

# OXNARD SCHOOL NAMED AFTER JUAN LAGUNAS SORIA

–Thirteen Years After His Departure



Editor's note: We publish this tribute to honor the following request: *In California as well as in Texas our people have suffered open violation of our Civil Rights. The 80th anniversary of Juan's birth made me think of reaching out and requesting your help in disseminating the story of this outstanding man that did so much for our people with his limited means. He was recognized by changing the de facto segregation that existed in our schools with a landmark case.. In June 1997, it was requested by the community and voted by the School Board that a school be named after him, but it was not until 2009 after the constant demands of members of the community [that it happened]. I pray that you might consider it for the June publication, he died June 13, 1997. I feel that it might inspire young persons that have so very much to offer to read about a man that lost his parents at age 13, and did much for his people. – Kindest regards, Catalina Frazier Vda. de Soria*

**J**UAN LAGUNAS SORIA was born March 28, 1932 in Oxnard, California. He was the second child of the 6 children of Antonio Soria and Maria de la Luz "Ramona" Lagunas de Soria. The couple met and married in Santa Ana, CA and moved to Oxnard. When Juan lost both his parents at age 13 he went to work as a farm laborer and as printer's devil for the local newspaper. Juan attended schools in Oxnard and at Ventura College. He received a football scholarship to Midwestern University in Texas. While working as a psych technician in Camarillo State Hospital, Juan was publisher and editor of the El Sol Newspaper with political and social information dealing with the Hispanic population.

As a union organizer for the Teamsters throughout southern and central California, Juan became well versed with the problems of farm workers in the packinghouses, orchards and fields. This knowledge covered their wages, working conditions, transportation and the double standards for local workers and braceros. In Ventura County Juan Soria organized picket lines with local farm workers and increased the hourly rate to \$1.25 an hour. He made a name for himself as an advocate for the needy, which was a majority farm laborers. Under the auspices of the American Friends Service Committee he created a farm workers' cooperative in California's Central Valley. In Ventura County Juan Soria was active in the Community Service Organization and in 1958 he coordinated a group of 500 Mexican nationals to become American citizens and registered voters. When United Farm Workers union leader César Chávez came to Oxnard to work in union organizing, Juan Soria and his followers joined him. Juan also led the march to Sacramento along with local farm workers and active community members of Ventura County.

In October of 1963, Juan received an invitation from the Vice-President's office to give input on the pre-War on Poverty programs (see letter signed by Lyndon B. Johnson). Programs under the Manpower Development and Training Act were organized in Oxnard. Operation Buenaventura, a 3B federal program to aid farm workers, was visited by Sargent Shriver, in charge of the Office of Economic Opportunity; Operation Buenaventura received his compliments. Also, War on Poverty personality, actor Steve Allen, visited and inspected Operation Buenaventura and praised its operation. Mr. Soria's experience in union organizing was resented by local growers and their servers while he worked for Operation Buenaventura and The Farm Workers Opportunity Project under the Manpower Development and Training Act.

He was also an organizer for Citizens Against Poverty, an anti-poverty program in Ventura County. Some affluent individuals felt CAP was an extremely leftist organization. A state chartered credit union, CAP Credit Union was organized and later managed by Juan's second wife, Catalina. A manpower training program, MDTA was created by Mr. Soria with the assistance of the State of California Department of Labor. This training and job placement gave farm workers the opportunity to receive training in different trades, it was held at Ventura Community College.

In 1968, Mr. Soria coordinated a group of plaintiffs against The Oxnard Elementary School District. Mr. Gerhard W. Orthuber, Attorney at Law, prepared and filed the de facto segregation case that proved with details that segregation was the main motive in the lack of academic achievement within the Hispanic students. Soria vs. Oxnard Elementary School District became a landmark case. This was one of the reasons the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) which is well known

throughout the nation for legal representation of the underprivileged, sought Mr. Soria for the position of Director of MALDEF's Community Education and Activation Program in later years.

Juan was always socially aware and in 1968 coordinated the political campaign VIVA HUMPHREY in Ventura County, the VIVA KENNEDY campaign; and participated in local politics as well receiving the endorsement of United Farm Workers President, César E. Chávez. Mr. Soria received the Mexican-American Of The Year award in 1966 by Mr. Bert Corona, State President of Mexican American Political Association (MAPA). Later Juan was nominated Ventura County Chairperson of the Mexican-American Political Association and in later years Chairperson of the Mexican-American Chamber of Commerce in Ventura County. Juan received a personal gift from President Lyndon Johnson for his assistance in his campaign, a maroon filtered Texan hat, which Juan proudly wore during the UFW march to Sacramento. Central California Action Associates gave Juan the position of Ventura County Area Coordinator. CCAA was an evening school program for farm workers that gave these men the opportunity to learn English as well as reading and writing and basic math with the purpose of getting better jobs. Soon, Mr. Soria was promoted to Job Placement Director for all the California counties covered by CCAA.

During the early 70s Mr. Soria traveled throughout the USA evaluating federal funded health clinics for farm workers. He was appointed by the Third World Board of the University of California at Berkeley to be the Associated Executive Director of the Associated Students Union Financial Projects for the University of California at Berkeley. Juan moved to the position of Regional Manager of the Office of Community Affairs at DQ University at Davis, California. When his contract expired he was offered the position of National Executive Director for National Chicano Health Organization (NCHO). In this organization Mr. Soria assisted many deserving young Hispanic Americans to obtain scholarships in the medical field, from technicians to medical doctors.

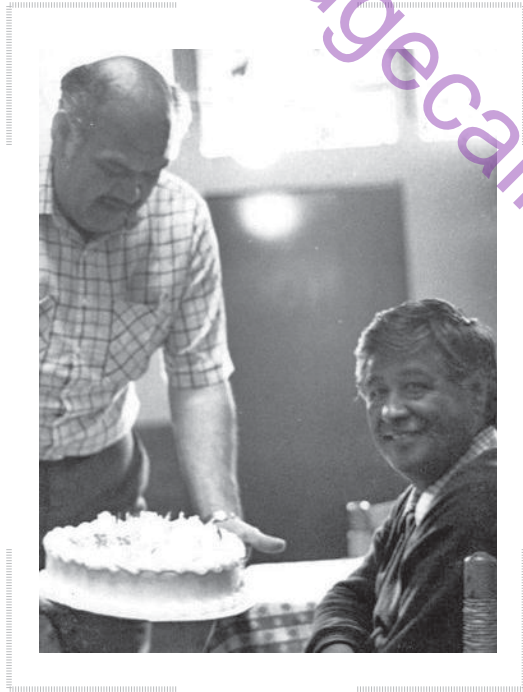
Mr. Soria and his wife Catalina operated a paralegal and accounting service in Oxnard since 1978. The Sorias also owned Adelante Publications which published a weekly bilingual publication disseminating information on education, politics and news of general interest to the communities of Ventura County. Adelante

Publications also contracted for private promotions of interest to the communities where it was disseminated. Ventura County chose Adelante Publications to prepare and disseminate a survival manual in Spanish for all the residents of Ventura County.

Bad circulation problems made Mr. Soria lose both legs to amputation. Yet he refused to retire and continued his endeavors. He organized a non profit corporation, Pueblos Unidos that made affordable housing to community members. He was the executive director of this non-profit corporation that received federal funds for housing and renovation projects in the Colonia area of Oxnard at the time of his death.

Juan Soria had 5 children with his first wife, Julieta Flores de Mendoza – Juan Carlos, Adriana Snell, Leticia, Lilia and Armando. When he married Catalina he helped raise her son, David Scott Frazier. They had 2 daughters, Catalina Soria-Viorato and Isabel. He is survived by 3 brothers – Catarino “Manny”, Henry and Roberto. Juan was preceded in death by his sister Peggy Del Rio and Luis Soria.

During the school dedication [in 2009] the Honorable Julia Brownley, State of California Assembly member, 41<sup>st</sup> District, presented a five point resolution to the Juan Lagunas Soria Elementary School principal, Mrs. Ana DeGenna, and a copy of the same to his widow, Mrs. Catalina Frazier Soria. Keynote speaker Angel Luevano, Vice President of League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), presented Mrs. Soria with a plaque honoring the memory of Juan L. Soria for his outstanding contributions to the Latino Community in bringing the landmark case



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Soria vs Oxnard School District. Words of inspiration regarding Mr. Juan Soria were presented by his daughter, Isabel Soria, who pointed out that Juan had attended intentionally segregated and elementary schools that were inferior to those the non-minority children attended; that he had lost both his parents at age 13; that he had worked as a farm laborer while going to school and more. Isabel pointed out that from her father we all can learn that no matter what ethnicity we are, no matter how difficult our financial situation is, and no matter what physical limitations we may have, there is always the opportunity to stand up for what is right; to speak for those whose voices are not often heard and to contribute to the betterment of our communities.

*Note: For more information and photos on Juan Soria's life visit: [www.juanlsoria.org](http://www.juanlsoria.org)*