they ask for more money or better treatment they could be deported because they aren't U.S. citizens or don't have government permission to work here.

Farmworker unions work for better pay, respect

The United States has a long history of farmworkers struggling for better pay, decent housing, and more respect.

Workers form unions—organizations of employees who band together to bargain with their employers over wages and working conditions. A union's bargaining power comes in part from its ability to get all its members to go on strike—that is, to refuse to work until their demands are met. The Spanish word for strike is *huelga*.

Workers tried to form unions in various parts of Washington State farm country starting in the early 1900s. The first attempt to unionize farmworkers started in 1909. A union called the International Workers of the World (IWW) came to Yakima. They found some workers willing to join a union to improve their conditions, and some too scared of losing their jobs if they joined.

Most farm owners were against the union, and in some places local police banned union rallies and arrested union members. No farms became unionized at that time, and it's not known whether all the meetings, demands, and pressure from the IWW persuaded any farmers to treat their workers better.

Race, changing times, and hardship

During the 1920s, few White Americans worked in the fields because they had other, better opportunities. It was common during those times for White people to think that they deserved more opportunities than Latinos, Indians, Asian Americans, or Black people. Latinos (at that time both Mexican and Mexican American) were recruited to come work in the fields.

But in 1929, the economy crashed and a lot of people lost their jobs. Then White people needed jobs badly enough to go work on farms again. So the government pushed Latinos out to make room for the unemployed White people. Thousands were deported to Mexico—including many who were American citizens. This was a violation of the law and their human rights.

Still, farmworkers' struggle for better treatment continued. In 1933, 100 workers went on strike at an orchard near Yakima and clashed with 250 armed farmers. All public meetings of workers were outlawed—another clear violation of their rights.

The federal government didn't help. In the 1930s, when Congress passed labor laws to protect workers from harsh conditions and long work days, they left farmworkers out. Much later, in 1973 and 1983, Congress passed laws to include certain farmworkers, but not all of them, and they still didn't get overtime pay when they worked extra-long days. (Overtime pay is usually 1½ times regular hourly pay.) It wasn't until 2021 that the Washington State Legislature finally passed a law that requires overtime pay in our state.

During World War II, in the early 1940s, Mexicans were asked to come work in the fields while others fought in the war or worked building ships and airplanes.





World War II and the Bracero Program

In the 1940s, when World War II was being fought[LG1] , White people, and some people of color, got higher-paying jobs in cities, where they built ships and planes needed to fight the war. Many were called to serve in the military.

Once again, farmers became desperate for workers. The U.S. and Mexican governments created the Bracero Program to recruit Mexicans to come to America to work on temporary visas (permission to enter the country). In this program, those workers were called Braceros.

Another part of the Bracero Program recruited Mexicans to work on railroads. However, the program was beset with terrible living conditions in remote locations, as well as corruption in both the U.S. and Mexico that cheated workers out of some of the money they earned.

Among the Braceros recruited to do farm work, people were expected to go back to Mexico between harvests. A U. S. Library of Congress Research Guide reports that:

The United States and Mexico agreed on a set of protocols that would protect Braceros from discrimination and poor wages. Nonetheless, discrimination continued and Braceros experienced surcharges for room and board, deducted pay, and exposure to deadly chemicals. The Bracero Program concluded on December 31, 1964 . . . the program resulted in an influx of undocumented and documented laborers, 22 years of cheap labor from Mexico, and remittances to Mexico by Braceros.

A remittance is money sent back to families in Mexico. Most of the workers who came in the Bracero Program were men who left their families in Mexico and sent remittances home.

During the years of the Bracero Program, Latino farmworkers were often welcomed and thanked for their hard work, and for saving farmers and our food supply from disaster during wartime.

But at the same time, they frequently lived in tiny shacks without running water or indoor plumbing, and some camped out on riverbanks. There were no public school programs for the children who came with their parents, and little or no health care or services for them.

The civil rights movement comes to Washington's Latino communities

In the 1960s, a new wave of farmworker union organizing swept up the West Coast from California, where Cesar Chavez founded the United Farmworkers Association in 1962. That union came as the Black civil rights movement was growing. Chavez helped people see the similarity between the discrimination against Black people and the treatment of Filipino and Latino farmworkers.

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. led the famous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, attended by some 250,000 people. All over the country, Black people and their allies campaigned for an end to laws in the American South that segregated Blacks and Whites, and that denied Black people the right to vote, get good jobs, and be respected as equals.

That movement inspired other people of color and women to campaign for their own equal rights too.

In the mid-1960s, a small group of Black civil rights workers traveled from Seattle to farm communities to show young Latinos how to apply for college. As a result, about 30 young Latino students were admitted to the University of Washington. Some of them were inspired by the Black students and their civil rights work, so they started a movement for justice for farmworkers and for all Latinos.

For several of those young Latinos, the struggle for equality, better lives, education, and health became a lifelong calling.

At that time, they called themselves Chicanos. The Chicano movement became quite powerful — so powerful that it produced three major centers of change that are important, thriving organizations today, including El Centro de la Raza, Sea Mar Community Health Centers, and Radio KDNA.



El Centro de la Raza

One of the Latinos who managed to graduate from high school and attend college was Roberto Maestas. He had been raised by his grandparents in New Mexico and worked as a migrant farmworker as a young teenager. He came to live with relatives in Seattle, went to college, and became a Spanish teacher at Franklin High School. With the help of a mentor who saw how smart and capable he was, he earned a graduate degree at the University of Washington. Then he helped create the English as a Second Language program at South Seattle Community College.

When money to run that program was suddenly cut off in 1972, Maestas and others decided to keep the program going on their own. They asked the Seattle Public School District for permission to use an empty, boarded-up school building. The School District refused. But Maestas and his supporters didn't take no for an answer. Maestas and about 75 activists moved into the empty school and rallied others in the community to support them. There was no heat or running water in the building, but a nearby Mexican restaurant provided food and ran a long hose to them for water. Black, Brown, White, and Native American people supported them, week after week, and then month after month. Eventually, a big crowd showed up at a Seattle City Council meeting and made it clear they weren't going to give up.

After three months, the school district and the City of Seattle finally agreed to lease the activists the building for \$1 a year. It was a big victory for nonviolent protest, and the beginning of a remarkable education and community services center.

El Centro de la Raza now provides child care, services to elders, education programs, English classes, and more for people of all races. Even more remarkable, El Centro has built apartment buildings for low-income people and elders on what used to be the school grounds. And it has big plans for more housing and service centers in other places with large Latino communities.



Washingtonia, poster by Alfredo Arreguin



**Alfredo Arreguin
(1935-2023)**

Arreguin emigrated to the US to attend the University of Washington and developed as an artist in Seattle. Internationally acclaimed for his densely patterned and symbolic paintings, he received numerous awards, including a Humanitarian Award by the Washington State Legislature, and a Washington State Governor's Arts Award.

Sea Mar Community Health Centers



Rogelio Riojas

Founder, Sea Mar Community Health Centers

Rogelio Riojas was a University of Washington student leader of the Chicano movement who participated in the occupation of the vacant school building that became El Centro de la Raza. The son of migrant farmworkers from Texas, he grew up in Othello, a town in Eastern Washington.

During the summer between his junior and senior year of college, he took a work-study job at a United Farmworkers (UFW) clinic in Toppenish, in the Yakima Valley. He thought it was unfair that people from Othello had to travel 80 miles to get to that clinic, and by the end of the summer, he persuaded the UFW to open a clinic in Othello.

That experience made him switch from wanting to be a lawyer to wanting to be a health administrator. While he was still in college, he and other students applied for funding to open a clinic for Latinos in Seattle. Another group had applied for a similar clinic in Marysville, so they joined forces, and in 1978 Sea Mar Community Health Center was born.

It started with seven employees in a small clinic in the South Park neighborhood of Seattle. Today there are 60 clinics in 13 counties that care for low- and moderate-income people of all races. They include mental health and dental clinics as well as medical care.

Sea Mar also manages housing for low-income people and those who've been homeless. It operates a bilingual preschool, child care centers, and summer camps. It even has a boxing club to get kids off the streets, give them exercise, and keep them away from drugs and alcohol.



In South Seattle Sea Mar also hosts an excellent museum of Latin American history in Washington State. It is a popular place for school field trips.

Sea Mar and its allies continue to advocate for medical care for all, safe and affordable housing for migrant farmworkers, immigrant rights, and other social justice issues.

In 2022, Riojas was still Sea Mar's leader. "I'll be an activist until I die," he says.

Radio KDNA

During the civil rights movement in the 1960s and early 1970s, federal programs to combat poverty and expand opportunity were started, but they didn't last long; by the middle of the 1970s, most had been defunded. But in those few years, those programs had shown what could be done, and many people who worked in those programs found ways to do more.

One way was to start a radio station.

At noon on December 19, 1979, Radio KDNA (pronounced *cadena*) went on the air in Yakima—in Spanish—to help fill these needs by serving the Latino farmworker community in Central and Eastern Washington.

It was an urgent need, since people who spoke little English didn't have access to information about what was going on in their communities, or in our nation. Later, in 2021, Spanish-language information about the COVID-19 pandemic was also vital.

KDNA became *la voz del campesino* (the voice of the farmworker). Just months after it went on the air, it proved its worth when the Mount St. Helen's volcano erupted, spreading ash so thick it turned day into darkness in the Yakima Valley. Latinos depended on KDNA to explain what was going on and how to protect themselves.

KDNA also reaches beyond the Latino community to serve Filipinos, Yakama Indians, and Anglos (White people) with some programs in English. It continues to advocate for better pay, working conditions, and housing for farmworkers and their families.

It became more than a radio station; it became a hub for all sorts of community activities. KDNA presents live concerts at a small amphitheater in front of its building. It holds a weekly farmers market. It also sponsors festivals, dances, holiday celebrations, and a big Christmas party as well as a driving school, immigration services, a credit union, and an education program.

KDNA also serves as a referral center that connects callers with local social, health, immigration, and education services.

With advice from community advisory boards, it identifies what topics or problems people need more information about. Then it writes and publishes *fotonovelas*, graphic novels that explain issues such as

prevention, vaccinations, combating sexual assault and opioid addiction, and air and water pollution that can harm human health. KDNA staff also make videos and use social media.

KDNA researchers investigate local problems affecting Latino and other low-income families. One study, which went on for 11 years, found ways to help reduce asthma, a disease that affects breathing. Asthma can be caused—and made worse—by polluted air and water.



Education reform for Spanish-speaking students

It wasn't until the 1960s that school programs were started for students who needed to learn English and for those in migrant families.

Before then, migrant parents had to enroll their children in one school, then transfer to another every time they moved. Before the Internet, the school had to copy and mail school records to the next school. Sometimes schools didn't get those records, so they didn't know which classes kids had already taken, or what credits they needed to graduate.



Until the 1960s, most schools didn't have programs to teach immigrant students English; they were just expected to learn it on their own.

It was also very hard for kids who only spoke Spanish or an Indigenous language to go to schools where there were no programs to help them learn English. They were just expected to learn on their own, and often they were punished if they spoke their home language at school.

Even after the creation of school programs to help students learn English, it took time for educators to learn how to do it well, and there are still debates about what teaching methods work best.

Now, in 2023, bilingual programs that teach whole classes – Latinos and non-Latinos together – in both Spanish and English are growing. But in those classes, students who speak only Indigenous languages will be challenged to learn two new languages.

Community-based education for students



The Latinx Youth Summit is held every year in the Olympia area. It's a big gathering of young Latinos sponsored by the La Mesa Redonda/ Hispanic Roundtable. This college and career-based event is open to high school students, their parents and their educators in Thurston, Lewis, Mason, Pacific and Grays Harbor Counties.



A place for learning and belonging

Mi Chiantla is a nonprofit education program in Thurston County, WA, that promotes academic and technical excellence with a focus on parent-based programs, and engagement-based drug use prevention program through STEM Education, Music, and Arts.

Latino Leadership in Washington's Legislature



Legislators above, seated:

Rep. Lillian Ortiz-Self, 21st Legislative Dist.
Rep. Bill Ramos, 5th Legislative Dist.

standing from left to right:

Sen. Rebecca Saldaña, 37th Legislative Dist.
Rep. Emily Alvarado, 34th Legislative Dist.
Rep. Tarra Simmons, 23rd Legislative Dist.



Sen. Nikki Torres,
15th Legislative District

Sen. Javier Valdez, 46th Legislative District
Rep. Monica Jurado Stonier, 49th
Legislative Dist.
Rep. Julio Cortés, 38th Legislative Dist.
Rep. Sharlett Mena, 29th Legislative Dist.
Sen. Emily Randall, 26th Legislative Dist.
Rep. Kristine Reeves, 30th Legislative Dist.

Rep. Alex Ybarra

When Alex Ybarra was a very small child, his mom took him and his brothers and sisters with her to the fields to work during the summer. She got up so early they were still asleep, and she carried them out to the car. They went on sleeping until the sun came up. Alex's brothers and sisters and mom weeded sugar beets and beans. The family also picked other crops, like grapes, cherries, and apples.

When Alex started school, he didn't know any English. He felt completely lost because no one taught English to Latino kids who only knew Spanish. He had to learn it on his own. When he needed help, he asked his older brothers and sisters. Kids got in trouble for speaking Spanish at school, so Alex really struggled. But he liked math because numbers were easier for him to understand than English words.

At the end of eighth grade, all the kids had to choose what math classes they would take in high school. All of the Latino kids chose an easy general math class rather than the harder algebra class. Alex wanted to take the easier class, but his teacher, Mrs. Lambeck, wanted him to take algebra. "No," he said, "if you put me in algebra I'll flunk!"



But she insisted. "No you won't, you're good at math! Look at your grades, you've been getting straight As in math, you'll do fine." Alex tried to argue with her, but she signed him up for algebra anyway.

Mrs. Lambeck was right. He got As in algebra. In fact, he went on to earn a college degree in math, and a master of business administration. He worked as an engineer/scientist at the Rocket Research Company for 14 years.

Then he moved back to his hometown of Quincy, in Grant County, to work for the county Public Utility District. He was elected to the Quincy school board and became its president, and later the vice president of the statewide association of school board members.

In 2019, he was elected to the Washington State House of Representatives, where he serves on the Education Committee and helps make decisions about schools for the whole state.

He knows from his own experience how much education matters to every student's future.

Carolina Mejia elected Thurston County Commissioner

A growing number of Latinos are being elected to lead on local school boards, city and town councils, and county commissions. Carolina Mejia is one of them.

She was elected Thurston County Commissioner in 2021. She and her family immigrated from Honduras when she was 11 years old. Her father, a doctor, had been forced by corrupt officials to turn over 30 percent of his salary to a new government, and conditions in Honduras were getting more violent and dangerous.

Luckily for Carolina and her family, they already had relatives here who sponsored them, so they were able to become U.S. citizens.

When they first arrived, Carolina remembers her first American meal was orange juice and a



baloney sandwich. It was very strange, she says, but “the best baloney sandwich ever.”

Learning English and fitting into a new country and a new culture were hard work. But Carolina was a good student and graduated from college

with a degree in business. She worked in the Thurston County family court before she was elected to the county commission.

She spends her days working to meet the challenges of a growing community for affordable housing, clean water, safe streets, and a healthy economy where people and businesses can thrive.

Farmworker conditions are better now, but there's more to do

Most people say that conditions for farmworkers are much better in the 2020s than they were in the 1960s. State laws have raised standards for farmworker housing, and wages have risen too—but not enough to pull many farmworkers and their families out of poverty.

Many farmers take pride in treating their employees with respect and ensuring that their working conditions are safe and humane. Some have been mentors to farmworkers and helped them move into better-paying and more skilled jobs. But there are still disputes over pay, housing, and other issues with other farmers, and there is hope that wages will continue to rise enough to lift families into the middle class.

The population of farmworkers has changed too. In the 2020s, more farmworkers are first-generation immigrants, and some are undocumented and subject to being deported. Many recent immigrants are Indigenous people

who speak their own languages rather than Spanish, including many from Central American nations. Most are fleeing extreme poverty and violence. All these things often make people afraid to stand up for their rights.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, crowded conditions and lack of face masks in the fruit-packing houses led to disease outbreaks and some workers going on strike. This was true for Latinos in other jobs too. Across the whole state, Latinos were more than twice as likely to get COVID-19—and to die from it—than White people. The packing-house workers won higher “hazard pay” for their work and somewhat safer conditions.

The Washington State Labor Council, the Washington Immigration Solidarity Network, and other organizations work to provide farmworkers and immigrants places to get information about their rights and how to protect them.



In Western Washington, raspberry, blueberry, tulip, daffodil, and vegetable farmers depend on farm labor, and so do dairies.

Unions come to the berry and tulip fields

In Northwest Washington, where berries and flower bulbs are major crops, union victories have succeeded in winning better pay and working conditions.

One such victory was at the Mt. Vernon-based Washington Bulb Company, where workers led by Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUPJ) went on strike three days before the 2022 annual Tulip Festival, which draws thousands of tourists to the area. They won the improvements they asked for, and though the employer didn't sign a union contract, he agreed to continue to meet with them if problems arise.

In 2017, FUPJ also won a union contract with Sakuma Brothers Farms, a major berry grower in Skagit County. This contract was signed after several years of conflict and a call for a boycott of its berries.

FUPJ is especially concerned about Indigenous Mexicans, Central American immigrants, and workers who come on temporary visas that allow them to work only for one employer. That means if they lose their job, they lose their right to be in this country.

FUPJ is also building public support by linking the cause of migrant workers with issues such as climate change, immigration reform, and racial justice. They created a worker cooperative farm, and they campaign for “food justice,” which means fairness to farmworkers; taking good care of animals, the earth, air, and water; and ensuring that all people have access to nourishing, affordable food.

Changing patterns of migration

The majority of Latinos in Washington State are of Mexican heritage, but in the last few decades, the Latino population has become more diverse. People have come from Central America, Cuba, and other Caribbean nations. More people from South American countries are also coming here, often when their countries are in crisis.

People often say that immigration comes from both a push and a pull—people are pushed out of their countries by hardship, and pulled to the United States by the promise of a better life.

For instance, Honduras is one of the three “Northern Triangle” countries in Central America; the other two are El Salvador and Guatemala. All three have suffered for many years from extreme poverty, government corruption, crime, and hurricanes. Nicaragua, another Central American country, suffers from these problems too. Many people think American companies and our government’s policies have sometimes made things worse instead of better. People in the U.S. Congress have had debates about this for decades.

Criminal drug-dealing organizations called cartels have also created danger and violence for many people in some of these countries as well as in Mexico.

Many people have fled their home countries to save their own lives or to feed their children. Unless they are lucky enough to have relatives or friends already here to help them when they arrive, they may feel very alone.

People who speak Indigenous languages also have a harder time finding translators who speak their language when they try to get medical care, enroll their children in school, or do business.

Latinos’ future: the next generation

It’s hard to read about—or to experience—the prejudice and injustices that Latino people in Washington have endured. But it is inspiring to reflect on the progress toward full equality and belonging that Latino people and their allies have achieved.

It will be even more exciting to see what happens next. What will the next generation—your generation—achieve? How will young people in Washington build on this legacy of progress?



Latino Organizations in Washington

Latino Civic Alliance

"Working together creates positive change."

14031 Ambaum Blvd SW, Burien, WA
A civic and learning center with Youth leadership Programs.

Web: Latinocivicalliance.org

Latino History of Washington State
1411 4th Avenue, Suite 803, Seattle, WA 98101

P: 206.447.8140

Web: historylink.org

Mi Centro

1208 S 10th St, Tacoma, WA 98405
A nonprofit that works with Latino and Indigenous native families through educational programs and civics instruction.

Web: MiCentro.org

Centro Cultural Mexicano

7945 Gilman St, Redmond, WA 98502
Cultural Center preserving Mexican Culture

Web: CentroCultureMexicano.org

La Casa Hogar

106 S 6th St, Yakima, WA 98901
A community based service cultivating seeds of success. We connect with and educate Latino families to transform lives in our Yakima Valley.

Web: LaCasaHogar.org

Casa Latino

317 17th Ave S, Seattle, WA 98144
Our goal is to help break the cycle of poverty with our Latino immigrant communities by helping women and men become economically independent.

Web: CasaLatino.org

Mi Chiantla

A place for learning and belonging
A nonprofit education program that promotes academic and technical excellence with a focus on engagement-based drug use prevention through STEM Education, Music, and Arts.

Dr. Carlos Mejia, Executive Director
E: Carlos@michiantla.org

Web: michiantla.org

Cielo

1601 N St, Olympia, WA 98501
We provide vital support and resources for refugees and immigrants in the South Sound. We offer educational, counseling and advocacy services. Family and individuals from all nations are welcome. Offices also in Shelton and Belfair.

P: 360-709-0931

Em: info@cieloprograms.org

Web: cieloprograms.org

Centro Latino

1208 S 10th St, Tacoma, WA 98405
We work with Latino and Native American families through our education programs, crisis intervention, family outreach services, arts and culture programming and advocacy efforts that concern our families and our community.

P: 253-572-7717

Web: CentroLatino.org

Latino Center for Health

Roosevelt Common East
4311 11th Ave NE, Ste 240, Seattle, WA

The leading voice in current and emerging health issues affecting Latinx communities in Washington.
P: 206-685-3583

Web: LatinoCenterHealth.org

Latinos en Spokane

1502 N Monroe St, Spokane, WA 99201

A Latino and immigrant led nonprofit organization centered on supporting citizen participation, culturally led community development and improvement for immigrant population in Spokane.

P: 509-558-9359

Web: latinosenSpokane.org

League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC)

1430 K St, Washington DC 20005
Largest and oldest Hispanic and Latin American civil right organization in the US. Established in 1929. Our goal is to advance the economic condition and education attainment, political influence, housing, health, and civil right of Hispanic people in the United States.

Web: lulac.org

Thurston County Hispanic Roundtable

A multi-cultural, multi-agency collaboration on a mission to strengthen the Latino community through partnerships, education, community building and cultural representation.

PO Box 6368, Olympia, WA 98507

Web: hispanicroundtable.org

Snohomish County Latino Coalition, La Prensa Bilingue

Monthly Hispanic newspaper printed in English and Spanish.

PO box 18835, Spokane, WA 99208

P: (509) 483-2523

Em: bilingualpress@icehouse.net

Web: latinnewszone.com

La Raza del Noroeste

Spanish language publications in Washington. Publisher:

E: ralcott@soundpublishing.com

Web: larazanw.com

Latino Community Resource

3809 Main St, Vancouver, WA 98663

A coalition that contributes to the attainment and success and empowerment of the Latino community and other systemically under represented communities through facilitating, out reach, education, advocacy and community connections.

P: 360-562-0237

E: lcrg.se.ws@gmail.com

Web: latinocommunityresourcegroup.org

Tri-Cities Latino Community Network

The libraries, Tri-city Hispanic Chamber and Kennewick School District work together to leverage the expertise of its members and local leaders to activate positive influence in the community.

E: tricitie.LCN@gmail.com

Web: midcolumbialibraries.org/tri-cities-latino-community-network/