

They went to court

Plaintiffs in election suit against Watsonville hoping it will reshape city's political scene

By NANCY BARR
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When it appeared there might be a way to use the courts to bring about increased involvement in city politics among Watsonville Hispanics, Waldo Rodriguez and Cruz Gomez didn't hesitate to get involved.

Both quickly volunteered to be plaintiffs in the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund's lawsuit to change the way the Watsonville City Council is elected.

Both say they saw the lawsuit as a way to achieve what they and their friends and colleagues have talked about for years — better representation for the city's minority population.

In the lawsuit filed in federal District Court in San Jose, MALDEF contends that voting in Watsonville is racially polarized — that Anglo people don't vote for Hispanic candidates — which makes it next to impossible for an Hispanic to be elected to the City Council. As proof, MALDEF points out that six Hispanic candidates have run for the council in recent years, and all have come in last or second to last.

As a solution, MALDEF proposes dividing the city into seven districts, with each district electing its own council representative. MALDEF's proposed districting plan sets aside two predominantly Hispanic districts.

MALDEF believes conditions in Watsonville are close to ideal for winning such a lawsuit under the provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act, and the group's spokesmen have indicated that if this suit is successful, it will pave the way for similar suits in other California cities.

Named with Gomez and Rodriguez as a plaintiff in the lawsuit is Patricia Leal.

Leal apparently has lived in Watsonville for many years, although several months ago she listed a Soledad address on court papers. Leal's attorney said she is again living in Watsonville, although she is not registered to vote, according to the county Elections Department, and could not be reached for comment on the MALDEF case.

Gomez, 45, has lived in the area since 1979, coming here from Salem, Ore. She moved into the city just before filing her nomination papers for City Council in 1983. She is the former director of the Salud Para la Gente health clinic, and is now director of the Migrant Media Education Project.

She has been an outspoken supporter of the frozen-food workers on strike since September 1985, and has worked on other issues of concern to the area's poorer Hispanics, such as trying to curtail what have been called abusive practices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Gomez has two grown daughters and one grandchild. She now lives on Clifford Avenue.

Rodriguez, 45, is a bookkeeper and paralegal with an office on Main Street. For many years he was involved in community activities, working for La Coalicion, an anti-poverty agency, and

helping to set up a temporary school at Valley Catholic Church when local parents felt the school board was not responsive to their children's needs.

He has shied away from community involvement in the last five or six years, Rodriguez said, because it was just taking too much of his time.

"Before you know it, you're going to meetings six days a week," he said.

Rodriguez has lived in the Pajaro Valley since 1950, when his formerly migrant family settled down in North Monterey County. He is married and has five children ranging in age from 1 to 24 years old. He lives on Sunnyhills Drive.

Gomez and Rodriguez have had personal experience with the electoral process — they have both sought elective office to no avail. Both are currently registered to vote in Watsonville, and agreed to talk about their involvement in the lawsuit.

Gomez said she began wondering about the Watsonville electoral process after running what she felt was a good campaign, and yet doing poorly in the election.

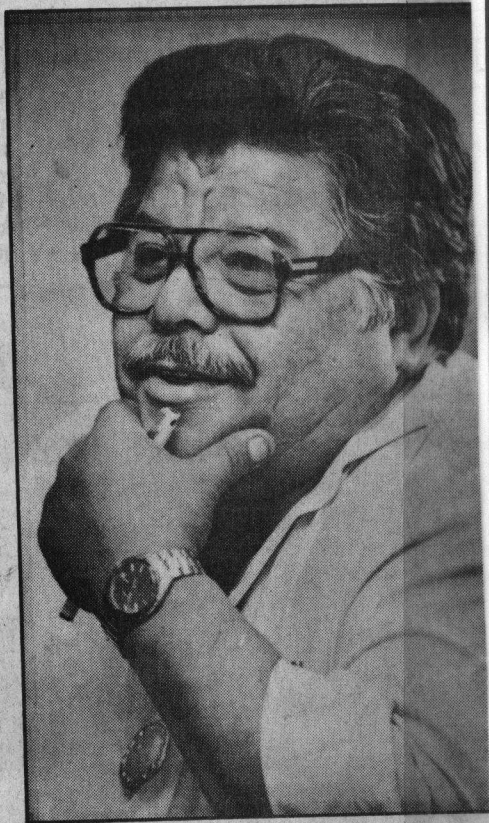
Gomez was among a group of Watsonville Hispanics who got together just about two years ago to discuss how to get better representation of Hispanics.

The group called itself the Watsonville Community Action Network — WatCAN for short — a name Gomez said isn't used any more, because it brings to mind Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. Gomez is a passionate supporter of the strike against Watsonville Canning.

The group considered trying to put an initiative on the ballot to require council elections by districts, but after hearing a presentation from a MALDEF representative, decided instead to file a lawsuit.

MALDEF needed plaintiffs, and Gomez and Rodriguez both indicated they would like to show their support for

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the lawsuit by allowing their names to be used.

MALDEF is covering the legal expenses of the lawsuit but Gomez and Rodriguez have had to give a lot of time to the effort. They have given depositions and provided information about themselves to the attorneys. They also both plan to attend the trial in San Jose in January.

(The trial is expected to begin Jan. 20, and will probably last about a week.)

"I think our lawyers need support," Gomez said of the importance of having good attendance at the trial. "I think the judge needs to see it isn't just two or three disgruntled people."

"The problem is (the trial) is in San Jose and during the week," she said, so it will be difficult for many people to attend.

Rodriguez and Gomez have high hopes for the outcome of the lawsuit, but not because they particularly want to sit on the City Council themselves. Gomez ran for council in 1983, but said she has no plans to run again.

"There will probably be a number of qualified candidates," Gomez said. "I see myself more as a watchdog."

Rodriguez made an unsuccessful try for one of the Watsonville-area seats on the Pajaro Valley school board in 1974 and said he has at times considered another run for public office, but has always decided against it. He doubts he'd run for the City Council, even if the MALDEF suit was successful, but doesn't rule out a change of heart down the line.

Rodriguez and Gomez are hoping the MALDEF suit will bring the city better representation of the minority community, which makes up about half the city's population.

"As the city grows, it's got to have balance," Rodriguez said. "The only way to have balance is to have districting."

If all the City Council members come from one section of the city, they are bound to forget, at least at times, the needs of other parts of the city, Rodriguez said. He'd like to see a minority-representative who is capable of representing the entire city.

"We've got to have someone who is sensitive to the town as a whole," he said, adding that this is an area in which the current council could stand to improve.

Gomez, on the other hand, is clear that what she really wants to see is someone who represents the poor minority community. Not that that representative must be a member of that community, but the person must be in touch with the needs of that community, Gomez said.

If MALDEF prevails in court, finding a good candidate is just one of the challenges that lie ahead for Hispanics seeking to win representation to the City Council.

"We still have a long way to go to get people involved in the electoral process," Gomez said, "because people are alienated."

"One of the biggest things I want to dispel, is that people say 'Latinos don't vote.' Nobody votes."

The outcome of city elections is generally decided by about 20 percent of the voters, she said.

Rodriguez and Gomez have no doubt that voting in Watsonville is racially polarized — a point that MALDEF must prove in court.

Gomez said that by looking at the results of recent elections, it was determined that Hispanic candidates made a good showing in the Hispanic neighborhoods, but that voters in those areas also voted for Anglo candidates as well. In the Anglo neighborhoods, the Hispanic candidates received little support.

People tend to vote for people they know or people whose faces and names are familiar — or because the person's ethnic background is familiar, Rodriguez said. "The easiest thing is what we know," he said.

When an Anglo voter looks at a ballot with names such as Jones, Ramirez and Smith, he or she usually throws Ramirez out of consideration because it doesn't fit — there just aren't usually Hispanic names on the ballot, Rodriguez said. It's just the way people's minds work, he said.

"A large segment of the voting community is not ready to accept (minority candidates) and to vote that way yet," he said.

He's optimistic, though, that the MALDEF lawsuit will help change things in Watsonville. Gomez, too, sees it as part of the process of building momentum in the Hispanic community and building the experience needed to win a political battle.

A recent voter-registration drive in the Hispanic neighborhoods was successful, Gomez said, "because of the enthusiasm people have and feel around the suit."

"There's a lot of expectations and hope," she said, "kind of like Christmas."