



Festival highlights segregated past with documentary

Indio — The legal doctrine of separate but equal that justified segregation isn't just a dark chapter in American history.

For Gilda Guitron Sandsness, it was her experience attending schools in Coachella, where Mexican and black students were segregated from whites.

It's also the reason Sandsness selected the "Mendez vs. Westminster" documentary to be screened during a film festival for the Mexican-American Family Festival, which kicks off today.

"It hit a chord," said the 76-year-old Sandsness, who is chairwoman of the Coachella Valley History Museum's Mexican-American Pioneer Families.

The film festival runs weekly through Oct. 13 and coincides with Hispanic Heritage Month, which recognizes the contributions of Latinos, the nation's largest ethnic and racial minority.

Seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, a little-known Orange County case — *Mendez v. Westminster* — ended segregation in California. The documentary follows the story of Sylvia Mendez, who as an 8-year-old was denied enrollment at her white-only, neighborhood school

because of her dark skin and Mexican surname.

Mendez was awarded the 2010 Presidential Medal of Freedom in February. In bestowing the highest civilian honor, President Barack Obama said Mendez "has made it her mission to spread a message of tolerance and opportunity to children of all backgrounds and all walks of life."

Mendez will be the guest speaker at the Oct. 13 showing.

Other screenings include tonight's "The Longoria Affair," an Emmy-nominated film that tells the story of the Texas funeral home that refused to hold a wake for a decorated veteran, Felix Longoria, and "Brown is the New Green" on Mexican-American actors and Hollywood.

Opening night also will include a 10-minute mini-documentary on Dr. Reynaldo Carreon, an Indio physician who co-founded the Indio Community Hospital, now John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital.

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Gloria Margarita, executive director of the Dr. Carreon Foundation, said the film festival was timely, given the national discussion on immigration reform.

"It definitely comes at a time when immigration reform is at the forefront," Margarita said. "I think it will be very relevant to people here in the community."

What: Mexican-American Family Festival

When: Kicks off at 5 p.m. today with film "The Longoria Affair"; series runs every Thursday through Oct. 13.

Where: Indio Teen Center, 81-678 Ave. 46, Indio

Cost: Free

Information: (760) 342-6651

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