

Paul De Muniz (1947-)

By Jeffrey Kovac

Paul Joseph De Muniz was the first Hispanic Chief Justice of the Oregon Supreme Court. He was elected in 2000, after serving ten years on the Oregon Court of Appeals, and served as Chief Justice from 2006 until his retirement in 2013. He was then appointed Distinguished Jurist in Residence at Willamette University School of Law and founded the De Muniz Legal Clinic in Salem, which provides civil legal service for previously incarcerated individuals.

De Muniz was born on June 8, 1947, in Glendale, California. When he was five or six, he moved with his mother permanently to Oregon. He attended Harvey Scott Elementary and Madison High School in Portland, graduating in 1965. Because of the family's financial difficulties, he began working part time at age sixteen and enlisted in the Air Force, where he served for four years including a year in Vietnam. For the first eighteen months of his tour of duty, he was stationed at the Dow Air Force Base in Bangor, Maine, where he worked part time as a ski instructor and took some courses at the University of Maine in Orono. At Dow, De Muniz worked as a Materials Facilities Specialist and was fortunate to have a senior sergeant as a mentor who taught him how to lead and manage people and how to work hard. When Dow closed, De Muniz spent a year in Vietnam where he managed a crew of Vietnamese men in a Civil Engineering warehouse.

After his discharge in 1970, De Muniz enrolled in Portland State University to study sociology. To help pay for his education, he worked in the evenings unloading freight on Swan Island. He graduated with a B.S. in 1972. De Muniz married Mary Shipp on March 18, 1972, and they had three children. After seeing a poster advertising the Law Schools Admissions Test (LSAT), De Muniz took the exam and applied to the Willamette University School of Law. He graduated in 1975 and worked as a public defender for two years. In 1977, he joined the Salem law firm Garrett, Seideman, Hemann, Robertson and De Muniz, and in 1988 he became a special prosecutor in Douglas County.

While in private practice, De Muniz became well known for his part in overturning the murder conviction of Santiago Ventura Morales, a young migrant worker from Mexico who had been given a life sentence in 1986 despite a faulty defense and his credible claims of innocence. His case was taken up by Donna Slepach, who formed the Santiago Freedom Committee and engaged De Muniz, who agreed to take the case pro bono. De Muniz based his appeal on the lack of a proper translator during the trial—Morales was a native speaker of Mixtec with only a rudimentary command of Spanish, but the court only provided a Spanish language interpreter. De Muniz reluctantly left the case when he was appointed to the Oregon Court of Appeals in 1990 by Governor Neil Goldschmidt. Walter Todd, De Muniz's handpicked successor, continued the case, and Morales's conviction was overturned on January 4, 1991.

Following his appointment to the Appeals Court, De Muniz was elected to a full term in November 1990. He was elected to the Supreme Court in 2000 and chosen as Chief Justice by his peers in 2006. As Chief Justice, he focused on strengthening the Oregon judiciary, making it more efficient and effective by funding the state court adequately and making court services more accessible to the public. During his tenure on the Supreme Court, he was active on a national level. For example, he served a three-year term as a member of the Harvard Kennedy School's Executive Session for State Court Leaders in the 21st Century and was a member of the Conference of Chief Justices, where he was elected to its board of directors in 2008.

De Muniz has lectured widely both to national and international audiences and to law schools on the importance of maintaining independent state judiciaries, improving state court administration, and the need for adequate state court funding. He has received numerous awards including honorary doctorates from both Willamette University and Portland State University, the 2009 National Judicial College Distinguished Service Award, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers Judicial Recognition Award, and the Oregon State Bar Judicial Excellence Award. He has also published four books—a practical guide to criminal procedure and practice; a study of judicial practice from a state court perspective; a biography of Oregon Judge James Tenney Brand, who was the presiding judge at the Nuremberg war crimes trials of Nazi judges; and a novel.

De Muniz lives in Salem with his family and serves as board chairman for the nonprofit De Muniz Legal Clinic, which he founded in 2013 to assist people with criminal backgrounds. The clinic's director and supervising attorney works with Willamette School of Law students and volunteer local attorneys to provide legal services such as expungement (removing convictions from the person's record), landlord/tenant problems, and juvenile clemency in an effort to improve post-incarceration transitions and reduce recidivism.

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