



# Hon. Salvador Mendoza, Jr.

## Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

by Jaclyn C. Celebrezze



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**W**hen Judge Salvador Mendoza, Jr. was sworn in to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit on September 15, 2022, it marked the latest chapter in a legal career dedicated to public service. But for Judge Mendoza, that moment was also a reminder of where it all began: with his parents, who instilled in him the values that have guided him throughout his career of giving back, uplifting others, and treating all with dignity.

On the day of our interview, those values were on full display. Judge Mendoza's office was abuzz with activity: his new law clerk had just arrived, and everyone, including the judge, went out of their way to ensure the new clerk was welcomed and prepared to face the challenges ahead.

It was a small moment, but a telling one—the kind of everyday kindness that defines Judge Mendoza, who approaches every interaction with consideration and integrity.

### Background and Education

Born in California and raised in Washington's Yakima Valley, Judge Mendoza has spent his career giving back to the region that raised him.

After studying philosophy at the University of Washington, Judge Mendoza went on to earn his law degree from the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law, where he served as Co-Editor-in-Chief of the *Chicanx-Latinx Law Review*. After law school, he returned to Washington to begin his legal career.

For the next fifteen years, Judge Mendoza dedicated himself to assisting Washingtonians with juvenile, criminal, and civil matters. First, he served as an Assistant Attorney General, then as a Deputy Prosecuting Attorney, and finally, as an attorney in private practice.

Throughout this period, he always made time to serve the greater legal community as well. Despite handling between 150 and 250 cases per year, he provided significant pro bono representation to indigent individuals and volunteered with several nonprofits to champion improved access to justice. In addition, he mentored new attorneys and created educational opportunities for the local bar. By 2013, his extensive community outreach and his experience as a judge



pro tempore made his appointment to the Benton and Franklin County Superior Court feel like an almost inevitable next chapter.

His service on the Superior Court quickly drew broader attention, and shortly thereafter, President Barack Obama nominated him to serve on the federal district court in Eastern Washington. In June 2014, after receiving overwhelming bipartisan support, Judge Mendoza was sworn in as a federal district judge for the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Washington.

During the eight years he served this court, Judge Mendoza gained a reputation for his warmth and collegiality in the courtroom. These experiences, including multiple assignments sitting by designation on the Ninth Circuit, deepened his appreciation for collaboration and prepared him for his eventual transition to the appellate court in 2022.

### Impact on the Bench

In his time on the federal bench, Judge Mendoza has become known as a thoughtful jurist dedicated to equal justice under the law. He approaches every case with an open mind, committed to basing his decisions on the facts before him and applying the law as interpreted in binding precedent.

As he explained during his confirmation process to the Ninth Circuit,

“Law, as it is practiced in this country, is an iterative process. With each new case or issue, judges must, without fear or favor, apply the relevant statutes, constitutional provisions, and precedent to the facts before them.”<sup>1</sup>

Judge Mendoza has accomplished this by issuing over 9,000 orders and opinions, all written with his characteristically fresh and approachable style. Throughout the circuit, Judge Mendoza’s opinions are known for their clarity and connection, guiding the reader through standards of review and complex issues of statutory interpretation with ease.

His recent opinion, *Gonzalez v. Herrera*,<sup>2</sup> is a perfect example. The case addresses the statutory interpretation or “linguistic wrestling,” as he names it, surrounding the First Step Act of 2018’s use of the term “toward.”<sup>3</sup>

Judge Mendoza uses his opening two paragraphs to succinctly break down the law and center the discussion on the relevant case facts.

The First Step Act of 2018 (“FSA”) was transformative law with far-reaching implications that have yet to all be realized. Pub. L. No. 115-391, 132 Stat. 5194 (2018). This case concerns one such implication: a system to incentivize incarcerated individuals to complete programs intended to reduce their risk of recidivism. As part of this system, Congress created “[t]ime credits” that “shall be applied toward time in prerelease custody or supervised release.” 18 U.S.C. § 3632(d)(4)(C).

Petitioner Leon Gonzalez served his custodial sentence. He is now on supervised release and sitting on a heap of FSA time credits that he asks to be applied to reduce the term of his supervised release. The Government argues that those credits are worth nothing—that the time and energy Gonzalez spent earning credits in excess of his custodial sentence is wasted. We disagree. The plain language of the law and the relevant canons of construction clearly demonstrate that Congress created the FSA’s time credit scheme to allow for the reduction in length of a supervised release term in Gonzalez’s circumstances. Therefore, we reverse the order dismissing Gonzalez’s petition for writ of habeas corpus and remand with further instructions.<sup>4</sup>

The opinion goes on to provide a clear and well-reasoned analysis, immersing the reader in the relevant facts and law before methodically walking through each relevant consideration. This ability to cut to the quick of a case is a direct result of Judge Mendoza’s years as a federal district court judge and a state judge. Judge Mendoza takes a forward-looking approach when drafting opinions, carefully converting the abstract to

the concrete and providing specific answers to complex, time-sensitive questions for future application.

Judge Mendoza advises attorneys to adopt a similar approach of clarity and concision when drafting briefs and preparing for oral argument. He urges attorneys to organize thoughtfully and lead with the most important and pressing issue before the court when drafting, noting that the issue will likely dominate oral argument as well.

Judge Mendoza is known for his courteous and deliberate engagement with all parties during oral argument. As he explains, oral argument is an opportunity to walk the court through your client’s position: “You’re there to have a conversation with the judges. Help us understand your point of view.” Therefore, he urges advocates to converse about the case’s thorniest legal issues, rather than reciting their briefs verbatim, as oral argument is often the last chance for clarification of the parties’ positions and sets the tone for judicial conferencing.

Indeed, Judge Mendoza cites the opportunity to confer thoughtfully and carefully on the issues to reach a panel decision after oral argument as what he enjoys most about the shift from trial to appellate court. Collaborative discussions in conference ensure that the final published opinion is thoughtful, detailed, and complete. Judge Mendoza’s kind and thoughtful engagement with all parties extends beyond his work on the bench to the legal community at large as well.

### **Building a Legacy of Outreach**

Outside of his judicial duties, Judge Mendoza maintains his personal commitment to civic outreach by looking for opportunities that are missing and creating those positive opportunities where he can. This has led to Judge Mendoza’s participation in efforts to improve access to justice, inspire the next generation of advocates and jurists, and mentor newcomers to the legal community.

### **Promoting Access to Justice**

Notably, Judge Mendoza has spent decades encouraging improved access to justice. He was a driving force behind a first-of-its-kind therapeutic drug court in Eastern Washington, a program that is still operating more than two decades later. The court seeks to reduce recidivism by connecting youth with non-violent offenses to strength-based community resources. This holistic approach coordinates stakeholders across the community, including treatment providers, probation officers, families, and attorneys.

Judge Mendoza has also been a long-time advocate for access to qualified counsel for individuals who cannot afford an attorney. In private practice, he provided considerable support through pro bono representation, and now as a jurist, he continues to raise awareness about this critical issue. For example, he recently highlighted the pressing need for rural practice attorneys to improve access to justice in small towns and remote communities. Further, he has frequently championed improved language access in the courtroom to ensure equal access to justice.

## Inspiring the Next Generation

Judge Mendoza is also dedicated to fostering the next generation of legal professionals. Judge Mendoza credits his own career trajectory to the support of community members—teachers, professors, lawyers, and judges—whose small acts of kindness changed his life. He notes that even the smallest of moments can linger with an individual and uplift them decades later. That’s why he strives to do the same for others.

Judge Mendoza frequently creates educational opportunities for young people considering a career in law. For example, each year, Judge Mendoza continues to host the Tri-Cities Youth and Justice Forum to inspire the next generation of legal advocates. In existence for more than 20 years, the program introduces close to 200 middle school and high school students from diverse backgrounds to the possibilities of a career in law, teaching them about the judicial system, their rights, and responsibilities as community members.

## Mentoring New Lawyers

Aware of the power of mentorship, Judge Mendoza also participates in numerous activities to prepare the newest generation of lawyers for a life of public service. Nowhere is this more evident than in his enduring relationships with his law clerks.

From the first day of clerkship, individualized attention and mentorship are hallmarks of Judge Mendoza’s chambers, a commitment that extends well beyond their time in chambers. In their letter supporting his ascension to the Ninth Circuit, several former clerks noted his life-long support of the next generation of lawyers, stating:

“Even after our time in his chambers ended, Judge Mendoza has continued to mentor us in our careers and offer his wisdom in our personal lives. Through career

transitions and life events, Judge Mendoza is generous with his time and advice and celebrates our personal and professional successes.”<sup>5</sup>

Known for his encouraging and insightful career advice, he is frequently sought after to speak to those just entering the legal profession. His advice for new lawyers just getting started echoes back to the advice he received in childhood: “Don’t try to calculate each step. Find your passion, give yourself grace, and follow your instincts.”

Through his work on the bench, his mentorship of young lawyers, and his dedication to community service, Judge Mendoza continues to embody the values instilled in him from childhood: giving back, uplifting others, and treating all with dignity. ☺

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>S. JUDICIARY COMM., 117th Cong., Questionnaires & Responses of Salvador Mendoza, Jr., (May 18, 2022), <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/QFR%20Responses%20-%20Mendoza%20-%202022-05-11.pdf>, [https://perma.cc/7SZE-UHGX].

<sup>2</sup>*Gonzalez v. Herrera*, 151 F.4th 1076, 1081 (9th Cir. 2025).

<sup>3</sup>*Id.*

<sup>4</sup>*Id.* at 1078.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew Clark, et. al. *Letter to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee in Support of the Honorable Salvador J. Mendoza, Jr. to serve on the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit*, 117th Cong. 1, 2 (2022), <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/5.10.22%20-%20Former%20Law%20Clerks%20Support%20for%20Mendoza.pdf#:~:text=We%20write%20in%20our%20personal,qualifications%20and%20achievements%20are%20indisputable>, [https://perma.cc/A75M-KA57].

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