

DR. GUSTAV “GUS” SELIGMANN JR. BA ’57, MA ’58
College of Arts and Sciences | Humanities and Fine Arts

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“At NMSU, I learned from Dr. Ira Clark how to be a historian. He taught me to question everything—push back, check the sources.”

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Although Dr. Gustav “Gus” Seligmann has not lived in Las Cruces since 1960, he still considers it his hometown—hardly a surprise, considering his grandmother’s family moved here in the 1850s and was one of the founding families of Las Cruces. May Avenue is named for them.

He got his start at New Mexico College Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now NMSU) in 1952 as a recruit into the White Sands Missile Range co-op program. When he was a junior, Gus needed a night class, and took Dr. Ira Clark’s history of the Southwest. Realizing his aptitude was for history and not engineering or science, Gus changed his major from physics to history, receiving his BA in 1957 and his MA in 1958. After two years in the Army, he entered the Ph.D. program at the University of Arizona and earned his doctorate in 1967.

Gus retired from the University of North Texas Department of History in 2022 after a 55-year career specializing in political history and New Mexico politics of the 19th and 20th centuries. In those five decades, he received \$1.79 million in external funding for teaching projects, including National Endowment for the Humanities grants totaling \$669,000.

His teaching and research were informed by his experience as a teenager. In 1948, his father, a career Army officer, was transferred to Bremerhaven, Germany. Gus’s experience of living in a heavily bombed city, seeing people rummaging through garbage for food and eager to exchange valuable heirlooms for cigarettes, chocolate, or coffee, left him with a deep appreciation of how lucky he was to be born an American—especially since his Seligmann grandfather, who was Jewish, had been born in Berlin.

This experience, plus his knowledge of U.S. history, shaped his teaching philosophy. “In a world full of countries that people will risk much to get out of, the United States is a country that people will risk much to get into.”

Today, Gus is president of the Historical Society of New Mexico and has held offices for the Southwestern Historical Association, the Western History Association, the Southern Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association. He was the second president of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and a founding editor of H-West, the H-Net division for studies of the North American West. Gus had a

significant role in creating H-Jobs, a clearinghouse for academic positions in history, and H-Reviews, which evaluates scholarly books.

Gus's legacy at NMSU includes being named an Outstanding Centennial Alumnus, one of the top 100 graduates in the first 100 years of NMSU. He is a past member of the NMSU Alumni Association Board of Directors and his great uncle, Vincent May, served on the Board of Regents in the early 1900s.

His advice to students? "You'll make mistakes, but in dealing with other people, try and make them in the direction of compassion. When it works, the psychic income is immense."