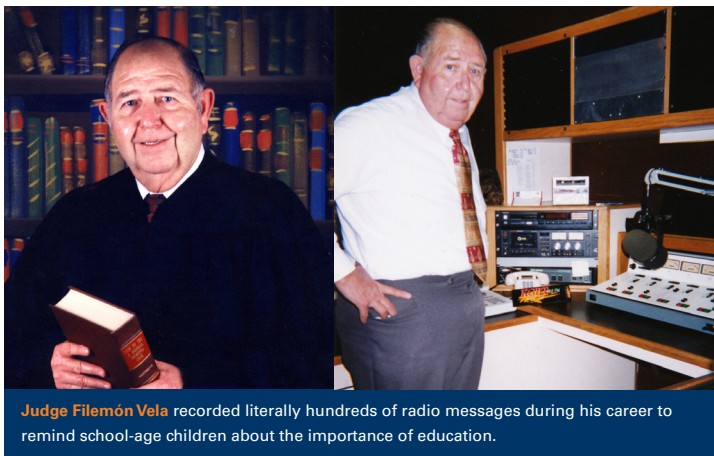


# The University of Texas at Brownsville

## Touching Lives, One at a Time

*Promoting the Power of Education*



Judge Filemón Vela recorded literally hundreds of radio messages during his career to remind school-age children about the importance of education.

The Rio Grande Valley lost a treasure when Judge Filemón B. Vela left this world at the age of 68 in April 2004. He and his wife of 44 years, Blanca Sanchez Vela, staunchly supported their family, their community and their church.

In June 2013, the *Blanca and Filemón Vela Scholarship Endowment* was created for students pursuing a liberal arts degree at The University of Texas at Brownsville. The \$50,000 gift used to establish the endowment had been raised in the years after Filemón's death. The family also gave \$10,000 to the Archer Foundation to sponsor two UTB students as Archer Fellows in Washington, D.C.

"We knew the most fitting way to remember our father and honor our mother would be through scholarships for deserving students," said Rafael Vela, one of the three Vela children.

The family began to raise funds for the endowment by holding a golf tournament in 2005 and in each of the four succeeding years. The golf tournament then morphed into a bike ride that has further evolved into the popular 60-mile "Laguna Loop" with a 5K run/walk family component. The Laguna Loop is held in October each year.

"The ride/run/walk really caught on, drawing in a younger, family crowd, and we are keeping the entry fee reasonable; the whole idea is to raise awareness and promote education through scholarships," said son Filemón Jr., who was recently elected to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives.

He, along with Rafael and sister Sylvia organize the annual event with a cadre of volunteers consisting of family and friends.

### Beating the Odds

Filemón, full of pride for his family and the community in which he had been raised, was the eighth of nine children who lost their mother at a very young age. He attended both Texas Southmost College and The University of Texas at Austin. He graduated from St. Mary's School of Law in San Antonio. In 1980, he was appointed U.S. District Judge for the Southern District of Texas by President Jimmy Carter, a post he held with distinction for 24 years until his death.

"My mother died when I was 11 years old," Filemón said in a 1998 interview. "I would say it was unusual for a person [with my background] to finish high school... and so certainly we weren't supposed to attend college. I believe there was a moving force, and that was my father. He had this thing about education. He was of an opinion that it was really going to make a difference in our lives--and not only for us, but also to [allow us to] serve others."

Blanca earned her bachelor's and master's degrees while raising three children and being active in the community; she served as the first female mayor of Brownsville from 1999-2003. As co-chair of the Brownsville Public Library Foundation, she was instrumental in establishing Brownsville's two public libraries; as mayor, she continued promoting literacy efforts throughout the community.

"I have always been firmly committed to the notion that the greatest contribution we can make to our community and country is to recognize that it is the youthful element that will determine our destiny," Blanca said. "The reality is that all children are born with the ability to succeed and accomplish the educational tasks of the day."

Filemón served on many boards, yet perhaps his most influential civic activity was in his self-appointed role as promoter of the power of education to school-age youngsters. Through the years, in his role as Judge, he tirelessly recorded radio messages and squeezed in visits to schools throughout South Texas to address countless students about the importance of education, to stay in school and continue on to college.

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**Blanca Vela** receives a heartfelt kiss from her Granddaughter, Carolina, at the presentation of the *Blanca and Filemón Vela Scholarship Endowment* held in August.

One of Judge Vela's former law clerks, Roman "Dino" Esparza, accompanied the judge on several school visits. "The judge said it was part of the job description for any law clerk who worked for him to participate in the school presentations," Esparza said. "Even though it always appeared the students were listening respectfully and paying attention, we would always wonder what impact the presentations had on the children. Judge Vela would say, 'As long as we touched one today, we did our job.'"