



A Note from the Office of Dean Leonard M. Baynes

Mid-September marks the beginning of National Hispanic Heritage Month. It is a time to reflect on the achievements of individuals of Hispanic descent and to recognize the profound impact they have had on the social, cultural, and economic fabric of our nation.

National Hispanic Heritage Month is celebrated annually between September 15 and October 15 coinciding with the anniversaries of independence of several Latin American countries.

Hispanic Heritage Month began when President Lyndon B. Johnson, signed a proclamation on Sept. 17, 1968, designating the week of September 15 to September 22 National Hispanic Heritage Week. After increased interest in celebrating the month, President Ronald Reagan, on August 17, 1988, signed a law expanding the week-long celebration to one full month.

Houston is a majority-minority city, and since 2023, Hispanics comprise the [largest ethnic](#) group, making up 44% of Houston's population, [and 40.5% of the population of the state of Texas](#). During Hispanic Heritage Month, we celebrate this progress while also paying tribute to the barrier breakers who acted boldly and established themselves in professions where they were unrepresented.

At the University of Houston Law Center, that barrier breaker is Tony Bonilla. He is a member of the Class of 1960, and was the school's first graduate of from a minority background as well as the first Hispanic graduate. He graduated from law school only six years after the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided, and he graduated before any of the landmark Civil Rights legislation was passed in the mid1960s.



Tony Bonilla '60

Bonilla is a native of Calvert, Texas, and is the president of Bonilla & Chapa, P.C., a personal injury firm with five offices across Texas. He currently resides in Corpus Christi. He is the son of immigrant parents, and one of eight siblings. With his parents emphasizing the importance of education, Bonilla and all of his brothers and sisters attended college.

In addition to a successful career practicing law, he has been a longtime civic leader. In 1965, Bonilla served in the Texas House of Representatives and was the first Hispanic representative from Nueces County. Bonilla played a role in the creation of the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Education Service Centers and served as National Chairman of the Board. He is past National President of LULAC, past State Chair of LULAC and has served LULAC and other Hispanic organizations in leadership roles.

"Attending the University of Houston Law Center was the best decision I ever made," Bonilla said in an interview with the Law Center. "I'm humbled by having been the first Hispanic person to graduate from the Law Center. It's very meaningful to me.

"By pursuing law, I was hoping I could bring some balance to our society where Hispanics weren't looked upon as second-class citizens, and so that we could have an equal opportunity to get jobs and promotions, and to get elected. I thank the University of Houston, and the great education provided by my professors. I thank the Law Center for opening the doors, not only to law but opening the doors to the possibilities that existed. I thank them for the opportunities to excel and become successful."

In 2021, Bonilla received the Dean's Distinguished Award for his extraordinary career. In the Law Center's John M. O'Quinn Law Building, Bonilla and his family honored his legacy by naming the Tony Bonilla, Sr. (J.D. '60) seminar room. I applaud Tony's commitment to the legal profession and his exemplary community involvement. His story serves as inspiration to anyone at how obtaining a law degree from the Law Center can be a life-changing force for good that extends for generations.

Happy Hispanic Heritage Month! We can use this time to amplify voices and celebrate the many legacies and rich cultural contributions than our Hispanic and Latinx communities bring to our Law Center.

Sincerely,

Leonard M. Baynes
Dean, Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen Distinguished Chair, and Professor of Law
University of Houston Law Center

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4170 Martin Luther King Blvd.
Houston, TX 77204-6060