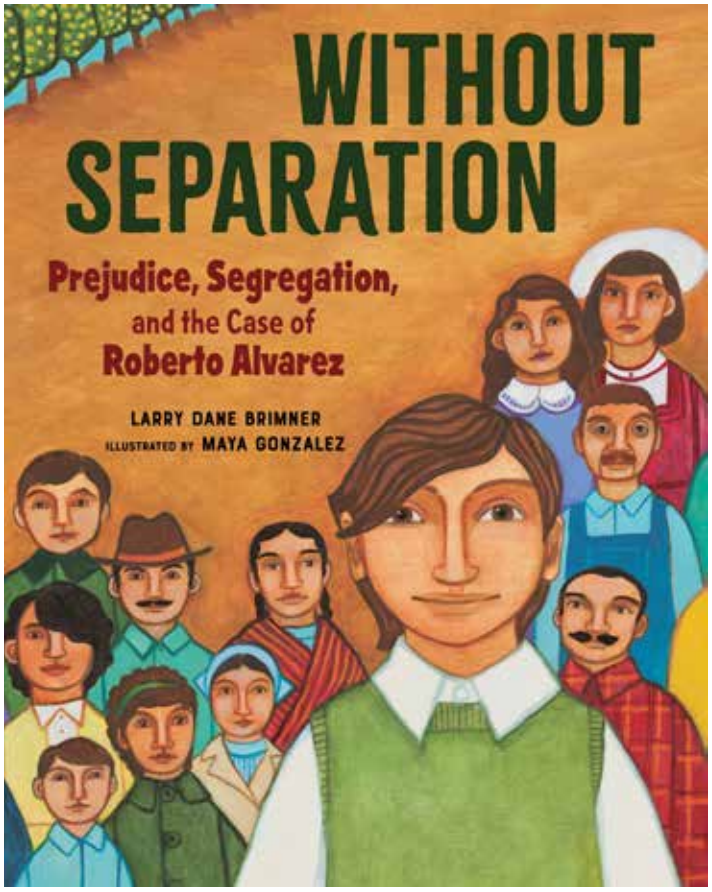
WITHOUT SEPARATION

Prejudice, Segregation, and the Case of Roberto Alvarez

LARRY DANE BRIMNER
ILLUSTRATED BY MAYA GONZALEZ

An Educator/ Discussion Guide



ABOUT THE BOOK

On January 5, 1931, Roberto Alvarez walked to school for the first day of classes after the holiday break. When he arrived, however, the principal stopped him and explained that he and some of his classmates were no longer welcome at Lemon Grove Grammar School. Instead, they were now expected to attend a new school on Olive Street—for Mexican and Mexican American students only. Roberto and his fellow students loved their school and didn't want to leave. What happened next is a milestone in American educational history.

Author Larry Dane Brimner introduces readers to Roberto—and to the first successful school desegregation case in the United States. Artist Maya Gonzalez's vivid illustrations bring life to the story of Roberto, his classmates, and their families as well as to the people who supported them in their fight for educational equality. Students will discover how "even one small voice can help bring about change for the positive."

PRAISE FOR *WITHOUT SEPARATION*

"*Without Separation* is written with heartfelt respect and is buoyed by Larry Brimner's consummate research. Maya Gonzalez's art is a glorious match to this poignant and celebratory account about our nation's first successful school desegregation case. A must-have for classrooms, school libraries, and readers who honor diversity."

—Pam Muñoz Ryan, Newbery Honor and Orbis Pictus Award-winning author

"Another powerful story from the distinguished Larry Dane Brimner, which celebrates those who fought against past discrimination, and encourages today's young readers to step up, too."

—Kirby Larson, Newbery Honor-winning author

"Brimner skillfully weaves threads of the past to recount the powerful story of Roberto Alvarez, reminding young readers that justice is the ripple of change."

—Rafael López, Pura Belpré Award-winning illustrator

"Careful research and vibrant illustrations combine to tell the inspiring story of a Mexican American community that stood up against prejudice and school segregation. *Without Separation* depicts an important yet almost unknown piece of American history that will resonate with young readers nowadays."

—Duncan Tonatiuh, Pura Belpré and Sibert Award-winning author and illustrator

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

At the beginning of the book, Roberto walks past lemon groves on his way back to school after holiday break. What is the name of his school? How do the local newspapers describe his school?

When Roberto gets to school, the principal stops him and the other Mexican American children. What does the principal tell Roberto and his classmates?

Before the school year began in the fall of 1930, the president and board of trustees for the school district met in July to discuss a letter from the parent-teacher association. What were the contents of that letter? Was the letter accurate?

In August of 1930, the board of trustees decided to build a separate school for Mexican and Mexican American children—but they didn't inform those children or their parents. However, the Mexican parents had heard a rumor that their children would be segregated from other students. What did Roberto do when the principal told him and the others to go to the Olive Street school?

How many students refused to attend the new segregated school? How many students and teachers attended the Olive Street School on the first day it opened?

What did Roberto's parents do when they found out about the new segregated school? Did they believe the school board and the newspapers' claims that the school would teach their children "the English language and American customs?"

Who helped Roberto file "a lawsuit against the board of trustees of the Lemon Grove School District." What did he ask the court to do? What did Roberto want the lawsuit to accomplish?

How did the school board respond to the filing of the lawsuit? What did the school board president tell a local reporter? What outcome do you think the school board president expected?

The San Diego district attorney represented the school district in court. He argued at the trial that the school "on Olive Street was to benefit the Mexican pupils." Roberto's lawyers disagreed. What evidence did they present to the judge?

The judge made a quick decision. What was his ruling?

"Sometimes a person has to stand up for what is right—to fight for justice." After the judge's ruling, where did Roberto and his friends go to school?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

When the board of trustees met in August of 1930 and decided "to construct a separate school for children like Roberto and his friends," they did not inform the parents of the Mexican and Mexican American children about their plan. Why do you think the board didn't share the news?

The author wrote, "seventy-four students, nearly half of the entire school district's enrollment, joined Roberto in refusing to go to the new school." Imagine you were told you had to change schools—or that half of your classmates would be forced to leave your school. How would you feel about that? What actions would you take to try to stop that from happening?

The letter from the parent-teacher association complained that the "Mexican children didn't understand English" and this lack of understanding "held back the white students." Yet Roberto was born in the United States and "spoke English as well as any of the white students in Lemon Grove." Additionally, the Olive Street school would not help the Mexican American "students learn the language and American customs." In fact, "the only thing that determined which of Lemon Grove's two schools a youngster was to attend was the color of the child's skin, brown or white."

Members of the Lemon Grove School Board, and the district attorney who represented the board at trial, were prejudiced against the Mexican and Mexican American students and were trying to separate them by sending them to a different school. The word *prejudice* is derived from two words that mean "judge before." How did the school board (as well as the parent-teacher association and the district attorney) "prejudge" the Mexican and Mexican American students? Why is it unfair to prejudge people?

"The parents met with the Mexican consul." What is a "consul?" How did the consul help Roberto and the other students?

The district attorney for San Diego described Mexican children as "backward and deficient." He also claimed the Olive Street School "was not about segregation" but was for "'better instruction.'" Was he telling the truth? Why do you think he said what he did?

The judge ruled that Roberto and the other students "had a right to receive the same treatment, education, and instruction as that given to white students." What does the word *right* mean in this context?

In the author's note at the end of the book, Larry Dane Brimner writes: "The principal, Jerome J. Green, was fired when his contract with the Lemon Grove School District ended in 1931. He had opposed the notion of a special school for Mexican and Mexican American children from the outset and was at odds with the board of trustees." Why do you think he was fired? Put yourself in Principal Green's position. What would you have done if the board told you to turn half the students away on that day in January 1931?

Along with a photo of Roberto as an adult, there is also some information about Roberto's career path in the author's note section. Roberto grew up to be a highly successful business owner, "philanthropist and civic leader." What does the word *philanthropist* mean?

EXTRA CREDIT

There are several Spanish words in the book, including [added italics to the Spanish words that are in italics in the book/]"*barrio*," "*el norte*," and "*la caballeriza*." What do those words mean? Think about some of the cities and towns in California, like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego (where Roberto's court case took place). Those city names are Spanish—as are countless other town and city names in California. Why do so many places in California have Spanish names?

In the author's note, you can find more information about Roberto's case and several other school segregation cases. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously in the case of *Brown v. the Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which prohibits states from denying equal protection of the laws to any person within their jurisdictions.

That ruling took place a long time ago, and yet today many Americans are still fighting for educational equality. In 2018, for example, Alejandro Cruz-Guzman was "the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit saying that Minnesota knowingly allowed towns and cities to set policies and zoning boundaries that led to segregated schools, lowering test scores and graduation rates for low-income and nonwhite children." Why do you think some schools are still segregated in the US? How can the US ensure that every child has access to the same educational opportunities? [source: www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/us/school-segregation-funding-lawsuits.html]

Immigration has been a constant in the history of the America. Emma Lazarus's famous poem, "The New Colossus," was written about the Statue of Liberty guiding immigrants—"huddled masses yearning to breathe free"—to freedom. Read "The New Colossus." What does the Statue of Liberty symbolize for people escaping hardship and oppression in their homelands?

Opposition to immigration has also been a constant in the history of the US. In the author's note, Brimner states that "the Olive Street School was built at a time when many people were without jobs in the United States. It was the early days of the Great Depression, which eventually left millions of people homeless and without food. President Herbert Hoover and others blamed the bad times on immigrants, especially Mexicans. He accused them of taking jobs away from Americans." What was the Great Depression? Do you think President Hoover should have blamed immigrants for that catastrophe?

Think about America today. How have government policies and people's attitudes changed toward immigrants? How have they stayed the same?

READING LIST

The School is Not White! A True Story of the Civil Rights Movement by Doreen Rappaport

Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation by Duncan Tonatiuh

The Story of Ruby Bridges by Robert Coles

The Teachers March! How Selma's Teachers Changed History by Sandra Neil Wallace and Rich Wallace

Where Are You From? by Yamile Saied Méndez

Guide written by Jane Becker

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