

Tatcho Mindiola, Jr.:

A Visionary at the University of Houston

By Debbie Z. Harwell

Sometimes life takes us on an unexpected journey. Tatcho Mindiola, Jr., director of the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS) and associate professor of sociology at the University of Houston, started out studying to be a businessman. Fortunately for the many students whose lives he has impacted, his own life took a different turn.¹

Mindiola was born and raised in Houston. His father, Tatcho Mindiola, Sr., worked as a baker, while his mother, Hortencia Rocha Mindiola, cared for their six children.² In the early 1940s, they became one of the first Mexican American families to move to Sunset Heights, a part of the Heights on North Main Street between 28th and 29th Streets. There Mindiola developed an awareness of the separation between whites and blacks—both geographically and socially. At the Polish beer and dance hall, a partition separated patrons by race. At his uncle's café on Center Street and at the Catholic church the family attended, blacks and whites sat on opposite sides of the facility. At these locations, Mexicans would be seated in the white section, but at other times they too experienced exclusion as Mindiola discovered growing up and attending Houston public schools. He remembered:

Being non-black [was my early awareness of brown versus black versus white]. My dad adhered to the LULAC philosophy at that time, and so we were not Mexican Americans, we were Latin Americans, and he used to tell us . . . "Don't let anybody think that they are better than you because you are Latin American."³

Mindiola, who went to Alamo Elementary and Hamilton Junior High School, recalled that during his junior high years, "the reality of who I was began to sink in." Mindiola's father taught the children important life lessons from the time they were very young and emphasized that they must exercise their right to vote. A self-educated man, Mindiola's father also discussed the racial issues facing Mexican and African Americans and explained to his children that he believed blacks were taking the correct approach by working through the legal system to win their rights and that Mexican Americans had to vote. He was proud of the fact that he always paid his poll tax and voted.

While a student at John H. Reagan High School, which



Tatcho Mindiola, Jr., and his dad, Tatcho Mindiola, Sr. Photo courtesy of Tatcho Mindiola.

was overwhelmingly Anglo at the time, Mindiola began to realize that sitting in the "white section" in church or a café did not prevent him from being marginalized in much the same way as African Americans. He experienced social discrimination by being excluded from parties, having girls refuse to go out with him because their parents would not approve, or meeting Anglo girls who were willing to date him but had to do so on the sly. He also had physical encounters with the Anglo students who taunted him. "I lost a lot of those fights," he says, "because I was a skinny teenager; but I never gave up, and over time I was left alone because my tormentors came to realize that I wouldn't quit." Some teachers also showed their prejudices. Even though his Anglo classmates often asked him to help them with their work, when Mindiola informed a teacher of his aspirations to go to college, she replied. "Well, you know, your people work behind the scenes." When he applied to the Distributive Education program, which allowed

high school students to work half of the day, he was accepted on the condition that he quit his job at a plumbing company and take a new job as a stock clerk at almost half his current hourly wage to ensure he made less money than his white peers. Mindiola rejected the conditions. Despite these obstacles, he aspired to something beyond these teachers' expectations for Mexican American students.

Not everyone Mindiola met subscribed to these prejudices. One high school teacher, Mr. Manning, had a very positive impact. When Mindiola had gotten into an altercation over racial issues, Manning stopped the fight, grabbed Mindiola, and took him to the principal's office. Mindiola remembered Manning saying, "What's the matter with you? You have a brain! Use it. Become a lawyer. Do something that will help your people." Manning encouraged Mindiola to see something different for his future. He told him several times to ignore the people who called him names or put him down, and to plan to continue his education. Years later, Mindiola had the opportunity to thank Manning for his encouragement.

Upon graduation in 1957, Mindiola began working for Houston Lighting & Power and enrolled in South Texas Junior College at night, but he found he was not ready for college. He decided to join the Army to become eligible

for the G. I. Bill when he returned to school and to figure out what he wanted to do in life. The Army assigned him to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, to the U.S. Army Polar Research Division and sent him to Greenland during the summer months where the Army was conducting experiments to test men's tolerance on the ice cap. He worked primarily doing administrative and clerical work. Many of the men with whom he served had college degrees, and he observed and participated in their discussions, taking an interest in political affairs. This, too, inspired him to continue his education. Scheduled to be discharged in October 1961, Mindiola had been accepted at the University of Houston and arranged for his financial aid. But the building of the Berlin wall caused all discharges to be frozen. Mindiola wrote to Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough explaining his situation and requesting to be released in time to attend classes in January. Mindiola is not sure what Yarborough did, but the future professor received his discharge just days before classes began.

The road to success had its difficulties. Mindiola first worked as a billing clerk at Central Freight Lines at night and later secured a job at East Texas Motor Freight loading and unloading trucks at night while he attended the university. The hours were long and hard. As a result, he often dropped classes, taking five and a half years to graduate with a degree in business. Shortly before graduation, he realized that he really did not aspire to be a businessman, so he analyzed which classes he had made his best grades in, and, more importantly, which ones he enjoyed the most. The list included history, English, and personnel management. With an eye on obtaining a degree in industrial psychology, he enrolled in social science courses as a post-bac student. He took two sociology classes from Dr. Henri Munson who encouraged him to consider a graduate degree in the subject and offered to help him with an assistantship. Accepted to both the psychology and sociology graduate programs, Mindiola said the assistantship tipped the scales towards sociology.

As a graduate student, Mindiola had an entirely different type of school experience. Since he had always worked, he had never taken part in campus life. Walking to campus, eating on campus, being involved in the activities, he said, "changed my world view." He remembers the Students for a Democratic Society, and the Wednesday "sound off" at the University Center where students could step up to the microphone and express their views on anything of interest to them. He got involved in establishing the first Mexican American student organization, the group's formation of an alliance with black students, and its efforts to gain more Mexican American classes and faculty.


During this time, Mindiola noticed what a great job his professors had being on campus all day. From that point on, becoming a professor

became both his goal and his passion. Upon completing his M.A. and making plans to work on his doctorate at Brown University, his father pulled him aside to say he was very proud of his son's accomplishments but wanted to know if Mindiola was continuing with school to avoid work. After hearing assurances that this was what was required to become a professor, his father wished him the best.

I got into graduate school, and I remember feeling surprised that I felt as I did for minority rights. As time went on, and I got active and remained active, it struck me that my experiences in middle school and high school had left me with a degree of anger that informed my political philosophy.⁴

In the classroom, first at UH and then at Brown, the coursework dealt with the important issues that were impacting society, especially race relations. Mindiola supported the civil rights and Black Power movements, and they in turn supported the emergence of Mexican American activism on campus. Following his father's teachings, Mindiola assisted in registering people to vote and tutored high school students. The Mexican American student organization presented its requests for Mexican American Studies the same year African American students presented their "demand" to the university, but the university delayed the request for Mexican American Studies until the African American Studies program was in place. Although he scaled back his activism at Brown, Mindiola worked to recruit minority students to Brown, including those from UH.

Mindiola returned to UH to take a joint appointment—the first at the university—in sociology and Mexican American Studies in 1974. He became director of the program in 1980. In the interim, he faced an uphill legal battle for tenure as a result of the joint appointment, demonstrating that Mexican American Studies was not afforded the same weight as other traditional fields in evaluating his academic accomplishments.⁵

Under Mindiola's direction, the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Houston has flourished. He has successfully raised funds and secured political and local support for CMAS to ensure its growth, and the program is unparalleled in the city of Houston as a result. Mindiola's efforts support faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, and high school students. At the same time, he continues to recruit new students and expand CMAS's offerings to turn out the next generation of leaders. 

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This July 23, 1960, U.S. Army photograph depicts Specialist Tatcho Mindiola, Jr., at Camp Tuto, Greenland.

Photo courtesy of Tatcho Mindiola.