As an African American, I never really knew much about civil rights movements outside of the Black community. My ignorance came as a result of my upbringing: my parents were strong advocates of the Black community and they focused heavily on teaching me about the history of our people. So when I learned that Mexican Americans were once discriminated against to the extent of some of my ancestors, I was in disbelief. I wondered why their struggle wasn’t as highly publicized as that of African Americans, and why I hadn’t learned about it in school, read articles about it in newspapers, or seen any primetime specials honoring their struggle. I therefore assumed that there were no leaders within the struggle.

Yet in my quest for more knowledge about this “hidden” piece of American history, I came across a man who, like many others, risked his life to improve the quality of life for his fellow man.

Gustavo “Gus” Garcia truly exemplified the words of Carlos Santana in being “an instrument of peace”, because he strived to help people live in both harmony and equality. As a civil rights attorney, he helped to improve the living conditions of Mexican Americans throughout Texas (and the United States as a whole) through his involvement with civil rights cases like Hernandez v. Texas in 1954. In the case, Peter Hernandez was convicted of killing Joe Espinosa in Edna, Texas. The Constitution states that all citizens are entitled to a jury of their peers, yet Hernandez was tried by an all-White jury. At the time, Mexican Americans were legally considered to be White, but their legal rights and the treatment they received on a daily basis resembled that given to Blacks. Just as African Americans were governed by Jim Crow laws and lived in constant fear of violent attacks, Mexican Americans were rejected from White businesses and also fell prey to hate crimes, such as lynchings and beatings, committed by White supremacists. Children were unable to attend schools with White students, so they had to learn in old, dilapidated buildings with outdated study materials that never mentioned anything about their heritage. In addition to this, Whites and Mexican Americans were segregated in public places like movie theaters, swimming pools, and even in public parks. With this in mind, Garcia argued that Hernandez deserved to be tried by a jury of his “true” peers: members of his race.

There were many people who argued against Garcia, saying that Hernandez was legally White and his jury was fair. Because of this fact, Hernandez was denied the protection of the Constitution’s 14th amendment, which banned discrimination on the basis of race (since Hernandez was legally White, his legal team was unable to use this fact in their argument). The case was overruled several times in Texas, and several appeal attempts were denied. Yet in examining the disparity in rights and privileges of Whites and Mexican Americans, the United States Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of Garcia, declaring that Mexican Americans were a “class apart” from Blacks and Whites. This helped to bring an end to the exclusion of Mexican Americans from the United States legal system.

Much of Garcia’s life was spent serving others: he served as first lieutenant in the United States Army, worked to pass an anti-discrimination bill in Texas, and also worked with several organizations to improve the lives of millions of Mexican Americans throughout the country. Although he struggled with the demons of alcoholism and mental illness in the latter part of his life, his commitment to bringing greater equality to the American legal system ultimately outweighs his faults. Furthermore, Garcia should be recognized as a hero, and remembered for his bravery and dedication to social change.