

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

WILLIAM “WILLIE” C. VELÁSQUEZ

activist

“Su voto es su voz” (“Your vote is your voice”)

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Background Information

Born May 9, 1944; Died June 15, 1988

Willie Velásquez was born in Florida and raised in Texas. His parents were of Mexican American ancestry. Velásquez received his bachelor's degree from St. Mary's University. The impact of his work is still felt today as he gave voice to the Latinx community. His mission to engage Latino voters impacted the American political landscape.

Velásquez's Resistance

Velásquez's heavy involvement within the Latinx community began early. When he was younger, he became one of the founding members of a Chicano youth organization, the Mexican American Youth Organization, or MAYO, which focused on social change. His role in MAYO led him to become involved with politics in Texas, organizing strikes as part of his work with the United Farm Workers (UFW) and being named the Southwest Council of La Raza field director.ⁱ In 1974, he established the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP), whose motto was “*Su voto es su voz* (Your vote is your voice).” He believed the Latinx community was not fairly represented politically and wanted to address poor voter turnout. Velásquez also sought to build an informed society. Collaborating with community members and organizers, he set up hundreds of voter registration and get-out-to-vote campaigns.ⁱⁱ In 1984, Velásquez established the Southwest Voter Registration, now known as the William C. Velásquez Institute. The institute contributes to public policy and community engagement efforts.

Achievements

In 1995, then-President Bill Clinton honored Velásquez's work by awarding him the Presidential Medal of Honor and called him “a name synonymous with democracy in America.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Southwest Voter Registration Education Project has registered over 2.7 million voters, trained over 150,000 political activists, and won over 100 civil rights lawsuits.^{iv} The institute also reported significant changes in Latinx voter registration, numbers rose from 2.4 million to 7 million between 1974–1998.^v

Essential Questions

1. When Velásquez was younger, he became a founding member of a Chicano youth organization, MAYO, focused on social change.
 - a. What motivated him to get involved in social issues while he was young?

2. Velásquez noticed there was a lack of Latinx presence in politics and he believed that one day they could play an important role, so he created SVREP. The project has had a tremendous impact not only on the voting turnout and presence of Latinx folks in politics but of empowering and education citizens to make a difference.
 - a. Do you feel that present-day politics represent you and the community you are a part of? Why or why not?

3. ***“Su voto es su voz (Your vote is your voice).”***
 - a. This phrase became a motto for the SVREP. Do you agree with Velásquez? Why or why not?

ⁱ Editors, wcv.org (2004). “Biography – William C. Velásquez.” William C. Velásquez Institute. Retrieved from <https://wcv.org/wcvbio.htm>

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Editors, History.com (2020). “Mexican-American voting rights advocate Willie Velasquez awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom.”History.com. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/hispanic-american-activist-willie-velasquez-presidential-medal-freedom>

^{iv} Editors, History.com (2020). “Mexican-American voting rights advocate Willie Velasquez awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom.”History.com. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/hispanic-american-activist-willie-velasquez-presidential-medal-freedom>

^v Editors, wcv.org (2004). “Biography – William C. Velásquez.” William C. Velásquez Institute. Retrieved from <https://wcv.org/wcvbio.htm>