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April 28, 1999 **Contact:** Bob Aaron, 309/556-3181

Working at the White House

IWU Political Science Grad Saw Impeachment Up Close; Campaigned with Kennedy-Clan Candidate in Maryland

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. What's it like to be a newly minted college graduate, working in the White House complex . . . when the president is facing impeachment?

Just ask Eliazar J. Mendiola, a 1998 Illinois Wesleyan University graduate, who had an appointment to the White House's Office of Communications Research from September-December last year.

"It was a difficult time for everyone," Mendiola said. "But, in many ways, I believe it was beneficial. It consolidated and strengthened the presidency and the Constitution."

The Founding Fathers, Mendiola explained, knew that the Constitution's impeachment clause could be abused, so they made it very tough to use. While Mendiola believes that President Clinton "isn't completely without fault," he couldn't believe that a presidential impeachment was taking place.

Mendiola made the most of his Washington experience, ensuring he was an eyewitness to some memorable events.

Ken Starr Testimony

He was in the audience the day Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr gave his impeachment testimony to the House Judiciary Committee. Mendiola arrived at the hearing site early in the morning only to find a long line of people already in place.

"I thought the committee rooms might seat 100 people," Mendiola said, "so I asked a guard why it was taking so long for the line to move. He told me that only two seats in the committee room were allotted for the public. I thought this was a great miscarriage of democracy. It's the people's house and they had every right to be there. Better representation of citizens was needed."

When Mendiola finally nabbed a seat in the packed committee room filled with House staffers, journalists, and others, it was in a rear corner.

On his last day in the nation's capital, Mendiola, his parents, and younger sister took a ceremonial tour of the White House East Wing. Afterward, they raced to Capitol Hill and caught sight of Democratic members walking out of the U.S. House of Representatives, a symbolic protest over the impeachment proceedings since the lawmakers immediately returned to work.

At the Impeachment Vote

The Mendiola family then navigated Capitol Hill's tunnel system to reach the House Judiciary Committee room in the Rayburn House Office Building, where they saw lawmakers vote three articles of impeachment.

"It was an historic time to be with my parents and my younger sister," Mendiola recalled. "We were very lucky" to be there.

Ironically, while Mendiola was in Washington, his reading list included John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, which includes a chapter on President Andrew Johnson's impeachment over Reconstruction politics after the Civil War. The chapter profiles Kansas Republican Sen. Edmund G. Ross, an obscure lawmaker whose courageous vote against impeachment and the "radical Republicans" saved the Johnson presidency by a single ballot.

"In that book," Mendiola said, "Kennedy spells out political and moral courage. I saw some of that in Washington during the impeachment, as certain public officials exhibited political courage, while others failed to. Being a political science major and having read *Profiles in Courage* while the issue of impeachment exploded was not only awe-inspiring, but also prophetic, though it was written well over 40 years ago."

But Mendiola had another reaction, too: "I was just in shock as I thought to myself, 'They're really trying to impeach the president.'"

Working at the White House

Mendiola, 23, put to work his IWU bachelor's degree in political science in an office charged with gathering and analyzing information for White House staffers and President Bill Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Tipper Gore, wife of the vice president.

"The office dealt with hot issues facing the administration," Mendiola explained, "everything from legislation requesting more money for schools to issues having to do with impeachment."

During his tour of duty, Mendiola conducted research on the census, education, voting records of members of Congress, and he gathered biographical information for briefing

sketches of White House visitors, ranging from average citizens to celebrities, including business leaders, actors, and athletes.

He also attended some state arrival ceremonies such as when the president of Colombia visited the White House. Mendiola served as a guide and interpreter at the event.

Among his other assignments was compiling a weekly calendar for White House staffers by gathering information from various White House offices and other places. Mendiola's calendar included the schedules of Cabinet members, key events like release of economic statistics, legislative highlights, congressional schedules, activities by certain interest groups, and anniversaries of important events.

During his last month at the White House, Mendiola created an extensive database of administration and historical anniversaries, compiling it into a 12-month calendar that will serve the White House in the future.

"The final document," Mendiola said, "filled a thick three-ring notebook. I finished it at the last minute, 7:30 at night" just before he left the White House.

Mendiola's office was ensconced in the ornate Old Executive Office Building, the former State-War-Navy building constructed in Ulysses S. Grant's days, located just west of the White House.

"I learned a lot working at the White House," Mendiola said. "I saw history unfold before me. I saw how the administration reacted to things, especially the impeachment.

"But the administration," he added, kept things going. When things around you seemed to be crumbling, the administration still had its responsibility to the people. We did not have the luxury to stop working until the impeachment was over, the work of the people had to go on, and this is what I helped do."

Working in Washington also sharpened Mendiola's sense of history. He lived on Capitol Hill, near the Library of Congress and the Supreme Court.

"It never got old," he said, referring to "an enormous sense of history" that he felt, adding: "If only those walls could talk."

On the Campaign Trail

Mendiola also learned a lot on the campaign trail, working for Mark Shriver, a Maryland state lawmaker. Shriver is the son of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of slain President John F. Kennedy and founder of the Special Olympics, and R. Sargent Shriver, former director of the U.S. Peace Corps and President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, as well as George McGovern's vice presidential running mate in 1972.

The first day on the job at Shriver campaign headquarters, Mendiola worked on mailings and met the candidate, who invited the IWU graduate to accompany him on some door-to-door campaigning.

Driving through the Maryland countryside to a campaign stop in a small Saab, loaded with the candidate, other campaign workers, and a pile of election literature, Shriver quizzed Mendiola about his White House work.

"I was reflecting on how lucky I was to be working for this candidate during a pause in the conversation," Mendiola recalled as he sat directly behind Shriver, "and then I heard a loud, shattering explosion.

"There was a shower of glass in all directions," Mendiola added, "and my mind was racing. We pulled off to the side of the road and jumped out of the car. I was in the back seat. Shriver was worried about asking if I was injured, and at the same time I was asking him if he was injured. The car was in shambles."

A deer had broadsided the car from the left, smashing the drivers' window and the windshield.

Mendiola had a few small cuts and Shriver had a minor cut to his eye, which needed hospital attention.

"That was my first day on the campaign trail," Mendiola mused.

Working the Phones

Despite a rocky start, Mendiola kept working for the Shriver campaign, helped out with a picnic for Maryland citizens, hosted by the candidate's parents, and worked the phones on election day at the Shriver home.

"I arrived about 11 in the morning," Mendiola said, "and worked the phone in the basement until about six o'clock. Then I went upstairs. We ate dinner and started to watch TV to see what happened."

Shriver won reelection to the Maryland House of Delegates in November, 1998, and Mendiola was at the victory party, which broke up about 1 a.m., taking advantage of the opportunity to have a photo shot with the winning candidate.

"From my campaign experience," Mendiola observed, "I learned how to run an effective campaign. I learned how much of the effort falls on the candidate. I enjoyed working on the campaign as much as working at the White House."

Mendiola added: "Mark, and his wife, Jeanne, were so hospitable and gracious to me. They were really the nicest people that I had the opportunity to meet while I was in Washington."

Talking to Schoolchildren

Since Mendiola has returned from Washington, he has talked to about 500

area schoolchildren about his Washington experience, especially youngsters who attend his old schools.

"I wanted to do something," he explained, "to give back to the community. I also feel obligated to share with young students my experiences, so that they can understand and realize that anything is possible."

The youngsters frequently quiz Mendiola about the Secret Service and presidential pets like Socks, the cat, and Buddy, the dog. He also shows the children many of the 1,000 photos he took while he was in Washington.

Mendiola Background

Mendiola is the son of Eulalio, an employee of Caterpillar, and Rita Mendiola. His eldest brother, Eulalio Mendiola, Jr., a 1993 IWU graduate, is employed by an energy derivatives firm in Palm Beach, Fla. His other brother, Elias, is a Bloomington police officer. His sister, Embarina, is a student at University High School.

Mendiola, who was born in Bloomington-Normal in 1975, attended Unit 5 public schools Brigham Grade School, Parkside Junior High School, and Normal Community High School.

After high school, Mendiola enrolled at Illinois State University in 1993, where he was involved in the Student Government Association, Academic Senate, and other activities, including the Illinois Board of Regents and the Illinois State University Board of Trustees, where he served the state of Illinois.

In January, 1997, Mendiola transferred to IWU.

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium.

