

CRUZ REYNOSO: A SON'S PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

I am Len ReidReynoso—the eldest son of Cruz Reynoso. Dad passed away on May 7, 2021. Following the 2022 Symposium honoring the life and legacy of my Dad,¹ the *Chicanx-Latinx-Law Review* approached me to write about Dad. I wondered how I could best honor him. Dad had expressed disappointment that much information written about him didn’t sufficiently focus on his family. In this piece, I share my personal perspective as Cruz Reynoso’s son. In doing so, I hope to add another layer of understanding Cruz Reynoso.

Dad was born on May 2, 1931, in Fullerton, California, to immigrant parents from Jalostotitlán, Jalisco, Mexico. Escaping the communist purge in Mexico² and in search of economic opportunity, his family immigrated to the United States in 1927. Dad was raised in a poor neighborhood in

¹ HONORING THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF JUSTICE CRUZ REYNOSO (1931–2021) (2022) [<https://perma.cc/MCA9-NUTT>].

² The purge in Mexico, I was taught by Dad, occurred following the Mexican Revolution when a communist/socialist government overthrew the dictatorship. As a result of the communist takeover, the government sought to eliminate religion, including the Catholic Church. This period was known as La Cristiada, or the Cristero War. During this time, many fled Mexico due to the violence, including government-sanctioned massacres of those who openly practiced religion, especially Catholicism. This education was a benefit of having a father who was a history major in college.

Brea, California and was the third son of eleven children. When he was seven years old, the family moved to a barrio called Alta Vista outside of Brea, CA. He became the first in his family to pursue college and graduate from law school. Through hard work, perseverance, and a supportive family, Dad broke many barriers, rising to the top of the legal world. Some of his biggest accomplishments include becoming Director of the California Rural Legal Association (CRLA) and serving as the first Latino on the California Supreme Court. In 2000, at age 69, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his life-long commitment to social justice issues, including immigrant rights, civil rights, and voting rights.

Dad has also been revered as a professor. But this was not always the case. When he was a young boy in the 1930s, other children nicknamed my Dad “Professor” as an insult. Back then, Professor was used to describe someone who was lazy because they preferred to study and read books over working. Dad’s mother also used this word negatively. Given her immigrant, working-class background, it was difficult for her to understand how choosing books over work could be beneficial. Nevertheless, Dad turned this insult into a strength. From my earliest memories, Dad was always learning and teaching. As a judge at the California Third District Court of Appeal, Dad continued his path as a professor. There, he established an intern program in the mid-1970s and loved mentoring the interns—sometimes *seven* of them. Nearly a quarter century later, that intern program was still used at the California Third District Court of Appeal when I interned. As a Justice on the California Supreme Court, he continued mentoring interns. Later, he taught as a professor of law at UCLA School of Law and then UC Davis School of Law. The title of Professor was one he honored. It was well earned.

MY EARLIEST MEMORIES: DAD “LEAVING ON A JET PLANE” FOR JUSTICE AND FAMILY

My earliest memories of Dad begin when he advocated for immigrants’ rights at California Rural Legal Assistance (CLRA) located in San Francisco. At that time, in the late 1960s, we lived in Piedmont—about a 20-minute car ride from San Francisco. Going into the city to visit Dad’s office with my mother, Jeannene Reynoso, and my two sisters, Trina and Ranene, was fun. We got to see where he worked, but what we really cared about as small children was going into Chinatown where we had delicious rice candy. Dad rose to the top at CLRA, becoming

Director. This new level of responsibility, along with other commitments outside of the Bay area, meant he was often gone and catching flights. His absence made me sad, so I looked out the window of my house to catch a glimpse of Dad's plane. As I did, Mom sang to me "Leaving on a Jet Plane" by Peter, Paul, and Mary. I missed him.

When Dad was gone, Mom kept the home front going. For example, Mom helped the girls bake in the easy bake oven, and they also loved to set up picnics. In Piedmont, we also developed the family tradition of having poodles as pets. Dad took in a poodle that had been orphaned in the street. He named her Orphan Annie. We had poodles until Mom passed away in 2007. Mom also made sure Dad had the kids' school events on his calendar, and in moments that we were sad, she instructed us that working hard for the benefit of others was a noble lifestyle.

But it wasn't until later that I'd realize why exactly he was gone so much: He left on that plane for justice. As Director of CRLA, Dad was busy fighting against Governor Reagan's administration in support of farm workers and other indigent individuals. CRLA won seven lawsuits against Reagan's administration. In a notable case, he secured a ban against the short-handled hoe, which had harmed farm workers' bodies. At CRLA, Dad mentored many attorneys, many of whom became prominent civil rights leaders, heads of law firms, and law professors. For example, Ralph Abastall dedicated his entire career to CRLA; Gary Bellow became a Professor for Harvard School of Law, advocating for the disenfranchised; Robert Gnaizda was General Counsel and Policy Director for Greenlining Institute; Martin (Marty) Glick is currently Chief Operating Officer of The Saul Zaentz Company; and, Fred Heistand, current General Counsel for Civil Justice Association of California.³ Dad also collaborated with a number of legendary organizers, such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Both Chavez and Huerta served on the Board of Directors for CRLA with Dad.⁴

Despite his heavy workload, I could tell family meant a lot to Dad and he cherished all the time he spent with us. Five houses down the street from our Piedmont home was a great rose garden: Morcom Rose

³ Georgetown University, *Oral History Interview with Cruz Reynoso, Conducted by Alan Houseman* (Aug. 8, 2002), <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1042295> [<https://perma.cc/RZW4-LE8R>].

⁴ Dad also worked with Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in the Community Service Organization and the National Farm Workers Association.

Garden. I remember family walks with Dad through the rose garden. Sometimes, I would ride my tricycle on these walks. I also liked to ride my tricycle inside our home. We had a circle through the hall, living room, kitchen, and dining room—perfect for my tricycle. The Morcom Rose Garden is still beautiful today, decades later. When I go back to that neighborhood, I recall those special moments with Dad.

I also have great memories enjoying picnics, family dinners, fireworks, and visits to Disneyland with Dad. We spent a lot of family time with Dad's brothers, Uncle Amado and his wife, Aunt Diane, and Uncle Joe and his wife, Aunt Belia, in California. Our Disneyland trips together especially stand out. I remember we would get to the park as early as possible. The plan was to hit as many rides as we could in the morning and shows in the afternoon. I liked Treasure Island. Mom's favorite was Pirates of the Caribbean and It's a Small World. We would normally end with the Haunted House. Dad enjoyed going on the rides and walking in the park.

On the other side of the country, we would visit cousins in Tennessee—the Terrys. I was always excited to visit my favorite cousin, Annette, one of five girls in the Terry family. We'd all go on adventures to Civil War sites, such as Biltmore Castle, and Colonial Williamsburg. Dad, of course, would use these moments as opportunities to teach us about history, just as he would whenever we watched history movies.

Dad and Mom also encouraged a love for learning and a deep sense of service. Mom demonstrated her commitment to education and service while always volunteering at school in PTO and PTA meetings, in homeroom tutoring, and with any other activity where assistance was needed. Dad also volunteered at school through lectures and at PTA meetings. Mom and Dad both taught us how to diagram sentences, an old style of breaking a sentence into a visual representation of the sentence structure and word use. Their commitment to education motivated the entire family: All of my siblings are either in education or public service. Trina is a schoolteacher and currently working with high-risk children in her own academy outside of Marysville, CA. Ranene has been a college recruiter for decades, first for University of California at Davis, then for Washington State University. Rondall is an Assistant Professor of Art at a regional college in Tennessee. I married a wonderful woman for whom service, and education are part of her soul. Such service includes church service, youth programs, teaching, working with adult disabled

persons, relief projects, and quilting. We are passing on those values to our children.

GRACE, DIGNITY, AND COMPOSURE IN ADVERSITY

One of the most important lessons my parents taught me occurred the night of the General Election in 1986 when Dad's seat at the California Supreme Court, along with others' seats, was challenged. My sister, Ranene, was Dad's campaign manager at the time, and she set up the election night gathering at Arcohe Elementary School. On this night, I anxiously awaited the results. Dad and two other Justices were not retained. After I asked Dad if he was upset, he said, how could he be upset since so many people had supported him?

The next day, my parents ignored all calls and drove up to the mountains for a relaxing lunch. Now they would have more time for themselves. They told me it was one of the best days in their 50-year marriage. The grace, dignity, and composure with which my parents handled the difficult situation taught me to act similarly when confronted with adversity. I will never forget that lesson.

MY LAW SCHOOL YEARS: DAD CONTINUED TO TEACH ME AND TO ADVOCATE FOR OTHERS

My parents encouraged me to go to law school many times. Seven years after completing my undergraduate degree from UC Davis, I finally agreed to seriously consider law school. I was accepted to many top law schools, including Stanford, and USC. I elected to attend UC Davis because I had met my wife Kym there, and Davis would be a great place to raise our four small children.

I started at UC Davis School of Law in 1998. At the time, Dad was teaching his last year at UCLA School of Law. In my second year, Dad joined the faculty at UCD School of Law. We would often drive to school together since we lived in Dad's second house on the Ranch outside of Galt, CA. We would leave early and would come home late to avoid the traffic. While I studied, I observed that Dad was a relentless advocate for students and for any disadvantaged person. He taught, counseled, and supported individual students and students organizations like La Raza. In addition, I saw him give speeches, meet with people, and review cases. He'd do anything to help people, especially those at a disadvantage.

Just as Dad had taught me when I was little, Dad continued to teach me when I was a law student. I was lucky to have a law professor as a Dad because he could help me understand how to think about the law. For example, when Dad's judicial opinions from the California Court of Appeals and Supreme Court came up in class, I had the opportunity to discuss them with Dad and bring up how the casebook authors had interpreted his legal analysis. In every case, the casebook authors did not accurately capture his interpretation. For example, in one case Dad decided that the need for water flow for fish was a legitimate factor in water policy. The casebook discussed environmental groups applauding the ruling as a huge progressive victory for water rights. However, when I discussed it with Dad, Dad thought his ruling was narrower. He employed a strict statutory interpretation, as the legislature had codified that "in stream" flow of water for fish was a high value use for water, meaning that water levels in the rivers had to stay high enough for the fish. Dad taught me that I needed to be careful to not make assumptions about what a certain judge meant in a case, and to read cases carefully, both narrowly, and broadly. Dad also emphasized—repeatedly—that the job of the legislature is to make the policy, while the job of the court is just to apply the law to a particular situation. As a judge, he believed he stuck to applying the law.

In addition, while a professor, Dad emphasized the need to examine the power dynamics between individuals and institutions. For example, when people would focus on the benefits of the Bracero program for Mexican immigrants—jobs—Dad would instead highlight the ways the immigrants lacked control in determining work conditions. These work conditions were often dangerous and pay was little. Later, in 2011 Dad chaired the Task Force reviewing the incident where UC Davis police pepper-sprayed students in an Occupy Wallstreet protest. Instead of focusing on the individual police officers who had engaged in the conduct, Dad focused on how to avoid such a harmful situation in the future by examining who had the most control to avoid the harm. Dad's work for the Cabazon Band of Cahuilla Indians as a gaming Commissioner, was also indicative of his recognition that as attorneys with certain backgrounds, we have the power to help communities who have been excluded by the U.S.

In August of 2000, the summer between my second and third years in law school, President Clinton honored Dad with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. My wife and I had the opportunity to attend the

ceremony at the White House and to meet both President Clinton and Mrs. Clinton.⁵ President Clinton described Dad in the following way:

The son of farm workers, Cruz Reynoso has devoted his life to ending discrimination, fighting for immigrant rights, and promoting equal opportunity. Through his efforts to address social inequality 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. Respected for his legal expertise and renowned for his compassion, Cruz Reynoso has earned his place as one of America's most distinguished lawyers, jurists, and social reformers.⁶

Seeing Dad be recognized with the highest civilian honor was a great experience. I have a picture of Dad, Mom, my siblings, my brother-in-law Duane, and my wife Kym, with President Clinton and Mrs. Clinton. We got to meet in the White House with the CEO of Johnson and Johnson, U.S. senators, generals, ambassadors, activists, religious leaders, and a Holocaust survivor who was a Nazi Hunter. Witnessing this high honor first-hand, made me feel immensely proud to be in the U.S., where my Dad had been encouraged to fight for social justice.

WORKING WITH DAD AND LATER YEARS

In 2001, after I graduated law school and passed the bar, it was time to be sworn in as an attorney. My wife and I invited family and close friends to our home for the special ceremony. I had the honor of Dad swearing me in on December 1, 2001. This is one of my most cherished memories.

In 2002, I opened my own law practice in Galt, California (Sacramento area) and in 2003, Dad joined as Special Counsel, retaining some of his own work. He split his overall legal work into three

⁵ Kym and I were with our kids in Utah on vacation. This was before cell phones. Mom made calls until she found us in Utah. Kym's sisters and Mom watched our four children so Kym and I could attend the ceremony at the White House.

⁶ *User Clip: Cruz Reynoso Medal of Freedom Ceremony*, C-SPAN at 47:04 (Aug. 9, 2000), <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5003494/user-clip-cruz-reynoso-medal-freedom-ceremony> [<https://perma.cc/YZ4M-EY96>].

categories: special projects, paid, and pro bono. Special projects, like gaming, were his own (not handled by my firm). Paid cases ranged from explaining California law to the Supreme Court of Israel, to working with a large shoe company in Spain, to expert testimony cases. Dad and I worked together on legal strategy, and with declaration-writing. Dad had a giant pro bono case load, too. He was always helping as many people as he could. He emphasized that as attorneys we should exercise our power and legal knowledge to help people.

In 2007, tragedy struck our family. Mom lost her long battle with breast cancer. Most of mom's treatments were at UCLA. Mom would not fly, so she would take the train or drive from the Ranch in Herald to the UCLA Medical Center. The family would sometimes join her on the train, Amtrak Coastal Line, to travel with her for her treatments at UCLA Medical Center. Mom enjoyed taking the grandchildren on the train. Mom passed July 2, 2007, with her family around her bed at home. We celebrated her favorite holiday, July 4th, then buried her on July 7, 2007. After Mom's passing, we took care of the Ranch in Herald, where Mom and Dad lived.

Dad kept busy with his work. He continued working at my office, and teaching classes at UC Davis, all while caring for dozens of other projects. Dad remarried in late 2008, and in 2010, his wife Elaine became disabled in a car accident while they were back east traveling between premiers of *Cruz Reynoso: Sowing the Seeds of Justice*.⁷ She was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. Toward the end of her life, Dad was her primary care giver. She passed away in December of 2017.

In August of 2017, Dad closed all matters with my office, but he still had a large portfolio of cases he was working on outside of my firm. In 2018, Dad began showing his age and could no longer work. I then had to assess what to do with his cases. Some were able to be transferred to attorneys working with Dad. Some matters I had to finish. Even in his senior years Dad had been immensely productive and hard-working. By 2018, Dad had been fighting for social justice for a total of 76 years, nearly *eight* decades—since he was eleven years old to 87 years old. It was time to rest.

Over the next three years, the family worked together with my sister Trina who is Dad's trustee, to ensure Dad had the best life possible.

⁷ CRUZ REYNOSO: SOWING THE SEEDS OF JUSTICE (2010), <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/28832> [<https://perma.cc/V8G7-VU7U>].

Many family members and some close friends would visit Dad on a regular basis. We would normally have a family member with him three to four days a week. Dad passed on May 7, 2021, at 90 years old with family at his side.

LESSONS

I had the ability to be with Dad for many years as a son, student, and as a professional. I learned so much through him in these different roles:

- Be honest with people.
- Sharing values and goals is a great basis for a relationship.
- There are no kings in the United States—treat everyone as an equal regardless of financial status, gender, race.
- Voting is the most important civil right we have. Use it and allow others their right to vote.
- Respect the political offices and institutions with authority—regardless of who is in that office at that time.
- Try to find a passion in your life and follow that passion.
- It is OK to agree to disagree, but do not be disagreeable.
- Dad believed in learning from history, not erasing history.
- Do not expect others to take care of me. I must care for myself.
- Be a supportive and attentive husband—always growing with your partner.
- Be a supportive and present Dad.

I am grateful for these lessons.

