

# HIGHLIGHTING HISPANIC LEGAL FIGURES

PRE-LAW SOCIETY AT VCU ~ OCTOBER 2020

Hispanic Heritage Month began on September 15th and lasts until October 15th every year in the United States. Hispanic Heritage Month was established in 1988 by Congress and President Reagan. To celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, we will be highlighting two Hispanic legal professionals and their incredible contributions to the legal profession. To learn more about how VCU is celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month, visit the Office of Multicultural and Student Affairs.

## MANUEL RUIZ JR.



Ruiz made legal history on many fronts. He was a first generation American, born in Los Angeles, California to parents who immigrated from Mazatlan, Mexico. He graduated from high school at the top of his class and continued his education at the University of Southern California. Ruiz was the first Latino to graduate from the USC School of Law and graduated in 1930 with his legal degree. After passing the California Bar the same year, he started his practice law. Because of the racial prejudices of the time, Ruiz learned quickly that in order to practice law he had to start his own firm. So, he opened his own firm in 1930 that focused on international law. Two years later, he passed the Bar exam in Mexico so he could practice in both countries.

In 1951, Ruiz argued *Buck v. California* in front of the United States Supreme Court. It has been argued that this is the first case argued in front of the Court by a Latino attorney. Ruiz was then appointed chairperson of the Citizens Committee for Latin American Youth. In this role, he represented members of the Latino community, worked with children and wrote journal articles. Ruiz also served Californians on the California Committee on Youth in Wartime. He joined the Mexican American Political Association in the sixties and contributed his legal services to the chapters in California and Arizona. Ruiz's legal services were used at the War on Poverty, INC. and as a member of the board of directors of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles. In 1970, Ruiz was appointed to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights by the President at the time, President Richard Nixon, where he helped examine discrimination directed at the Hispanic community. You can read more about Manuel Ruiz Jr. and explore an extensive collection of his work at the Online Archive of California.

## MIRIAM NAVIERA MERLY

The Honorable Miriam Naveira Merly was born in Puerto Rico in 1934. Unfortunately, there was not much information that I could access on Chief Justice Merly so I will go over her contributions to the legal profession. Chief Justice Merly graduated from the College of Mount Saint Vincent. She continued her education at both the University of Puerto Rico and Columbia Law School.

Merly started her track as a trail blazing Latina at the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico. She first served there as a legal officer. From there, in 1966, Merly became the first Latina to be the Assistant Secretary Justice. She then became the first Latina to serve as the Attorney General of Puerto Rico before returning to the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico where she was appointed as an Associate Justice. Merly was again the first Latina to serve in this capacity. At the end of her legal career, Merly served as the first Latina Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico. She retired from the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico in 2004 and passed away in 2018.



## AUTHOR: MOLLY CALO

# CITATIONS

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