

MARTÍNEZ, VILMA S. (1943–)

“The opportunity to help build MALDEF, then a fledgling civil rights organization which had started with a foundation grant, into a nationally significant Latino institution was very important to me in large part because of my own experiences with discrimination in my home state of Texas.”

From 1973-1982 Vilma Martínez was president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), the nation's most important organization dedicated to the protection of civil rights for Mexican Americans. A skillful fund raiser, she doubled the organization's budget during her time in office and led important legal suits, including expansion of the Voting Rights Act, and the case, Plyer v. Doe. The latter guaranteed the right to a public school education for undocumented children. Awarded for her many contributions, Martínez has received the Margaret Brent Award from the American Bar Association, the Medal for Excellence from Columbia Law School, the Mexican American Bar Association's Lex Award, and the Jefferson Award from the American Institute for Public Service.