



In Memoriam



José Angel Cárdenas

October 16, 1930 - September 17, 2011

Honoring the Life of Dr. José Angel Cárdenas

It is with great sadness that we share the news of the passing of IDRA's beloved Founder and Director Emeritus, Dr. José Angel Cárdenas.

On behalf of everyone at IDRA, I offer my deepest condolences to Laura Tobin Cárdenas, José's wife, and the entire Cárdenas family.

Dr. Cárdenas died on Saturday, September 17, 2011, in San Antonio, Texas. He was 80.

I received word of his passing just after a group of civil rights and education leaders had gathered at IDRA to launch a new phase of work to increase school funding equity in Texas. For us, there is no more fitting tribute than to continue the work that Dr. Cárdenas pioneered and to carry forward his vision for an equitable, excellent education for every child.

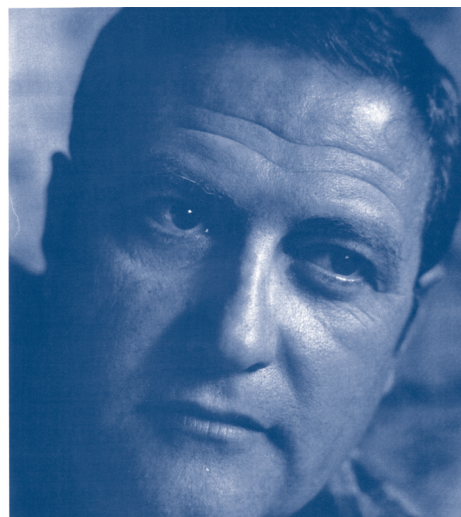
With deep roots in Laredo, Texas, José always knew that having more than one language and culture (a Spanish-speaking left foot as he put it, having been taught in the U.S. Army that the left foot always comes first), is not a deficit, but a reservoir of strength. He then went on—as teacher, principal, superintendent, university professor, researcher and advocate—to dedicate his life's work to fighting for an educational system that nurtured and recognized children's strengths. He was a champion for all children and carried their concerns from the streets and the schools to the legislature and the courts.

Dr. Cárdenas, it has been the greatest privilege for all of us to have known and worked with you. Your presence, whether we knew you as Pepe, Joe, José, JC or Doc, will be profoundly missed. But you have lit a torch. Within all of us, it burns on.

Gracias por todo, José Angel Cárdenas. I will miss you. Que en paz descanses amigo, educador, defensor de niños y eterna inspiración.

Cuca Robledo Montecel

Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, President and CEO
Intercultural Development Research Association
September 19, 2011



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Su Palabra es Oro ~ His Word is Gold

The Child

Of the many ways a man's destiny may be shaped, two are important to this story. *Family* is destiny and *character* is destiny. José Angel Cárdenas was born into a family that valued and prized education. Justo and Matilde Cárdenas decided early that all five children would graduate from college, and the five children earned nine college degrees. They taught the fine old Mexican values of manners and respect, of defense of the weak by the strong, and above all, of measuring a man's worth by the value of his word. As a child, José Cárdenas began to show the personal qualities that would later combine with his upbringing and circumstances to produce the man whose vision created IDRA.

José was a beautiful baby. One neighbor remembers the general wonder produced by his golden curls. "But you know," he says, "he had a different image of himself. He always knew his own mind! When he was four years old, he took a pair of scissors and cut the *risos* off!"

José skipped three grades and came to the assistance of all his teachers, as manners demanded. One teacher declared to her class, "*The* is an article, and can never be the subject of a sentence." José's hand shot up and he asked politely, "Would you mind diagramming the sentence, '*The* is an article?'"

He amazed his friends and family with feats of memory and rapid mental calculation. José once tried to show the owner of a *cambio* – or money exchange – how to hold the rates for dollars and pesos in his head and make rapid calculations. Instead of learning the trick, the man hired him. José used his wages to go to the bullfights.

José always liked science, so one Christmas, he was given a chemistry set. His father went down to the basement and asked, "What are you doing, my son?" Very seriously, his son replied, "I'm making dynamite."

And he's been making dynamite ever since!

He started at the University of Texas when he was just 15. Despite his tender age, his classmates remember him as equal to any challenge and more than a match for his classmates, some of whom were GIs returning from World War II and much older. He belonged to the Alba Club, a progressive political force on campus. He took a class from

one of the Hispanic professors who addressed the club, Dr. George Sánchez. "It may have been the first multicultural class in the country," José says. "He was an influence, more than I realized at the time."

The Educator

At nineteen, José began teaching junior-high science in Laredo and discovered what would prove to be a life-long love of children and of teaching. He even went to the Korean War as a teacher... of radio operation. Where was the dynamite? Returning to San Antonio, José took the express elevator from teaching to educational administration.

The Administrator

Dr. José Cárdenas became the first vice principal of Edgewood High School in 1955, and the first Hispanic administrator of the Edgewood school district. Dr. Cárdenas next served in the central office as district math and science supervisor, then as principal of Stafford Elementary School. He wanted to go back to teaching but at a higher salary. He accepted an offer from St. Mary's University, where he soon chaired the education department. At St. Mary's, he began contemplating teacher preparation, figuring out what it really takes to help children learn.

"I had seen that some teachers didn't work as hard as I did, didn't like children as much as I did, and were less successful with their students," he says, "but I still believed schools themselves were right, that the values schools taught were superior to those of our own minority populations. One day, I happened to walk into a meeting of all the counselors in the school district. They were saying it was outrageous that Mexican American students had so many absences because of their family responsibilities – going the doctor with their parents, for example, to serve as translators. And I remembered all the books I had read for my master's degree demonstrating that serious national problems resulted from 'dissolution of the family.' And yet these educators were ready to sacrifice the family to reduce absences. Did anyone ever say that serious national problems resulted from the excess absences of school children? I was prepared for a total transformation of my thinking, without realizing it."

(cont. on Page 4)

"I remember sometimes saying that I was born with my right foot in the United States and my left foot in Mexico. I specifically designate my left foot as the Spanish-speaking one because I was taught in the U.S. Army that the left foot always comes first, and Spanish was my first language."

– Dr. José Angel Cárdenas



(*Su Palabra es Oro*, continued from Page 3)

Research and Development

Dr. Cárdenas took a job in educational research, where these and other thoughts began to come together to combine explosively with new information. He was making dynamite!

"In the context of my research project at the laboratory," he points out, "I began to talk to anthropologists who showed me how difficult it is for society to judge values, to decide which will prevail. And I thought about my classes with Dr. Sánchez, and what I learned from Julian Zamora, William Madsen, Arthur Ruble and Ted Parsons..."

"And then, in one powerful moment, it all came together for me. One of these men told me that scientists had experimented with amoebas in a laboratory, and by using their reactions to color and light, they had trained these amoebas to recognize letters of the alphabet. And I thought, 'What if the amoebas had been sent to public school instead?' Then I would be hearing what I always heard about non-readers in our schools: 'They don't speak our language! They're amoeba, how can you expect them to learn. They come from the wrong side of the pond!'"

"What was different, and special, for those particular amoebas wasn't their readiness to learn compared with other amoebas but the *context* – the laboratory and all its special equipment, the skills of the technicians, the elegant process the scientists had designed specifically for amoebas... And I was sure that all children could learn if their schools had effective curricula and materials, were properly equipped, and their teachers were well-trained and exercised every effort to teach them."

"I was determined to make it happen! But as I prepared to take up new responsibilities as superintendent of the Edgewood School District, I asked my fellow administrators, 'What do you see as your primary responsibility?' And they all said, 'To stand up for my teachers.' Well, whose responsibility is it to stand up for the child? I resolved this conflict by imagining that God had appeared to me in the night and asked me to defend his children."

The Advocate

And defend them he did. Not only the students of Edgewood but all students. Dr. José Cárdenas made speeches, published papers and testified as an expert witness in *Morales vs. Shannon*, *U.S. vs. Texas*, *Keyes vs. Denver*, *Lau vs. Nichols*, *Doe vs.*



Plyler, Otero vs. Mesa Valley, Castañeda vs. Prichard, and 60 other cases "Litigation was so important," he asserts, "because many of these cases were class action suits, and through them we were able to better the educational opportunities of thousands of students. One that I am very proud of is *Doe vs. Plyler*, because these were students without any advocacy for them at all, and they were being blamed for failures of the schools."

Dr. Cárdenas saw that one of the biggest problems – for his students and many others – existed in the vast inequities in school financing. "I kept hearing that more money was not the answer, yet I saw my most talented teachers being hired away by districts that did have more money." Edgewood filed suit against the state commissioner of education. The boy who once multiplied exchange rates and money in his head to go to the *corrida* now mastered school finance to go to court. School finance was the founding issue of IDRA's predecessor organization, Texans for Educational Excellence, or TEE. "It was always clear to me," José says, "That more money alone was not the answer, but that it needed to be used for significant change."

He developed his thinking about the need for change into the "Theory of Incompatibilities." Essentially, it states that the values and practices of school are incompatible with the characteristics of many students – children from homes of little material wealth, for example, and those from minority populations. The school, he feels, must make its programs compatible with its students.

The Vision: IDRA

With the founding of IDRA, Dr. Cárdenas was able to multiply his efforts many times. "The effect of research and development can be powerful and far-reaching," he says. "Our tutoring program [the

Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program] takes what the school considers failing students, and supports them in a role that schools value – teaching younger students – and they begin to succeed in school. This will reach more students and do more good than a thousand speeches or reports, and I'm very proud of it."

The single goal of IDRA is improving educational opportunities for all children, and the organization prizes its intense singular focus. Supportive and critical observers alike agree that IDRA is creative, responsive, innovative and accountable. Every activity is thoroughly conceptualized and rigorously evaluated.

And what does his staff say about Dr. José Cárdenas? They say he's tough but fair. That he has high standards. That he recognizes talent and enjoys encouraging its development and expression. That he will do the most difficult thing if he's convinced it needs doing.

But above all, they say he does it all for the children. Because he loves them and because he said he would. And he's a man of his word.

Su palabra es oro.

This story is from the transcription of a video developed by IDRA on the occasion of Dr. José Ángel Cárdenas' retirement in October 1992. Narrated by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., IDRA senior education associate.



Scan this code with your phone to view the video online or go to http://www.idra.org/About_IDRA/IDRA_Staff/jcardenas/.

José Angel Cárdenas Early Childhood Center

Rededicated June 16, 2010

Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio ~ Dr. Elizabeth Garza, Superintendent

The following is reprinted from the rededication plaques at the José Angel Cárdenas Early Childhood Center, June 16, 2010.

**All children are valuable;
None is expendable.**

The Student and Patriot

Dr. Cárdenas started college at the age of 15 at the University of Texas. He earned a master's in education from Our Lady of the Lake University and a doctorate in education from UT. He later was a professor at both universities as well as at the University of Texas at San Antonio. From 1951 to 1953, Dr. Cárdenas served in the U.S. Army Infantry in Korea.

"The end result of an educational program for minority children – and for all children – is freedom."

The Educator

As a classroom teacher, Dr. Cárdenas worked in multicultural settings with limited resources. He later was the first Hispanic school superintendent in San Antonio, where he constructed the first school in Texas designed for preschoolers. He recognized the systemic barriers to providing the excellent education he envisioned. He dedicated his life's work to make his vision a reality.

"A popular song includes the phrase, 'By your students you will be taught,' and this phrase has been remarkably true for me, since it was in teaching that I learned the most."

The Advocate

Dr. Cárdenas founded the Intercultural Development Research Association, dedicated to improving educational opportunities for all children. He was an expert witness or consultant in more than 70 education civil rights cases and is known as the father of Texas bilingual education. He led decades-long efforts to achieve school finance equity and was instrumental in the Edgewood court cases.



"Every child has the right to a quality education."

"If students are faltering, failing, or leaving school, then their schools – not the students – need to change in fundamental ways."

The Visionary

Dr. Cárdenas believes that all children are valuable. His work has moved people to understand cultural diversity and how it is used to enhance or deny opportunities for students. A champion of the most vulnerable children, Dr. Cárdenas played a central role in litigation that ensured that children of undocumented parents were not denied access to education.

"My dream is for an ideal educational system where success and rewards are dependent on the student's capability and effort and are not constrained by the circumstances of their birth, their family or their environment – an educational system in which all students can and will learn."

"One of the myths that was perpetuated for years and years, and is still present, is that there are better schools in some areas of town because they sacrifice and spend more money for the education of the children."

– Dr. José Angel Cárdenas

**Todos los niños son valiosos;
Todos son indispensables.**

Estudiante y Patriota

A la temprana edad de 15 años, el Dr. Cárdenas ingresó a la Universidad de Texas en Austin donde obtuvo un doctorado en Educación. Su maestría en educación la obtuvo de la Universidad de Our Lady of the Lake. Fue profesor de ambas universidades y de la Universidad de Texas en San Antonio. Sirvió a nuestra nación con distinción en ejército.

“El objetivo final de la educación para todo niño de las minorías, como para todo niño, es la libertad.”

Educador

El Dr. Cárdenas dedicó su vida como educador en comunidades multiculturales con recursos muy limitados. Llegó a ser uno de los primeros superintendentes hispanos en esta nación y estableció el primer centro preescolar en Texas. Luchó contra barreras del sistema educativo para lograr una mejor educación, equitativa y de primera clase para todos los niños. Dedicó su vida para hacer esto una realidad.

“Una canción popular dice, ‘Por medio de tus alumnos, aprenderás,’ y esta frase es muy cierta para mí ya que de dar clases, fue de donde más aprendí.”

Defensor

El Dr. Cárdenas fundó el Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), una organización no lucrativa dedicada a mejorar las condiciones y recursos de escuelas que aboguen por el bienestar de todos los niños. Fue consultor experto en más de 70 juicios jurídicos donde defendió el derecho de todos los niños a una educación de calidad. Se le reconoce como el padre de la educación bilingüe en Texas. Lanzó una campaña para lograr la equidad en la distribución de fondos a distritos escolares en Texas y se destacó en los propios juicios jurídicos del distrito de Edgewood.

“Cuando vemos a alumnos abandonar la escuela, tener dificultad en sus clases, y perder toda ambición por lograr el éxito escolar, la escuela --y no los alumnos-- tiene que cambiar fundamentalmente.”

Visionario

El Dr. Cárdenas considera que todos los niños son muy importantes. Sus contribuciones han inspirado a muchos a entender la diversidad multicultural y cómo ésta se utiliza para proveer o negar oportunidades para triunfar y tener éxito. Defensor



“Todo niño tiene el derecho a una educación de primera clase.”

de todo niño de escasos recursos o vulnerable, el Dr. Cárdenas jugó un papel muy importante en el juicio jurídico que aseguró que a todo niño de padres indocumentados no se le negará el acceso a la educación.

“Sueño en un sistema educativo ideal donde el éxito y la recompensa dependan de la capacidad y trabajo del alumno y no de sus circunstancias ambientales, familiares o financieras —un sistema educativo donde todo alumno tenga derechos y pueda aprender.”

“What started out in the 1960s as a quest for equal rights and justice became a national economic imperative... The failure of the educational system to produce a skilled worker is not only a personal loss for the underperforming student, it is an unaffordable resource loss to the community, the state and the country.”

– Dr. José Angel Cárdenas

Paso por aquí José Angel Cárdenas

Tributes from Colleagues and Friends

"Dr. C, advisor, my life-long mentor, El Jefe... You were truly my mentor and advisor... You've touched so many lives; you've been an inspiration, an untiring advocate for equal educational opportunity for all children, and that philosophy carried me through my professional career."

– Dr. Max Spencer Castillo, retired,
President, University of Houston-Downtown

"I wish to extend my deepest sympathy to Dr. Cárdenas' family... Our profession is full of stories like mine, people who had dreams and were encouraged, guided and challenged by José to make them reality. To so many, he has been a friend, mentor, colleague and guiding light. The world has been a better place simply because of his physical presence here, however, today, the universe quietly sheds a tear as we mourn the loss of a truly great man."

– Dr. Paul Martinez, Director, Center for the
Education and Study of Diverse Populations, New
Mexico Highlands University

"I am also saddened by the passing of one of our most consistent and persistent advocates. Dr. Cárdenas always stood up for the disenfranchised and did so with dignity, grace and class."

– Dr. Baltazar Acevedo,
Professor, College of Education,
University of Texas-Pan American

"He truly was a great leader in this important arena and will be missed."

– Sen. Judith Zaffirini, Texas Senate

"One of the tests for determining the quality of a person's life is how she or he made a difference or changed the world for the betterment of many. José Cárdenas changed the world in profound ways. He is a great loss. He will be missed. He taught us so much."

– Dr. Richard Gambitta,
Director, Institute for Law and Public Affairs,
University of Texas at San Antonio

"José was a great and highly respected leader in the world of education. Many people have felt the positive effects of his life both as an educator and an advocate. And many more will continue to do so through all that he has helped to create."

– Rep. Rubén Hinojosa, U.S. House of
Representatives

"Extremely sad news... Superintendent of the Edgewood district, founder of IDRA, leader in efforts for school finance equity for 40 years, lead theoretician and activist behind the development of bilingual education – one of the smartest people I have ever met. José was also lead expert witness in cases on school finance, bilingual education, education of the undocumented, testing and higher education access. We have lost a real champion. José, descansa en paz!"

– Al Kauffman, Associate Professor of Law,
St. Mary's University

"The National Association for Bilingual Association mourns the passing of Dr. Cárdenas. We are grateful for his contributions to education and equity."

– Dr. Rossana Ramirez Boyd,
President, National Association for
Bilingual Education

"He was a true pioneer in all respects. By his efforts so many have been helped and will continue to be helped. We are honored to be associated with IDRA, the agency he founded, and respectfully share with you our sadness at his passing. May God bless and rest the family during this time."

– Jose Medrano, South Texas Adult Resource and
Training Center (START Center)

"Whereas, An individual possessing great expertise, integrity and determination, José Cárdenas used his abilities to help ensure that the benefits of education are available to all, and his accomplishments will continue to make a positive difference in the lives of countless people for many years to come; now, therefore be it resolved that tribute be paid to the memory of Dr. José Cárdenas..."

– State of Texas Resolution issued on
September 22, 2011, Rep. Joaquín Castro,
Texas House of Representatives

"I know I speak for many, many educators and school board members that, though they never knew you, they were privileged to have heard your message(s) and, as such, assisted in opening the "bilingual doors of opportunities" that had previously been either closed or very difficult to open by so many students."

– Vickie Gomez, Retention Officer,
University of Texas - Permian Basin

"Whereas, Dr. Cárdenas was renowned for his brilliant mind, his intellectual curiosity, and his pursuit of educational justice and equity for Latino children; he wrote several books on education...; in 1973, he founded the Intercultural Development Research Association, a nationally known institution that conducts research and develops curriculum and education theory... Proclaimed, that the Senate of the State of Texas hereby pay tribute to the life of José Cárdenas..."

– Texas Senate Proclamation No. 309, Sen. Leticia
Van de Putte, Texas Senate

"I first met José in 1972 and that meeting pretty much determined the course of the next 40 years of my professional life. Mentor, inspiration, leader, take your pick."

– Roger Rice,
Executive Director, META Inc. (Multicultural
Education Training and Advocacy, Inc.)

"Whenever you see a young child going into an early childhood education classroom and receiving instruction that affirms and respects and supports who he is, you can say, 'Paso por aquí, José Cárdenas.' When you see the numbers of our young people graduating from college and you see them going on to master's degrees and doctoral degrees, you can say, 'Paso por aquí, José Cárdenas.' And for those of us who loved, who learned and cherished him, we will say in our hearts, 'Paso por aquí, José Cárdenas.'"

– Dr. Blandina Cárdenas (from eulogy), retired,
President, University of Texas - Pan American

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Dr. Cárdenas to share your
thoughts and stories and read
others.

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