



A Note from the Office of Dean Leonard M. Baynes

Hispanic Heritage Month, observed each year from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, is an opportunity to celebrate the contributions of Hispanic and Latino Americans who have helped shape our nation and the profession. Here in [Houston](#), where nearly half the residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, that heritage is woven into the fabric of our city and reflected daily in our neighborhoods, classrooms, and workplaces.

Our profession has been shaped by Hispanic attorneys and jurists who have expanded opportunities and strengthened our constitutional tradition. In 1954, Texas attorneys Gus Garcia and Carlos Cadena successfully argued *Hernandez v. Texas* before the U.S. Supreme Court, securing equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment for Mexican Americans and other groups. Judge Reynaldo G. Garza became the first Mexican American federal judge in 1961, and in 1979, the first Mexican American and Latino to serve on a circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals when he was appointed to the Fifth Circuit by then President Jimmy Carter. Later in 1994, Fortunato Pedro Benavides (J.D. '74) became the first UHLC graduate to serve on the Fifth Circuit, appointed by former President Bill Clinton. UH Law alumnus Judge Raul A. Gonzalez (J.D. '66) became the first Hispanic justice on the Texas Supreme Court in 1984, and in 2009, Justice Sonia Sotomayor became the first Hispanic and Latina justice on the U.S. Supreme Court. Their achievements helped broaden access to justice and affirm the promise of equal protection under the law.

That legacy lives on at the University of Houston Law Center.

Our Hispanic and Latino students, alumni, faculty, and staff enrich every aspect of our community. They bring talent, determination and a myriad of perspectives that strengthen legal education and prepare our graduates to be a part of society. Equally important, they reflect the communities our profession is called to serve.

This year, I am proud to recognize Ezequiel Reyna, Jr. (J.D. '80), whose life showcases the transformative power of legal education and opportunity.



Ezequiel Reyna, Jr. (J.D. '80)

Reyna grew up impoverished in a small town in South Texas, where resources were very scarce. Along with his parents and seven siblings, he traveled across the country as a farmworker, seeking employment anywhere they could find it. However, everything changed when his childhood friend, George Almaraz (J.D.'77), encouraged him to apply to the Law Center. This pivotal decision set Reyna on a new path, transforming his life and opening doors to opportunities for himself, his family and thousands of others.

After graduating, Reyna returned to the Rio Grande Valley and founded the Law Office of Ezequiel Reyna Jr. in Weslaco. What began as a small personal injury practice has grown into a firm with eight attorneys and more than 100 staff members that has served thousands of clients. Throughout his career, Reyna has stayed focused on helping people and righting wrongs.

Reyna has made that same commitment to the Law Center. As a member of the Cornerstone Club, he helped support the construction of our current law school building. He and his wife, Livia, also established the Ezequiel and Livia Reyna Hispanic Law Heritage Wall of Honor and the Ezequiel Reyna Jr and Livia Reyna Hispanic Heritage Classroom, which serve as a daily inspiration for our students.

Reyna's story reminds us that excellence is built by people in their individual capacity but with the support of friends, allies, law schools, and the legal community. Success in the legal profession is attainable regardless of where one's journey begins. When we invest in students working to be lawyers, we not only change individual lives but strengthen the profession and the communities those graduates will ultimately serve.

As we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, I encourage each of us to honor Reyna's legacy and contributions by doing our part. At the Law Center we have many opportunities to support future generations of lawyers so they can learn, serve, and lead and we'd love to hear from you.

Please take a moment to view our [digital slideshow](#) highlighting Hispanic and Latino alumni, faculty and staff whose accomplishments continue to strengthen and inspire the world around them.

Sincerely,

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

[Share Your Thoughts](#) with the Dean

Learn more about [Dean Baynes](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@UHLawDean](#)

[Register for Upcoming Events](#)

The University of Houston Law Center is part of a Carnegie-designated Tier One public research university and an EO institution.

