LESSON TEN: OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

Enduring understandings:
Mexican-Americans in Texas faced numerous obstacles during the mid-20th century, including discrimination and segregation, unemployment and low wages, poor housing, substandard medical care, unequal educational facilities, and language barriers. Russell Lee’s photo essay *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* documents both the challenges faced by Mexican-Americans during the 20th century and ways that the group overcame adversity.

Essential questions:
What obstacles did Mexican-Americans face in Texas during the mid-20th century?
How did Mexican-Americans overcome these obstacles?
How does the photo essay *Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas* document the challenges faced by Mexican-Americans and ways the group overcame hardships?

TEKS:
7.7 understand how individuals, events, and issues shaped the history of Texas during the 20th century
7.7 (C) trace the civil rights and equal rights movements of various groups in Texas in the 20th century and identify key leaders in these movements, including James Farmer, Hector P. García, Oveta Culp Hobby, and Lyndon B. Johnson
7.7 (D) analyze the political, economic, and social impact of major wars, including World War I and World War II, on the history of Texas
7.21 (A) differentiate between, locate, and use primary and secondary sources such as computer software, databases, media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information about Texas
7.21 (B) analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions

Materials:
1. Overhead projector
2. Transparencies of Identifying Obstacles exercise
3. Copies of Overcoming Adversity handout [1 per student]

Objectives:
• Using the photographs of Russell Lee, students will identify the obstacles faced by Mexican-Americans in Texas during the early and mid-20th century.
• Students will use the images of Russell Lee to identify ways that Mexican-Americans worked to overcome these obstacles.

Anticipatory set:
Ask students:
What the most challenging obstacle that you’ve faced in your life? How did you overcome this obstacle?
Procedure:

Explain to students:
Although many Mexican-Americans migrated to Texas in the 20th century to seek a better life, they faced numerous hardships in the United States. Today we will examine these hardships and consider how Mexican-Americans worked to overcome them.

Discuss problems that Mexican-Americans faced during the era, providing historical background information as appropriate. Topics discussed should include:

- The Great Depression
- Unemployment, low wages, and problems associated with migratory work
- Segregation, discrimination, and Jim Crow laws
- Voting rights
- Language barriers
- Substandard housing
- Lack of adequate medical care
- Unequal educational facilities

Note: For a thorough explanation of these topics, please consult the following Handbook of Texas Online articles:

- Mexican Americans
  http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/MM/pqmue.html
- The Great Depression
  http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/GG/npg1.html
- Segregation
  http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/pks1.html
- Civil rights movement
  http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/pkcfl.html

Explain to students:
Russell Lee’s work The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas provides primary evidence of the problems faced by Mexican-Americans in Texas during the mid-20th century. As a group, review the overhead Identifying Obstacles. Display the images on the classroom overhead, and ask students to identify the obstacle(s) documented in the picture and present the discussion questions for each image.

After viewing the images on the overhead, ask students:

- Can you think of any other images from The Study of the Spanish-Speaking People of Texas that document obstacles faced by Mexican-Americans? Which ones?
- From what you know of Texas history, were Mexican-Americans unique in the challenges they faced? What other groups encountered similar challenges?

Explain to students:
When faced with these obstacles, Mexican-Americans in Texas responded in several ways—they organized groups to defend their rights, sought better educational
opportunities for themselves and their children, and strengthened their family and community bonds.

With the class, discuss the ways Mexican-Americans responded to the challenges they faced. Include an explanation of the organized groups that worked to improve the lives of Mexican-Americans, including:

- **The American G.I. Forum**—Formed by Mexican-American veterans returning from World War II, the American G.I. Forum worked to gain equal civil rights, improve education, and assure adequate medical care for Latinos. Prominent members include Hector P. Garcia and Gus Garcia.

- **The Pan-American Progressive Association (PAPA)**—Consisting primarily of middle-class Latino businessmen, PAPA worked to provide improved housing and encourage economic strength in Latino communities.

- **The School Improvement League**—The School Improvement League sought to improve educational facilities for Latino communities. The group worked to open more schools in Latino communities, improve school buildings, lower class sizes, and improve school cafeterias and playgrounds.

- **League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)**—Organized in 1929, LULAC is the oldest and largest Latino political organization in the United States. The group has worked to combat racial discrimination, voter disfranchisement, poverty, and segregation in public schools and housing.

Explain to students:
Next, we’ll look for historical evidence of the ways that Mexican-Americans overcame the obstacles they faced in the work of Russell Lee. Pass out a copy of Overcoming Adversity handout to each student. When students have completed the handout, ask students to share their answers. Expand the discussion to modern times, asking students:

- Do any of the problems encountered by Mexican-Americans in the 20th century persist today? Which ones?
- What can our state do to solve these problems?

**Closure:**
Review the problems faced by Mexican-Americans in Texas during the early- and mid-20th century and ways that the group overcame these obstacles.

**Evaluation:**
Evaluate student responses to handout “Overcoming Adversity.”
Identifying Obstacles

Untitled
1949
A ward in the City-County Memorial hospital. The largest wards in the hospital have six beds and segregation of Latins and Anglos is practiced. However, both Latins and Anglos were seen in the same room in the children's wards. Corpus Christi.

What obstacles are shown in this picture?
How could segregation affect the quality of medical care received by these patients?
Why might medical treatment be different for adults and children?
Discrimination. Dimmitt, Texas. This is a small, west Texas wheat town with practically no permanent Spanish-American population. The sign is meant for the migratory agricultural worker.

What obstacle is shown in this picture?
Can you infer from this picture and the accompanying description what work Mexican-Americans did in Dimmitt?
What other ethnic groups faced similar treatment?
How do you think Mexican-Americans felt when they saw this sign?

(Identifying Obstacles, pg. 2)
1949

Slum-corrals built in 1913 and occupied continuously since then. The twenty-two units now rent for $5.50 monthly each. Six outdoor flush type toilets and one shower are provided for the more than one hundred people. There was no evidence of any regular repair or maintenance work by the landlord; however the interiors were neat and clean and many tenants had painted the inside walls, repaired screens, etc.

What obstacles are demonstrated in this picture?
How is this neighborhood different from where you live?
How would these living conditions be unhealthy?
Why do you think the landlord did not do any maintenance or repair on the houses?

(Identifying Obstacles, pg. 3)
Entire family groups move from Texas to Wyoming for work in the sugar beet fields. En route at San Angelo, Texas.

Describe the obstacles shown in this picture.
Why does agricultural work necessitate frequent migration?
What problems do you think the children faced when they had to change schools often?

(Identifying Obstacles, pg. 4)
Hot lunch at the grade school in the Latin-American section, San Angelo, Texas. The lunchroom was screened and clean; the food was well prepared, attractively served and ample in quantity. The lunchroom, which had been converted from a classroom was too crowded.

What obstacle is described in the text that accompanies this image? How is this school different from your school? How is it the same? How does an overcrowded school negatively impact the quality of education received by students?

(Identifying Obstacles, pg. 5)
A mother and father come to take their baby who has been sick home from the hospital. Neither the mother or the father spoke English. Corpus Christi, Texas.

What obstacles do the parents in this picture face?
How do you think the parents felt if they could not communicate with a doctor in their own language? Would this impact the treatment received by the child?
Clothing belonging to his daughter hangs above the bed of Ben Cortez, who has been in bed at home with tuberculosis for four months. With 8,000 estimated cases in the county there is no available room in the twenty-bed county hospital.

What obstacles are shown in this picture?
Why do you think that there is clothing hung on the wall above the man’s bed?
What problems would the man’s illness cause for his family?

(Identifying Obstacles, pg. 7)
Overcoming Adversity

Name__________________

Estella Cortez gives her brother-in-law a hypodermic. The family doctor, a Latin-American, taught her home nursing techniques so that she might care for this man and his wife, both of whom had tuberculosis. The wife died the week before; this man has been in bed at home for four months. The city health officer, Dr. Gordon Fisher, estimates that there are 8,000 cases of tuberculosis in the county; there are only twenty beds in the county tuberculosis sanitarium, which is designed to supplement the state sanitarium—at which there is a long waiting list. Corpus Christi, Texas.

Describe what you see in the picture, including people, objects, and setting.

How does this image show how Mexican-Americans responded to inadequate medical facilities?
A student in the automobile body repair and painting class at Del Mar College. These particular classes, which are part of the vocational training program for veterans, are very popular; according to the instructor. His better students are in great demand and are moving into good jobs. Corpus Christi, Texas.

Describe what you see in the picture, including people, objects, and setting.

How would this man’s employment benefit his community?

Why do you think that many Mexican-American veterans enrolled in job training programs?
Describe what you see in the picture, including people, objects, and setting.

What obstacles can be overcome through education?
A meeting of the board of directors of the Pan American Progressive Association. Left to right: Raoul Cortez, president of radio station KCOR; Virgilio Elizondo, owner-operator of a grocery store; Felix Cerda, executive secretary of PAPA; Jose Nunez, owner-operator of the Casa Blanca restaurant and president of the board of PAPA; Dr. Ramiro Estrada, physician and surgeon.

Describe what you see in the picture, including people, objects, and setting.

How do you think this group helped their community?
Raoul Cortez, president of radio station KCOR, interviewing General of Brigade Manuel Reyes Idunate, who is on a goodwill tour and visit to military establishments in the United States.

Describe what you see in the picture, including people, objects, and setting.

KCOR was the first Spanish-language radio station in Texas. Why would a Spanish-language station be helpful to the Latino community?
Felix Cerda, executive secretary of PAPA, interviewing a lady who is asking his advice on a personal legal matter.

Describe what you see in the picture, including people, objects, and setting.

Why is it important to have access to legal advice?

Why do you think Mr. Cerda is providing legal advice to members of his community?
A house in San Diego addition. 120 such houses were constructed in 1944-45 by G. H. Swartner, private builder, with priority orders for Latin-American war workers. The houses average 650 square feet each and sold for $3,450 and $3,550; each carried a $2,900 FHA loan under Title Six and the monthly payments, including interest and insurance, averaged $25. Corpus Christi, Texas.

Describe what you see in the picture, including people, objects, and setting.

How would better housing improve the lives of Mexican-Americans?

The image description states that these homes were constructed during World War II for war workers. Why do you think that these houses were made available to workers in the war effort?