

# JULIAN SAMORA

## A Silent Warrior

**J**ulian Samora, the first Mexican American to be awarded a doctorate in sociology and a pioneer of the study of the Mexican American community in the United States, died in Albuquerque, New Mexico, last February. As founder of the Mexican American Graduate Studies Program at Notre Dame University, the first and most extensive program of its kind in the United States, Samora's main goal was to educate students of Mexican ancestry and motivate them to do graduate work and research on social, economic and political topics related to their community.

Samora was born in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, in 1920. After graduating from Adams State College in 1942, he became a high school teacher and then taught at his alma mater. In 1947 he obtained his master's degree at Colorado State College, after which he worked as a research assistant in Wisconsin. He later received his doctorate in sociology from Saint Louis' Washington University, at a time when only four or five people of Mexican ancestry had doctorates in any of the social sciences.

One of the first areas of applied research he went into was medical sociology, in which he studied the interaction be-

tween traditional and modern medical practice and the differences in access to health services according to ethnic origin. In 1955 he published "A Medical Care Program in a Colorado Community," co-authored with Lyle Saunders, a case study of the problems and obstacles faced by a Mexican American community in Colorado when it attempted to establish a community health program in 1946.

Later, Samora was invited to participate in a border studies program based at the University of Michigan and organized by Dr. Charles Loomis. Since in the 1950s the border was a research topic hitherto unexplored, this program set up an interdisciplinary net-



Julian Samora (far right) after receiving the Aztec Eagle.

work of researchers in the Southwest and Midwest, later the basis for all border studies. Samora collaborated in different phases of the project, giving of his professional experience and commitment which were invaluable for understanding the border area and its most important ethnic group, Mexican Americans.

During his stay at Michigan State, Samora came into contact with another researcher, Bill D'Antonio, from Notre Dame University, who invited him to work at that university's Sociology Department. Samora and D'Antonio published a joint article in 1962 entitled "Occupational Stratification in Four Southwestern Communities: A Study of Ethnic Differential Employment in Hospitals."


Samora worked at Notre Dame University until his retirement in 1985. Professionally he concentrated on creating awareness in the dominant Anglo society about the national importance of the Spanish-speaking population in the United States. His work with Charles Loomis was the bedrock upon which he based his project of a Mexican American studies program. In the early 1970s he received a large Ford Foundation grant to develop the Notre Dame Mexican American Graduate Studies Program with sociology, political science, economics and history students. Later he acquired other funds to strengthen and enlarge the program, including the setting up of a publishing house. This was one of the most important programs of its kind; more than 55 students have graduated with master's and doctorate degrees, among them distinguished researchers from both the United States and Mexico. Samora identified emotionally with the word "Chicano" and the program is informally referred to as "Chicano Studies."

In 1971, with the collaboration of two of his most distinguished students, Gilberto Cárdenas and Jorge Bustamante, he published the acclaimed *Los Mojados, The Wetback Story*, dealing with Mexican undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Samora was always interested in the interdisciplinary study and the dissemination of the consequences of racism and discrimination against the minority of Mexican origin. He explained that this

came out of his personal experience as a Chicano. "I got involved in doing things about Chicanos because of the discrimination that I suffered in going to school and in trying to get jobs....Very early I decided I was just as good as the next gringo and I'm going to speak English as well as they do. I did, and they still discriminated against me....That, I think, was a big motivation for all my life."<sup>1</sup>

Samora played an important role in the development of the political weight of Mexicans in the United States through his relationship with different organizations like the Southwest Council of La Raza, the National Council of La Raza and the Census Committee. Notre Dame Professor Joe Scott called him a "Silent Warrior" because of his interest and involvement in fundraising and supporting minorities through his academic work. Samora commented on his activist-scholar role saying, "There are so few of us that you can't afford to do pure Sociology. And particularly at a time when the [Chicano] population is becoming important in the eyes of other people... where you want Chicanos and Indians and Blacks to be getting grants, you join the review committees... and you insist...and [at the same time] you have to be, from their point of view, a safe person, which is not very complimentary."<sup>2</sup>

After his retirement in 1985, Samora moved to New Mexico where he studied *mestizaje* [the process of racial mix and the conditions of people with mixed ancestry]. In November 1990 the Mexican government awarded him the Aztec Eagle medal, Mexico's highest decoration given to people of foreign birth. 

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<sup>1</sup> See Barbara Driscoll, *La Frontera and Its People: The Early Development of Border and Mexican American Studies*, Working paper No. 17, UNAM, Mexico City, 1993, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, p. 56.