

'From the Barrio to Washington'

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

Armando Rodriguez lives on a quiet street in El Cajon, Calif. Seldom does anyone suggest that he go back where he came from.

Matter of fact, few Americans ever heard of the place he came from - Gomez Palacio, in Mexico's central valley. Now retired at age 86, however, Rodriguez finds quiet amusement in the beef Hispanics hear so often - that they swipe jobs that might otherwise be filled by willing Americans.

Some of the jobs this man has held were pretty high up. That could be an annoyance to certain persons who have made "immigrant" a dirty word. My friend Armando was never illegal. His family entered the United States fully documented in 1927, when Armando was just 6. He waited his chance to become a citizen via Army service in World War II.

But legal or not, his family endured disadvantages familiar to thousands in their circumstances - sleeping space wherever the kids could find it in a dinky home. Depression-era sustenance ever dependent on the availability of work. And, burnished inevitably into the psyche of a newcomer who doesn't understand the language, that lonely feeling of not "belonging."

Young Armando, a small kid whom San Diego barrio neighbors called "Shadow," would work around those difficulties. His autobiography, "From the Barrio to Washington," written in tandem with the gifted San Diego wordsmith, Keith Taylor, has just been published by the University of New Mexico Press. It's a nifty production under a cover photo in color of Armando and wife Beatriz being greeted by a beaming President Jimmy Carter.

As many successful people have done, Rodriguez conceived something book publishers call a "vanity" publication - memoirs that a person may publish for family and friends. Vanity or not, the University of New Mexico Press bought Rodriguez's story and is publicizing it nationwide. It chronicles how one man beat the odds, refusing to accept society's judgment that his background alone left him unworthy of advancement.

Not surprisingly, the book reads like Horatio Alger on his way to Yale University. An adept amateur wrestler, Rodriguez coached a San Diego State University team to the NCAA's championship round. He was voted State's 1949 "alumnus of the year," edging out such worthies as Art Linkletter. Meanwhile, he had become the first Hispanic to attain administrative status as a principal in the San Diego school system, later the second to serve as a college president (East Los Angeles) and first to serve the entire nation as a presidential appointee to commissions charged with overseeing the enforcement of racial and gender equality.

Inspiring reading, Shadow's story reflects the attitude of a person who, despite such disappointments as his rejection for a college fraternity, never seems to have felt sorry for himself.

I came to know Armando well in 1962. Among the usual half-dozen political races in San Diego County that year, I was running for Congress, he for the state Legislature. I frankly saw Armando as the best qualified among all of us. Yet while I was winning a hairline victory, Armando didn't quite make it, and I think I know why. Most Californians were not then ready to elect someone with a Hispanic name. He'd have fared better a few years later.

"From the Barrio" makes useful reading for the slant this man offers on many national leaders he encountered while in government service - including Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who chaired the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission of which Rodriguez was still a member in the early Reagan years. (Shadow hints that he spotted one or two character flaws that boded ill for Thomas, although not in the justice's allegedly improper relations with Anita Hill.)

For San Diegans, however, the book's appeal will lie in its references to places and people we know. And yes, it contains a highly appealing love story. A chapter titled "The Girl Across the Street" relates that Shadow's first awareness of the lady destined to become his beautiful bride was as a pesky neighbor kid much younger than he. Their eventual elopement briefly upset both families.

My own favorite story from the book concerns a role Rodriguez once filled as "visiting teacher" in the San Diego school system. That was a euphemism for truant officer. He quotes a recollection shared with Rachael Ortiz, still a highly regarded Latina leader in San Diego. Rachael admits ditching school now and then, but adds:

"We felt honored to be busted by Mando. For the first time, we could look at a person in authority who looked like one of us."

Van Deerlin represented a San Diego County district in Congress for 18 years.