

Dr. Joe J. Bernal

prominent son of the Westside dies at 97 years old

On January 25, 2025, Dr. Joe J. Bernal, pioneering bilingual educator, visionary Texas

legislator and relentless force for Mexican American Civil Rights, died at 97 years old. Born at 711 Torreon in San Antonio's *mero* Westside, Joe never forgot his roots. As one of 9 children who lost their father early on, "Chema" worked at various jobs as a young boy: selling tomatoes door-to-door, candy at the *Progreso Theater* and shining shoes. From a poor segregated barrio to the halls of the Texas state capitol, Joe championed the poor, the elderly, teachers, students and veterans making significant contributions in housing, civil rights, health, education and elder care. Graduating from Sidney Lanier High School as a champion athlete and student, Joe experienced racism first hand as a Mexican American and Spanish speaker. He went on to enter the US Army in 1944 and became staff sergeant at age 19 receiving an honorable discharge in 1946. After graduating from Trinity University in 1950 with a degree in sociology and a teaching certificate, he went on to study at Our Lady of the Lake University where he met his wife, Mary Esther, with whom he formed a power partnership for 65 years. He ran for the Texas House of Representatives in 1964 where he served for 2 years before serving 6 years in the Texas Senate. As a legislator, he was key in the enactment of laws pertaining to civil rights, voting rights, the first minimum wage in Texas and in establishing

the University of Texas and UT Health Science Center in San Antonio. He also sponsored legislation impacting teachers and children, including free statewide kindergarten and Texas bilingual and dual language education programs. As a founding member of MALDEF, he was the lead plaintiff in a U.S. Supreme Court case decision that established single member districts in Texas to elect state representatives. After his legislative stint, Joe was elected to the Texas State Board of Education, where he continued making educational reforms in Texas. In 1978, he earned his Ph.D. in Education at



the University of Texas, under the tutelage of iconic professors George Sánchez and Américo Paredes. He never forgot the prevalence of poverty in his barrio and advocated for financial assistance and scholarships for Lanier High School students throughout his life. In 2014, the Northside ISD named a middle school in honor of Dr. Joe J. Bernal that included a music wing in honor of Mary Esther. The Esperanza Peace & Justice Center extends our sincere condolences to Dr. Bernal's family, colleagues and Westside community.

To read his official and detailed obituary go to: (bit.ly/Joe-J-Bernal). In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the SAISD Foundation—Lanier Endowment Fund, 2411 San Pedro Ave., San Antonio, TX 78212. Or online at: <https://saisdfoundation.com/>