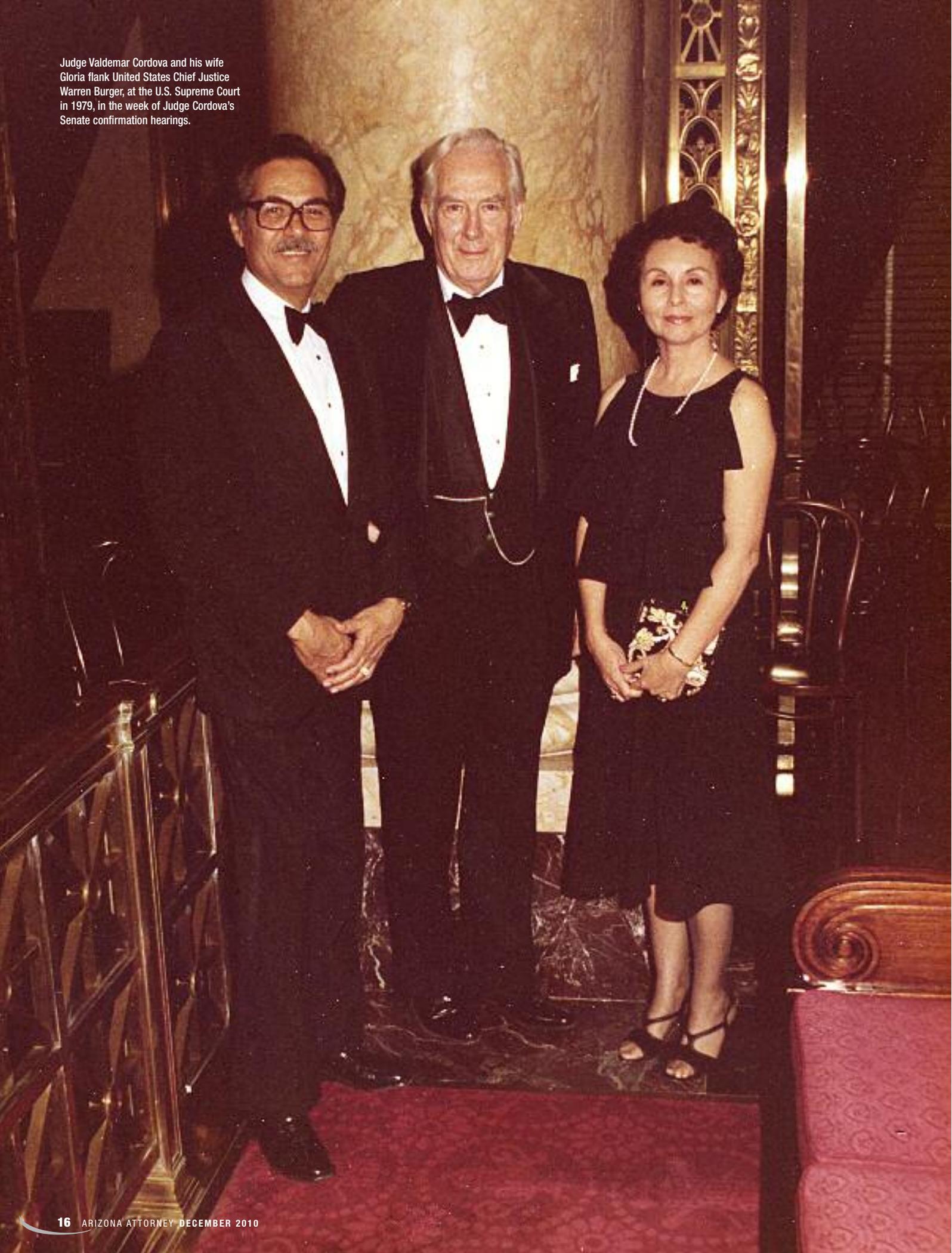


Judge Valdemar Cordova and his wife Gloria flank United States Chief Justice Warren Burger, at the U.S. Supreme Court in 1979, in the week of Judge Cordova's Senate confirmation hearings.



VALDEMAR A. CORDOVA

Gentleman Judge



As I prepared to attend law school at the University of Arizona in the summer of 1988, I received the unexpected news that I was a recipient of the Judge Valdemar A. Cordova Scholarship. I was honored by the selection, but at the time I was mostly very grateful for the financial help. I had wanted to be a lawyer since an early age, and the Cordova Scholarship contributed greatly to fulfilling that childhood dream.

As a first-year law student, I attended several Cordova Scholar events, where I learned generally about Judge Cordova's contributions to Arizona's Latino and legal communities. Because of my heritage and my interest in historical figures in general, I remained curious over the years about Judge Cordova's life and legacy. I searched for more information about him, but found little published material, so I began a series of interviews with people who knew him.¹ I discovered that Valdemar Cordova was a quiet, intelligent, highly respected man who led a life marked by patriotism and public service.

Early Years

Born on Dec. 6, 1922, to Luis and Carmen Cordova, Valdemar was one in a family of eight children who grew up in the Grant Park neighborhood of South Phoenix. He was known to his family and childhood friends by the nickname "Baldy," given to him by a younger sister. He loved that neighborhood, and as an adult, Cordova reflected that, even though he came from humble circumstances, in childhood he had considered himself rich because of his family's values and heritage.

That heritage included his father Luis's involvement in local politics and civic affairs. Luis Cordova, a boilermaker for the Southern Pacific Railroad, helped form the Latin American Club to fight prejudice against the Latino community in Phoenix. Luis also campaigned for, and consulted with, many Arizona politicians—including Governor Ernest McFarland. He also was instrumental in the creation of Grant Park as a place for the neighborhood children to play. This included his young son Valdemar, who would grow up to continue his father's tradition of public service.

VALDEMAR A. CORDOVA

1939 Cordova at 17, in 1939.



Cordova attended Lowell Elementary School in Phoenix and, later, Phoenix Union High School. What followed was something I never learned at the scholarship events—this legal hero was first a military hero. At the age of 17, he left high school to join the United States Army in August 1940, later serving in the Army Air Corps as a First Lieutenant during World War II.

the hands of their German captors. Cordova also endured execution threats for consistently refusing to divulge information they sought. Lieutenant Cordova was honorably discharged in November 1945, remaining close friends over the years with the tail-gunner shot down with him.

Returning to Phoenix at the conclusion of the war, Cordova married his Grant Park neighbor and sweetheart, Gloria Orduno, on July 21, 1945. The couple went on to have three children: Kenneth, Valerie and Lexia.

War and the Law

After several years of active service, Lieutenant Cordova's plane was shot down during a bombing mission over Germany. He was captured by the enemy and remained a prisoner of war in Stalag Luft I in Barth, Germany, for the duration of the war, which was about 18 months. He and his fellow prisoners suffered constant hunger and other hardships at

Valdemar Cordova recalled, "I expected to get a degree just as I expected to get up the next day to have breakfast."

Valdemar and Gloria on their honeymoon in California, 1945.



Cordova's father had always been a strong believer in education. As Valdemar Cordova recalled, "I expected to get a degree just as I expected to get up the next day to have breakfast."² So he completed his high school education, and, capitalizing on the federal G.I. Bill, pursued a college education.

He attended both Arizona State University and the University of Arizona, eventually receiving his undergraduate degree from the University of Arizona. Cordova enrolled in law school there as well, where he was elected president of the law school student body in 1949. He maintained an "A" average in law school, and often took extra courses in order to graduate early. He graduated from the College of Law in 1950, and placed second in the Arizona State Bar Examination that same year.

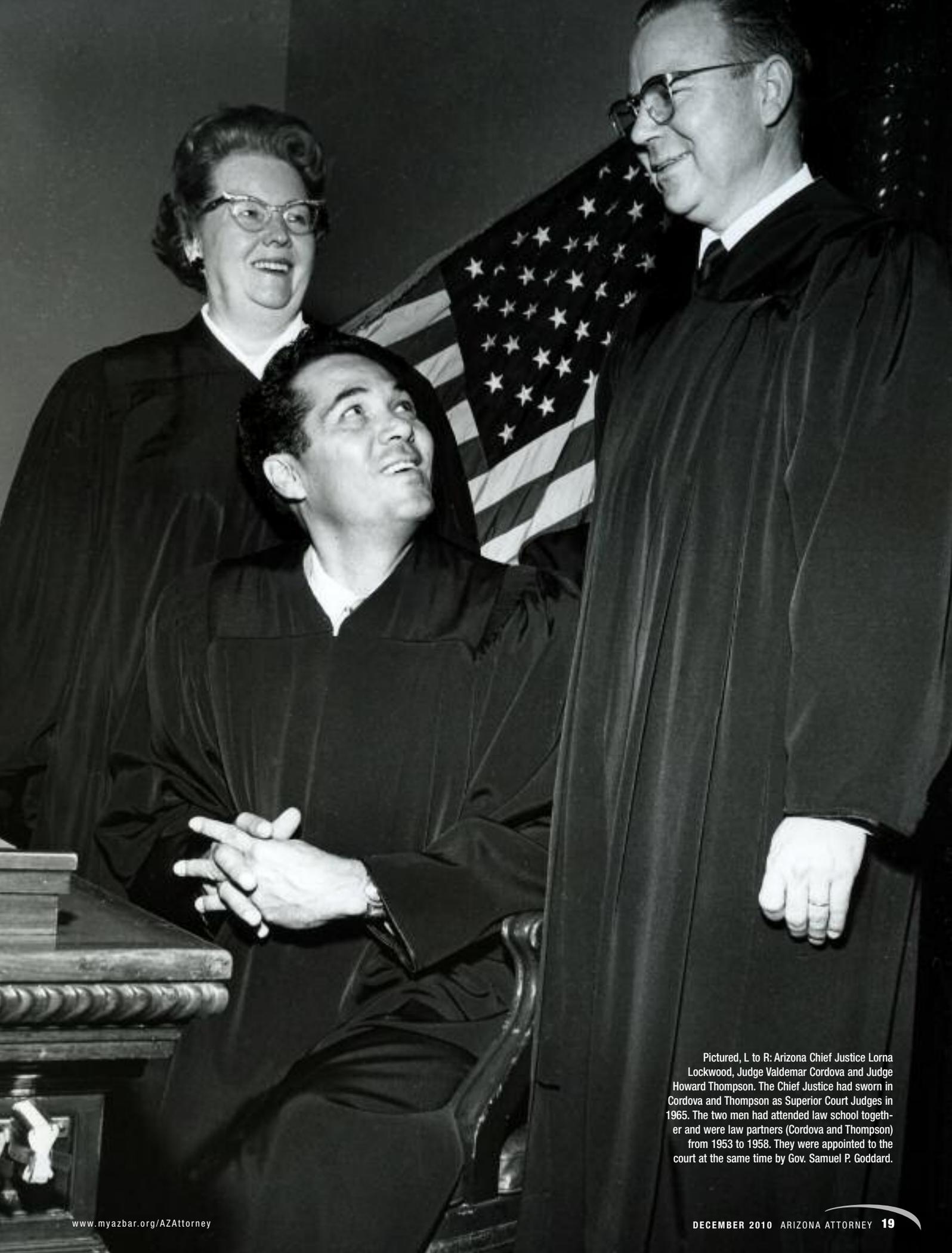
Law Practice and Taking the Bench

Cordova returned to Phoenix and began practicing with a local law firm, quickly gaining a reputation as an outstanding litigator, and, equally important, a kind and respectful attorney.

He also continued his father's tradition of political involvement and public service, serving on the Phoenix Board of Adjustment from 1954 to 1955; the Phoenix City Council from 1955 to 1959 as a part of Charter Government; and the Phoenix Civil Service Board from 1961 to 1965. Cordova served on various other boards and societies, including the Advisory Board for the Boy Scouts of America, Roosevelt Council, in 1966.

Cordova and other prominent Hispanic leaders often met over a meal at the El Portal Restaurant in the old Grant Park neighborhood to discuss local issues—a tradition that continues today among local leaders and downtown Phoenix attorneys.

On June 1, 1965, an appointment by Governor Samuel P. Goddard made Valdemar Cordova the first Mexican-American Superior Court Judge for Maricopa County, a position to which he was reelected a year later. In 1967, Gordon Cook, knowing



Pictured, L to R: Arizona Chief Justice Lorna Lockwood, Judge Valdemar Cordova and Judge Howard Thompson. The Chief Justice had sworn in Cordova and Thompson as Superior Court Judges in 1965. The two men had attended law school together and were law partners (Cordova and Thompson) from 1953 to 1958. They were appointed to the court at the same time by Gov. Samuel P. Goddard.



Cordova's reputation as a great trial attorney, persuaded the judge to leave the bench and join his expanding law firm as a partner. The firm of McKesson, Renaud, Cook, Miller & Cordova³ subsequently

moved to the top floors of the Luhrs Building in downtown Phoenix, where Cordova occupied an office in the northeast corner.

From that office, Cordova built a thriving law practice consisting primarily of plaintiffs' and insurance defense cases. Gordon Cook recalled that Cordova "really knew how to try a lawsuit." Cordova possessed the rare combination of



The Cordova family on the day of Val Cordova's swearing-in as Superior Court Judge in 1965. L to R: Gloria, Lexia (Lugo), Judge Val Cordova, Valerie (Susie) and Ken. Behind Judge Cordova is Nana (Carmen Cordova).

Valdemar Cordova became the first Hispanic federal judge in Arizona, and among the first in the nation. He referred to his journey from the Grant Park neighborhood to the federal court bench as "a long mile."

extraordinary verbal and written skills, and he was very effective in front of a jury. In fact, Cook remembered one case settling immediately after Cordova's delivery of an especially powerful opening statement. Stemming from a love of helping others instilled by his father, Valdemar drew satisfaction from securing compensation for the deserving and assisting members of the Latino community.

Mentor and Colleague

More than just an exemplary litigator, Valdemar Cordova was personable and friendly. He freely shared his knowledge and experiences, helping to shape good attorneys, as well as future Hispanic leaders, such as U.S. Rep. Ed Pastor and Judge Richard Trujillo. Cordova was widely regarded as a "gentleman," known to be both generous and un-opinionated. Recalling their days of practice together, law partner Gordon Cook described Val Cordova as "everything I would want in a lawyer and [law] partner."

Popular with colleagues and clients for his work ethic and knowledge of the law, Cordova also routinely mentored young lawyers. Patient and kind, he led by example, showing through

his own respectful actions how to interact with judges and court staff. As a young associate at the firm, Len Mark worked primarily with Cordova. Using words often uttered to describe Cordova, such as "incredible" and "exemplary," Mark recalled that Cordova took time to explain not just how to do something, but why to do it that way. As a young lawyer, I appreciated any experienced attorney taking the time to do this for me, and hearing this about Cordova deepened my respect for him.

Outside the practice of law, Cordova stayed physically strong and took his childhood love of basketball into adulthood. He often played a pickup game at the downtown YMCA over his lunch hour. Unfortunately, the Cordova men carried a history of congenital heart disease. One day while playing ball at the Y, he suffered a severe heart attack, requiring major heart surgery.

Judge Cordova Returns

After recovering from these health problems, Cordova ultimately decided that the best way for him to serve the public and make a positive difference was as a judge. In 1976, Gov. Raúl H. Castro appointed him to a second term on the Maricopa County Superior Court.

Cordova served on the superior court bench from 1976 until 1979, when he was appointed by President Jimmy Carter on July 3, 1979, to serve as a federal district court judge on the United States District Court, District of Arizona. With that appointment, Valdemar Cordova became the first Hispanic federal judge in Arizona, and among the first in the nation. Although his courtroom was only a few blocks from his humble childhood home, he referred to his journey from the Grant Park neighborhood to the federal court bench as "a long mile."

As a federal judge, Cordova discovered the culture of the federal bench to be more formal than that of the superior court, yet he maintained a judicial style more forgiving than tyrannical. Valdemar earned the respect of the entire bar for his demeanor



and his reputation of following the law.

One fellow judge described Cordova as “what a judge should look like,” inspiring awe in the courtroom when he took the bench and exuding the

importance of the proceedings with just his presence. But any visitor to the court requesting to speak to “Baldy” was warmly ushered back to his chambers. As did many others, I admire that even with the formality and power of a judicial position, he maintained a humble and approachable attitude.

Judge Cordova also continued his habit of looking out for young lawyers. As a new attorney, future State Bar of Arizona President Ernie Calderón completed a clerkship with one of Cordova’s colleagues on the federal bench and had an interview for an associate position with a large, prestigious law firm. Calderón learned during the interview that Judge Cordova had made an unsolicited telephone call on his behalf to recommend him for the position.

Cordova also had a high respect for the law and his role as a judge. One case that came before him on the District Court involved a plan that he knew might lead to the demolition of his high school, Phoenix Union. In ruling in favor of the plan, Judge Cordova commented that, despite his personal attachment to the site, “The board—indeed the voters—have decided

‘Hard work’ raised Hispanic from barrio to U.S. judgeship

Val Cordova, who rose from a barrio near Grant Park to become a lawyer and a Maricopa County Superior Court judge, Tuesday became the first Mexican-American to take the bench as a federal district court judge.

The 56-year-old Cordova, whose father was a Mexican laborer, made a point of telling a jostled gathering of friends and relatives of his humble beginning because he said he wanted youngsters who now live in the barrio to know they can rise above it.

“It is only about a mile from Grant Park to here (the federal building) — a short walk. But it took me 50 years of hard work to make it,” said Cordova, of Phoenix.

“There were hard times and there were good times. I came from a family of eight and until I was 25 years old, two of my brothers and I slept three to a bed.

“When I went into the army (in 1940), and was given a col. it was a real luxury,” Cordova said.

The new judge introduced each member of his immediate family — his wife Gloria, their children, Kenneth, Valerie and Lexia, and his 75-year-old mother, Carmen Cordova. In introducing his wife, he said, “This is the woman I’ve loved for 34 years.”

Cordova thanked Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz., for promising to recommend a Mexican-American to the federal bench and finally selecting him.

“He (DeConcini) kept his promise to find a qualified Mexican-American,” the judge said.

DeConcini said, “Today is a day all of us can be proud of.”



Republic photo by Michael Zwick

New U.S. District Judge Val Cordova kisses his wife, Gloria. Cordova is the first Mexican-American to be appointed as a judge on a federal court.

Judge Valdemar Cordova and his wife Gloria enter a testimonial dinner in his honor, at the VA Thunderbird Post 41, Sept. 18, 1965. They are escorted by Joe Fiore, Post Commander.

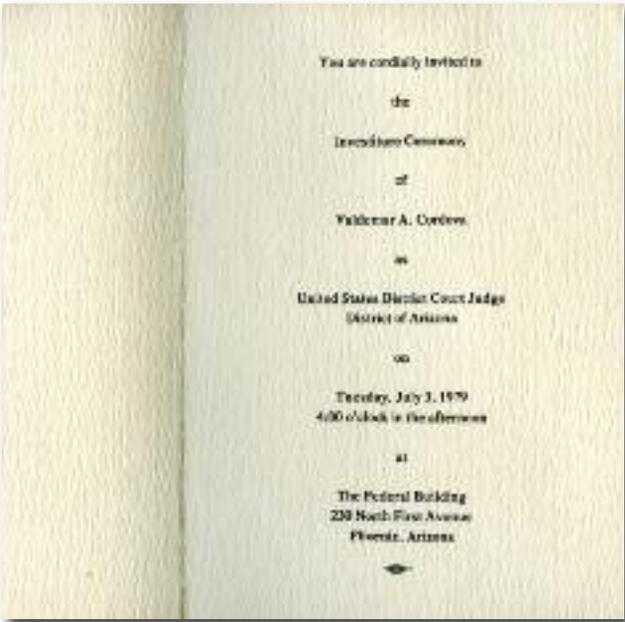


it should be sold. My personal preference is beside the point—the law is the law.” The case involved whether plans by the school board to close central Phoenix schools had a discriminatory effect on minorities. Cordova further commented, “It’s not for me to say I like or do not like what the school board has proposed. It is for me to say if it meets the constitutional and legal requirements of this country. A federal judge has to do his job notwithstanding the consequences. That’s not to say we don’t have feelings.”⁴

Sadly, the Arizona federal court was not to enjoy the influence and service of Judge Cordova for long. In 1984, he suffered a serious stroke, after which he was unable to resume his judicial duties. His fellow judges and the entire federal court staff missed his presence greatly, and on June 18, 1988, Judge Valdemar Cordova died from complications of the 1984 stroke.

A Rich Legacy

Valdemar Cordova was extremely proud of his Mexican-American heritage, and he believed that he and his family had prospered by hard work. In part due to his father's admonition, Valdemar always strove to be his best in every venue—as a student, in the military, as a practitioner, as a



Circle Staff Photo by Bob Lefeb

Honored guests Bennie M. Gonzalez, left, and The Honorable Valdemar A. Cordova, center, chat with Vilma Martinez of San Francisco, president and general counsel of Mexican American Legal Defense

and Educational Fund; Graciela Olivera (second from right), chairperson of MALDEF board of directors; and The Honorable Leonel J. Castillo, right, commissioner-designate.

CARTER NOMINEE SPEAKS HERE

Rocky Immigration Road Seen

Saturday, April 23, 1977



judge—and it showed. Those close to him said that he felt a great sense of responsibility because of the gifts God had given him to be a leader in his field and in his community, and he wanted to contribute and inspire others to do likewise.

Representative Pastor and attorney Len Mark each recalled that this was Cordova's preferred method of activism—to consciously set an example by going to school, studying hard, and then working hard. In doing so, he paved the way for others who shared his racial heritage to enter and thrive in the legal community—myself included.

In 1986, Maricopa County Superior Court Judge Armando de Leon approached Phoenix attorneys Ernie Calderón and José Cárdenas

VALDEMAR A. CORDOVA



with the idea to begin a scholarship at Arizona's law schools in Valdemar Cordova's name. Cárdenas was then president of Los Abogados, Arizona's Hispanic Bar Association, and the organization was instrumental in the establishment of the scholarship. The original fundraising effort included a banquet with former Governor Raúl Castro and other Arizona elected officials, and it netted \$70,000.

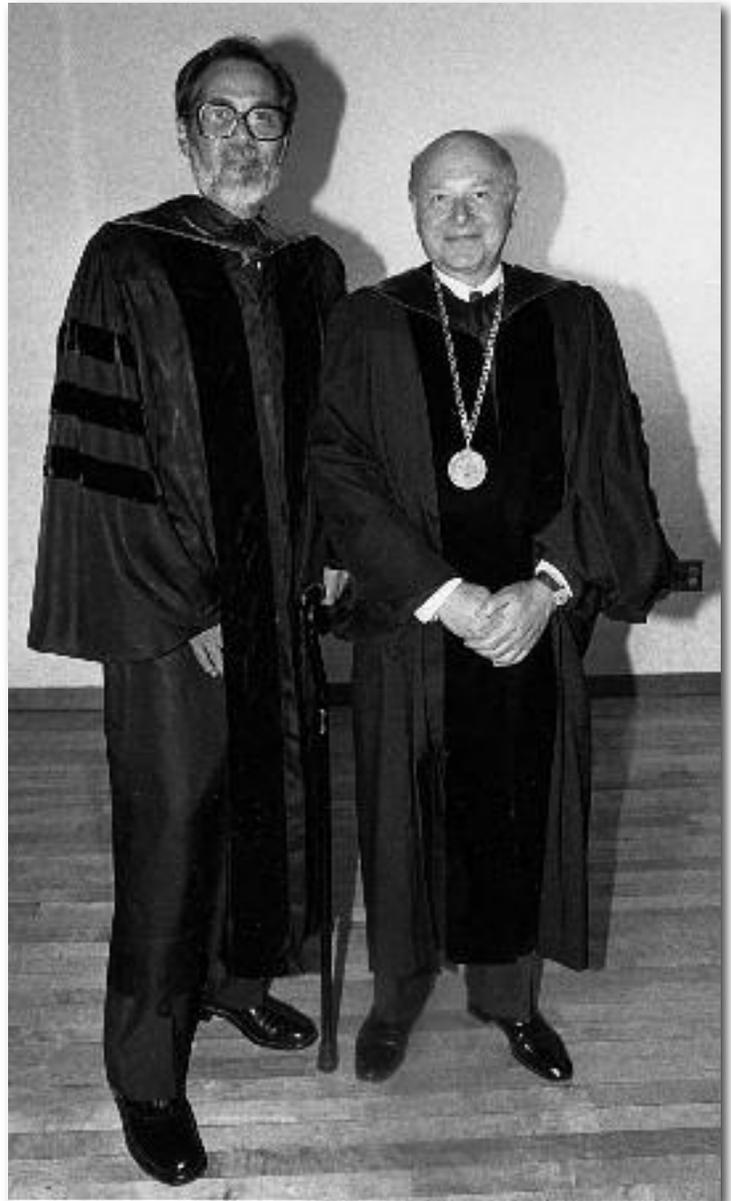
The scholarship, originally offered at both the Arizona State and University of Arizona law schools, continues today at the Arizona State University College of Law, and Los Abogados remains a key sponsor. And in 2002, Congressman Ed Pastor submitted a successful nomination to rename the City of Phoenix Municipal Court Building after Valdemar Cordova, in part because he "served the community with honor and distinction



Valdemar Cordova and U.S. Sen. Dennis DeConcini

and was a role model to many individuals in the fields of politics, law, judicial, education, public service, advocacy and civil rights."

I discovered that Judge Cordova was indeed a role model—not just in accomplishments, but also in character. He was kind and respectful to all, regardless of station. Even as a successful attorney, or when cloaked with the power and prestige of a judicial robe, Cordova was more than a competent and consummate



Judge Val Cordova, left, received an honorary doctor of laws degree from the University of Arizona, 1986. He is pictured with UA President Henry Koffler.

professional; he was a humble, genuine person. This is the example I most appreciate. It is also what I most wish to emulate as I follow him into the judiciary.

Judge Cordova left a legacy of values strongly held and actively lived. The financial help I received in his name years ago meant a great deal to me at the time. However, I now consider his example even more valuable. His is an example of the kind of public servants, attorneys, judges and leaders that our community deserves. And that legacy is priceless. 

endnotes

1. Information for this article came primarily from personal interviews with, and input from, several people, including Judge Cordova's sister, Lala Bustoz, and his son, Ken Cordova; Representative Ed Pastor; Judge Stephen M. McNamee; Judge Earl H. Carroll; Judge Richard J. Trujillo; Los Abogados President Salvador Ongaro; and attorneys Ernie Calderón, Len Mark and Gordon Cook. My sincere appreciation goes to all who spent time and effort sharing their memories of Judge Cordova with me.
2. Deborah Shanahan, *Old School Ties: Judge Cordova Ok'd Sale of His Alma Mater*, ARIZ. REP., Nov. 29, 1982.
3. Later known as Renaud, Cook, Miller & Cordova, and today named Renaud Cook Drury Mesaros PA.
4. Shanahan, *supra* note 2.