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## Yakima farmworkers' daughter keeps her heritage at forefront

After an Ivy League education, Elizabeth Mendoza, a farmworkers' daughter from Yakima, is beginning a law career with politically invisible Latinos back home on her mind.

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WASHINGTON — Elizabeth Mendoza has come far from the days when, as a grade-schooler in Yakima, she rose before the sun to pick apples, pears and cherries with her parents, farmworkers who crossed the border from Mexico during the 1970s.

Now 28, Mendoza will collect her second Ivy League degree next month when she graduates from Columbia Law School. She's wrapping up a four-month internship in Washington, D.C., with the U.S. Senate Budget Committee, chaired by Sen. Patty Murray.

Then she'll be off to Seattle for a year-long clerkship with federal Judge Richard Tallman of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. After that, Mendoza will start what likely will be a six-figure job in transactional law with Perkins Coie, a top Seattle firm.

All along the way, Mendoza's achievements were wrapped with a sense of duty to her community — Latinos in Eastern Washington whose swelling ranks have yet to bring them much political clout.

Four of 10 Yakima residents are Hispanic. Yet no Latino has ever been elected to the seven-member Yakima City Council, which remains all white. Mendoza campaigned for Sonia Rodriguez True, a Yakima family-law attorney who attempted that feat in 2009. Rodriguez True lost to conservative radio host Dave Ettl, even though she was endorsed by the Yakima Herald Republic and despite revelations of her opponent's previous arrest for drunken driving.



KYUNG M. SONG / THE SEATTLE TIMES

*Elizabeth Mendoza, 28, graduated from Dartmouth and will earn her law degree from Columbia University.*

In 10 Central and Eastern Washington counties where Latinos make up a sizable portion — even majority — of the residents, a Whitman College report found they have won just 4 percent of seats on school boards and city councils in the past decade.

Mendoza, who canvassed for votes door to door for Rodriguez True and volunteered for Yakima School Board President Vickie Ybarra's unsuccessful run

for the Washington Legislature in 2008, believes Latinos' political advances have been stymied in part by many voters' unease.

"If you see your community undergo a dramatic demographic transformation, that can be scary," said Mendoza, a slight woman who speaks with the animated eloquence of a politician stump-

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ing for votes, during an interview at the Dirksen Senate Office Building.

“When you see a name on the ballot that looks unfamiliar, the instinct is to go the other way.”

Some Latinos in Yakima and elsewhere immigrated to the United States illegally and aren’t eligible to vote. But Mendoza believes little effort is made to engage even Latinos who, like her, are American born, fluent in English or naturalized citizens.

Mendoza is the second of five children born to Gloria and Gabriel Mendoza. Her parents, both born in Michoacán, Mexico, came to the U.S. separately without papers during the 1970s, when the border was more porous and Americans arguably more tolerant of farmhands entering illegally.

From about age 9, Mendoza worked with her family around Yakima’s orchards. Rising at 4 a.m. on her days off from school instilled an unshakable work ethic. But it did not give Mendoza a love of fruit picking; as soon as she turned 16, she escaped to a bank teller’s job at Washington Mutual.

Mendoza’s family in Yakima lives in Washington’s heaviest Hispanic 4th Congressional District, represented by Pasco Republican Doc Hastings. Hispanics, the vast majority of them of Mexican descent, account for 37 percent of the district’s residents.

That’s more than three times their statewide share of 11 percent. Washington has the nation’s 15th-highest concentration of Hispanics, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

Mendoza said watching two well-qualified Latina candidates who “for some reason could not seem to break through at the polls” made her aware of a need for a government that looks more like its people. That the two women were Democrats in a historically conservative region may also have been a factor.

“For me, it’s not about political involvement. It’s about community involvement,” Mendoza said.

Matt Barreto, associate professor of political science at the University of Washington and an expert on the Latino electorate, said the stereotype that most Hispanics are not citizens has discouraged both outreach to voters and efforts to recruit candidates.

Nationally, 44 percent of Hispanics were eligible to vote in 2012. That compares to 79 percent for non-Hispanic whites, 69 percent for blacks and 52 percent for Asians. The lower rate for Hispanics stems from both their relative youth and a higher share of noncitizens.

Here the rate is lower still. Nearly 36 percent of Washington’s Latino residents, or 271,000 people, are eligible to vote, ranking the state 33rd in the nation, according to Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C.

Mendoza said her semester at the Capitol, for which she was chosen through Columbia Law School’s “externship” with the federal government, has given her an intimate look at how politics can shape people’s everyday lives.

She has helped with legislation to encourage states to extend in-state college tuition and financial aid to more poor students, regardless of immigration status, and to extend the Earned Income Tax Credit to low-income, childless adults, which encourages work by offsetting federal payroll taxes and income taxes.

Mendoza said she wants to spur other Latinos to get active politically, much the way some of her best teachers left their imprint in her life.

Her third-grade teacher at Union Gap School, Mrs. Clayton, constantly pushed books two or three grades above her. Her eighth-grade teacher, Mr. Roepcke, habitually called her “Dr. Mendoza,” a greeting he used with all farmworkers’ kids.

And it was her physics teacher at A.C. Davis High School, Mr. Hashimoto, who steered Mendoza to his alma mater, Dartmouth College, a school she had never heard of and which opened her eyes to the world beyond the Yakima Valley.

“It is important to me as a young American that I do everything I can to facilitate Latinos’ participation in their communities and the political process,” she said. “It’s good for democracy, plain and simple.”