

Welcome to *History from Room 213*, a five minute podcast. I'm your host, Beccah.

Introduction

In this episode we learn about Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzales--professional boxer, humanitarian, poet, and leader of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and '70's.

Early Life

Rodolfo Gonzales was born in Denver, Colorado on June 18, 1928. From a young age, Rodolfo was talkative and charismatic, always ready to "pop off like a cork," inspiring the nickname of *Corky* given to him by his uncle.

The son of Indalesia and Federico Gonzales, Corky grew up the youngest of 8 children in a single parent home during the era of the Great Depression. Indalesia passed away when Corky was only two years old, leaving Federico to raise the family on his own. Federico, an immigrant from Chihuahua, Mexico, educated his children about the Mexican Revolution, Mexican history, and instilled in them a pride in their Mexican culture and heritage.

Education continued to be important to Corky. He successfully graduated high school at the age of 16, despite many challenges. Between helping his father in the fields and the frequent move from school to school, made necessary by the migrant farmer lifestyle and harvest schedule, Corky often missed large chunks of class time.

After high school Corky enrolled at the University of Colorado, intending to pursue a degree in Engineering. In his first semester, Corky realized that it was not financially possible for him to continue his education. He made the decision to leave school and began his career as a boxer. From 1947 until his retirement in 1952, *Ring Magazine* and the National Boxing Association ranked Gonzales as the 3rd best Featherweight Boxer in the World. He ended his career with a record of 65 wins, 9 losses, 1 tie and earned the title World Boxing Conference Champion.

Politics and Civil Rights

After boxing, Corky uncorked. He opened a sports bar, a bail bonds business, and became actively involved in politics in the Democratic Party. Gonzales worked on JFK's presidential campaign, was appointed as director of the local Neighborhood Youth Corps, and served as the Colorado state chairman for the War on Poverty program. In 1955 Gonzales ran for city council of the neighborhood of five points. In 1960 he ran for

Colorado Legislature, Colorado Senator in 1964, and for the office of Mayor in Denver in 1967. Rodolfo Gonzales, however, never won an election of his own.

In 1967, Gonzales left the Democratic Party after years of service and dedication. Corky believed that the Democratic Party did not do enough to support the Latino community whose votes he worked to win. He was subsequently fired from the Neighborhood Youth Corps and stepped down from his position as chairman for the War on Poverty.

Gonzales continued to focus on humanitarian efforts, beginning with the founding of the Crusade for Justice - a civil rights organization that hosted conferences for Chicano youth across the country.

In 1967 Gonzales published his epic poem, *I am Joaquin*. The poem explores what it means to be Chicano and identifies the challenges faced by the Chicano people. The poem ends with the narrator declaring "I SHALL ENDURE! WE SHALL ENDURE!" *I am Joaquin* became the manifesto of the Chicano movement and is generally believed to be the catalyst for a renewed interest in Chicano literature.

The 1960s and 1970s are remembered for protest and the fight for Civil Rights of African Americans, women, and other minority groups. Gonzales was right in the middle of it. He was a respected Civil Rights activist who worked with leaders including Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers movement and Russell Means of the American Indian Movement. He organized demonstrations and protests against the Vietnam War, police brutality, and supported high school walkouts. In 1968 Gonzales worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on the Poor People's Campaign. Gonzales helped organize the Southwestern contingent of the campaign and led more than 1,000 Chicano and Native American activists in the Poor People's March on Washington D.C.- a march meant to bring awareness to economic and human rights injustices of the poor and underprivileged.

Conclusion

Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzalez died in 2005. His legacy is seen throughout the city of Denver and felt in Chicano communities across the country. He founded a summer program that provided alternative education for young latinos; built parks and playgrounds; taught dignity, self respect, and the importance of self-identity; and inspired Chicanos to become politically active and fight against injustice. He was the first Chicano athlete inducted into the Colorado Sports Hall of Fame and the 1990 recipient of the Colorado Humanitarian Award. In 2015, Denver Public Library opened a branch in Gonzales' name as a tribute to a man who celebrated education and literature. A man who

prevailed in the face of discrimination, oppression, racism, and economic hardship. It would be difficult to overstate the impact and importance of the life and work of Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzales.

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