



LATINO LEADERS
NETWORK™

MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

**Remarks by:
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Thank you. Lily, thank you for that all-too-kind introduction. Your colleague and my good friend, Joel, had suggested maybe Bob Denver or Larry Storch. So, I appreciate that you traded up on that, and I really want to thank you for all you've done on behalf of kids and your colleague, Dennis Van Roekel, and all of the hundreds of thousands of folks that you help. My kids are proud public school students at Montgomery County, an NEA affiliate, and you know that.

So, it is really an honor to be here with all of you today and it's a particular honor to be here with Dolores Huerta. I mean, I'm a student of the civil rights movement. When you sit next to La Generalissima, La Jefe, you know, the folks who wrote this history, that is -- I have these days when you drive home and you say, "They're paying me to do this job? I can't believe it." Today is one of those days because I got the honor of having my photo taken with Dolores Huerta. So, thank you for everything that you do for everyone.

And thank you to all of you. There're so many people in this room that helped me throughout so many different phases of my life. And the most recently, with the Department of Labor, before that, the Department of Justice, before that, state and local government, there is no better leader than my good friend, Rushern Baker in Prince George's County -- he understands what coalitions are about, he understands leadership -- and so many other people in this room who've played such a big role in helping him, so I really appreciate that.

I have so many friends in the business community who've been so helpful, because we can't be dividing this up. We can't get into our ideological echo chambers. That doesn't help anybody. And the work that my friends in the business community have done, I'm so grateful for.

And I would be remiss if I didn't introduce my wife, Ann Marie, because we just celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary, and one of the many reasons I feel lucky is that three times in a row, our kids, they look like their mother. That's the best gift that they could have. So, I'm very, very grateful for that. And I'm very grateful really for the example that she sets. She's a lawyer who works here at the D.C. legal clinic for the homeless doing so much work on behalf of our most vulnerable. And she models behavior for our children in ways that we hope will have a return on investment, and we think we are having that return on investment. And so, I'm so grateful for her.

And let me talk about my friend, Mickey Ibarra, for a moment. Because, you know, there are some people that will say, "You know, if you don't like Mickey or you don't like so-and-so, it's your fault." Well, Mickey is one of those people. If you don't like Mickey Ibarra, it's your fault. I'm just telling you right now. And that's the reality. Because I've known him for years, and Mickey has taught me so much about friendship, about leadership, about how you get things done, and perhaps more importantly than anything, you've taught me that it's nice to be important, but it's important to be nice, and that is the Mickey Ibarra that I've always known. And so, I really want to say thank you.

The other day, Mickey and I had a chance to spend some one-on-one time together, and we were reminiscing about a story -- because my mother always taught me -- my late mother was a real role model for me, and she taught me years ago when I was a kid, she always said, "Tom, everything happens for a reason." She was a person of deep faith, went to church every single day until her health started failing her, and she always used to say everything happened for a reason.

Well, Mickey and I were reminiscing about the year 2006, I was on the Montgomery County Council, and I loved that job because we were able to help people, we were in the frontlines just like Rushern is, just like people like Victor Ramirez, Adam Ortiz, and so many others were, just like the mayor of Central Falls is, and we were on the frontlines, I was running for attorney general, we just got some polling back, we were -- it was a dead heat, it was a three-person race, we were surging in the right direction, we were just about to get on TV because there were people like Mickey Ibarra and Ken Trujillo and others who had invested in our campaign, we're 10 days out of the campaign and my phone rings, and it's someone telling me that the state court of appeals, the highest court in Maryland, just kicked me out of the race on a technicality. So, I was going 70 miles an hour and I hit a brick wall that I had never seen or never anticipated.

And I remember that day well, it was a Friday afternoon, it was not one of my better days, and Mickey and I were reminiscing on it and I remember thinking at this point, my mother had died roughly 10 months earlier, and I remember thinking, "Okay, I remember what she said, you know, everything happens for a reason." The reason wasn't jumping out at me at the moment, you know? It wasn't readily apparent. She used to say, "A door closes, windows open," and you know what, I thought I was in solitary confinement, I saw darkness, I saw nothing but darkness at that moment and for frankly weeks after because I couldn't quite figure out what happened.

And you know what happened then? Fast forward to a few months later, Governor O'Malley appoints me as Secretary of Labor and we have an opportunity to go across the state, building partnerships with businesses and others, helping people who needed the skills to compete, making sure that workplaces were safe, working with our local colleagues and local government and elsewhere to address the foreclosure crisis which had hit so many communities disproportionately Prince George's and elsewhere, and we were able to do so much.

And then, a couple of years later, the president nominates me to serve as the assistant attorney general for Civil Rights, which was for anybody who's been a Civil Rights lawyer, that's the dream job. And I remember June of that year, Senator Kennedy calling me, he only had a couple of months left to live, and I worked for him. And anyone -- you know, when you worked for Senator Kennedy, you're part of the Kennedy family for life. And I remember him calling me to say, "This is a really important job, and I am so excited for you." And I had that privilege of going around the country, expanding opportunity for everyone, and working together to make sure that the corrosive power of fine print didn't result in the American dream becoming the American nightmare for homeowners, and working with so many other people on police reform and education reform, so many critical issues.

And then, earlier this year I was literally getting ready to go to Malaysia on a trip to talk about human rights in Malaysia and talk about how Muslim, Christian, and other populations can co-exist, and I'm sitting in the airport, at national airport, and the phone rings and it was the White House, "We'd like to talk to you about the Department of Labor job." And after I picked myself off the chair, I said, "Well, I'm actually heading to Malaysia," and I ended up interviewing with the President and I moved my trip around a little bit, came back a day early, took a 36-hour flight, got back one night, interviewed with the President the Friday before the inauguration, and with your help, I was able to get confirmed roughly three months ago, July the 21st of this year. And so, I have to say thank you. I have to say thank you not only to all of you and not only to the President for your support and for his support and confidence, but I have to say thank you to those folks back in Maryland in 2006, those folks who thought they could kick me and get me down and get me out of a race, and I want to tell you my mother was right, everything does happen for a reason.

You know, I really do feel as I stand here before you that we are a product of the American dream. And like so many of you in this room, my story, your story, it's the story of the immigrants coming to America, the story of people looking for a better life, looking to help.

My folks were born in the Dominican Republic, my maternal grandfather was the ambassador to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic until he spoke out after the massacre of the Haitians in the '30s. It was a brutal massacre, roughly 20,000 people senselessly murdered. And after he spoke out, he was declared non grata. My father was part of the student movement there, he had to get out of Dodge. And they settled, they got married, and they came to America.

And my father went into the U.S. Army as a legal immigrant, and as you well know, legal immigrants have been serving this nation with distinction since the Revolutionary War. And as you may recall, legal immigrants, in the first fatality in the most recent war in Iraq was a legal immigrant from Guatemala who came here, was undocumented, had his status adjusted, enlisted in the U.S. Army, made the ultimate sacrifice and received his citizenship posthumously. My uncle, were he alive, my near dear Uncle Hugh, he was proud of showing you his war wounds that he sustained in World War II fighting on behalf of the United States of America.

My family and my extended family, they were proud to serve this nation. They were proud of their Dominican roots and they were proud of their American roots, and they were proud to be here, and they were proud to serve, and so was my dad. And after he got out of the service, my folks settled in Buffalo, New York, and they did that for one obvious reason. They wanted weather that was similar to D.R. and they found it.

And you know, they always taught me something else too, because I sat through a lot of dinner table conversation about politics, because when you've been kicked out of a country and disrupted in the way that they had, and you saw bad things happen in the way they had, it has a profound effect on your life. And that was the currency of our dinner table conversation, was politics and what's happening back home. My folks never went out to dinner. They never went on vacation. "Why would you go rent a house for a week when you own a house? That would be two houses? One too many." That was my parents' logic, I kid you not. We went on one vacation in the 12 years that I was alive and my dad was alive. One vacation, because it was unnecessary. And that was their world. They wanted to make sure that my four siblings and I -- I was the caboose. You know, four, four-and-a-half years and then me -- you know, when you're Catholic, you don't call it a mistake, you call it God's gift. You know that. And they settled in Buffalo, and we had a wonderful time in Buffalo.

And one other thing they taught us was adversity builds character. And the year 1974 was kind of a character-building year, I guess you'll call it, not just for Richard Nixon but for Tom Perez. And it was a character-building year because frankly if on January 1st you had said to our family one of your parents is going to die, there would have been unanimity that it would've been my mother, not my father, because she had chronic health issues. She basically had a frequent flyer card to the hospital because she had a number of issues. And she went to New York early '74 for major surgery because there was no surgeon in Buffalo with the competency to do it. So, she went to Columbia Presbyterian in New York which gave her an opportunity to get back to Mecca, which for any Dominican in this room you know is Washington Heights, 152nd and Riverside Drive, The Riviera. Okay? Senator, you know that area of the country? Okay. That's an Amen moment in the Dominican room. And so, she had that surgery, she came back, got home, things were getting better, getting back to normal.

My aunt who was from Colombia, living in Colombia with her husband, she had been staying with us for a few months because we needed some help and she got ready to leave, she was going to leave the Monday after East Sunday, and Easter Sunday was the first heart attack that my dad had. Now,

I was the youngest and they thought, "We need to make sure that Tom is sheltered from that," a very laudable aim but a learning moment for me, tell your kids the truth. And so, I thought everything was hunky-dory and things were well and we were moving right along, and then, a few months later is when my dad had his fatal heart attack, which was the end of June of '74. And so, things were kind of tough, and we had the service in D.R. My parents' dream was to raise their kids here, return home, and it didn't quite work out for either of them but they did raise their kids here and they did a pretty good job because my siblings are all doctors. I didn't become a doctor because I watched my brother operate one day and after they peeled me off the ground, I think I decided I need a new line of work. That is a true story.

And after we got back from D.R. for the service, my mom, as I said before, she checked back into the hospital because a lot of her chronic issues flared up, and so, it was a -- I hated the end of summer -- what did you do on your summer vacation? That was not a good lesson that fall because it wasn't a very, very good summer. But I'm happy to report that she did well and she recovered and she was there for us, and we had this rock of a community in Buffalo.

You know, my website at home, when I turn my computer on, still has the *Buffalo News*. People wonder, why? Well, because I'm a masochist. I like teams that lose World Series and football games. I was a Red Sox fan, I was Bills fan. Now the Red Sox win once in a while. But, you know what, Buffalo was our community. People had our back, my siblings had our back, and with the benefit of Pell Grants -- and I used to call them Perez Grants, because I had older siblings who would help me out, so, we had the Pell Grants and the Perez Grants, and with that, I was able to get through college and law school. And by the way, my first client in law school was Tom Perez because the social security administration came after me saying that I had worked too many hours in college -- this is a true story. And you know, there's an adage -- I represented myself, there's an adage that says, you know, "Show me a lawyer who represents himself and I'll show you a man with a fool as a client." Well, this fool won that case, okay, and we moved on.

And you know, I wish all that stuff hadn't happened, you know. We can stipulate to that. But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger and it informs what you do for a living, and that's why I do what I do, because that's what we learn. It's not unique necessarily to the immigrant experience but it has been a powerful part of who I am and what I do.

Remembering the most important lesson my folks taught all of us is the following, and it's not a lesson unique to my folks but it was really a Biblical lesson, "To whom much is given, much is expected." And so, I used to teach law school, and I used to challenge my students, "You know what, I want you guys to make sure you go out there and you can say that you've loved every job you've ever had," because lawyers are the most risk averse group of folks I've ever met. They get into these jobs that are sometimes monetarily rewarding but not necessarily spiritually as rewarding.

And so, I used to challenge my students, the last assignment I would give them in the semester or the second last assignment is I would ask them to write their own obituary. And the reason I ask them to do that is because I wanted them to reflect on what they want their legacy to be. You know, after they're gone, what are people going to write about you? Don't start thinking about that the day before you die, you know, it's a little bit late. Think about that while you're in school, think about that then.

And you know, I'm very blessed, because I feel like I was able to answer that question with the help of my family and with the help of my community, and the answer to that was I was put on the planet to make sure we expand opportunity for people because when I was in local government, that's what we tried to do. And I'm so proud of the fact that the county that I had the privilege of representing has a proud history of welcoming people, of inclusion, of making sure that the American dream is a dream that's accessible to everybody. And when we were in the state of Maryland, we did the same thing: building partnerships, expanding opportunity.

And in my federal service, I had been so blessed to have the ability to go out there in communities across this country to address some of the most biggest challenges that we confront, and one of the things that I recall so vividly in my first 90 days on the job was getting to go to the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington because that really brought together my two lives: civil rights and labor rights. And I remember sitting there, listening to the President, listening to other people talk, thinking about and reflecting on the tremendous progress that we have made. And make no mistake about it, we've made so much progress.

And as the President correctly pointed out, it does a disservice to those people who died in the process to suggest that we have made no progress. It really does a disservice. But at the same time, it would do an equal disservice if we didn't acknowledge, in the words of Senator Kennedy, "The unfinished business of America," the unfinished business of civil rights, the unfinished business of making sure that everybody has access to economic justice and economic opportunity. That everybody has the same opportunities to build those ladders of success that my parents gave my siblings and I by focusing on education, by making sure in our family, there was no such thing as a vacation, because you know what, we're investing that money so that our kids can get to college and do what they want to do. That's what we learned and that's what I learned and that's what I have tried to devote my life to.

And I'm impressed by the people that have been part of that journey -- life is the journey, it's not the destination -- and it's been a wonderful journey throughout. And we've done so much, I'm so proud of the work I've done in every phase of that journey but I also reflect with great regularity on that unfinished business. I can't help but reflect as I left the civil rights division on the number one piece of unfinished business and that is addressing issues of voting rights.

I was with John Lewis quite literally a couple of days ago, and every time I see him, and I have a signed photograph of him and me in my office, one of my true heroes, and he talks about the Edmund Pettus Bridge, he talks

about that faithful day when he almost lost his life, and he talks about what they did to get the voting rights bill passes shortly thereafter, and we're about to celebrate the 48th anniversary of that bill this year, two years away from 50. And it is so challenging to see what's happening, because we're having a pitch battle about the direction of our country, and that's the essence of democracy. But I always thought that what we should do in that context is have that battle and then do our level best to make sure that every single person who's eligible to vote gets to the poll and that exercises the franchise, and that we don't single out and target our perceived ideological foes and make it harder for them to vote.

And I'm so impressed with people like Colin Powell and others who've spoken out on this, because this isn't a Republican or a Democratic issue. One of the biggest leaders in the Voting Rights Act in Congress is Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner, Republican of Wisconsin, and I applaud his continuing efforts. So, this isn't about R's and D's. This is about everybody, and this is about our leadership in the global world, setting the example of what democracy should be doing. And so I still find myself reflecting on those issues, I still find myself talking to Eric Holder a lot because these things are important. And I find myself reflecting and executing every day the business of the Department of Labor which is the department of opportunity.

And I have a portrait right behind my desk if you come for a visit of Frances Perkins who I think is the gold standard of labor secretaries, just like John Doar, for those of you who remember civil rights history, was the gold standard for civil rights heads of the justice department. So many things that we take for granted today were brought to us by Frances Perkins, and I believe today that the work of the labor department has never been more important since she was there because there are so many people in need.

We're making so much progress in our recovery -- I mean, we've had 43 consecutive months of private sector job growth to the tune of 7.6 million jobs. Our unemployment rate is going steadily down but not fast enough, and if the president were here he'd be the first to tell you that we've got to have our foot on the accelerator. We need to do more. We need to address in addition the growing inequality gap, a gap that was discussed in the March on Washington, which you know was a march for jobs as well as a march for civil rights. That's what we need to be talking about and that's what we're doing in the department of labor, expanding access to opportunity by using our regulatory authority, by using our bully pulpit, by using our enforcement authority, by using our partnerships with businesses, labor unions, other key stakeholders, to make sure that we do things.

And let me give you an example or two of things that I am very proud of that help people. There are 1.8 million home health workers in America, 90 percent of whom are women, 50 percent of whom are minority, 40 percent of whom are on some form of public assistance. They're working hard and falling behind, and they do God's work without a doubt. And what do we see in our wage and hour laws? What we saw was a loophole in which home health workers were treated like babysitters. My girls babysit, they do a great job, but you know what, they don't hold a candle to home health workers.

And as a result, they weren't entitled to the protections of minimum wage and overtime laws. And so, we changed that.

And by the way, we have a shortage of home healthcare workers. Why? Because I met one who said, "I left that industry and I'm now working in fast food because that is a better career track for me. I can make more money." And I mean no disrespect to the fast food or any other service industry, but that's not right, we've got to change that paradigm. And that's why we enacted that regulation, so we can help two million people and the next generation of home health workers, and just to be selfish for a moment, people like me who are going to need them very soon, sooner than I can admit, and so many people who need them now. And so, that's how we expand opportunity. We expand opportunity by working to raise the minimum wage and by in so doing, by debunking false choices, by noting that it is an absolute false choice that we either have profits for our shareholders or fair wages for our workers.

Just take the example of Costco. I've spent time with Jim Sinegal, the former CEO who spent 20, 30 years in Costco. My Costco card is so old, I have hair on my head from that photo that I took. You know, Jim has written the book on how you can return investment for your shareholders and have a living wage for your workers, and in addition, how you can make sure that you leverage your position as a major retailer in America to affect the supply chain for people like Dolores Huerta and the people that she represented so that the strawberries that you buy at Costco were picked by workers who are earning a decent wage. And I've spoken to their supply chain management, they're doing it and they're doing it well.

And so, we need to debunk these false choices. You either have job growth or you have job safety; that's a false choice. And I know that because employers tell me. Employers who play by the rules tell me that my most important asset is my worker, and if I compromise and cut corners on safety, I hurt my workers, I hurt my bottom line, and I lead that race to the bottom. And so, we need to reject those false choices, and we do so in the work that we do, in partnership with industry, workers, all key stakeholders. We need to expand opportunity by making sure that we work together to pass immigration reform and pass it soon. We expand opportunity by bringing together employers, workers, community colleges around the issue that's one of the biggest sleeper issues I see and that's the issue of the skills gap. I cannot tell you the number of employers who tell me, "I want to expand my workforce but 80 percent of the people coming in don't have the skills to succeed." And there are employers in this room that have made major investments in their workforce -- Sodexo by way of example, who've invested in that workforce -- and there are partnerships out there along those lines that make sure that we're investing in skills.

There's so much we can do, and we work with our state and local partners, we work with our corporate partners, we work with unions. And if you go to Las Vegas, you see the large employers and the unions working together to make sure that the service industry employees have a pathway to upward mobility and earn a decent wage and get healthcare benefits. That's the world you see. Don't believe the models that say the only way to

survive is on sub-minimum wage or minimum wage paradigms. That's incorrect. Categorically incorrect.

And so, that's the thing we do at the Department of Labor, is expanding opportunity in those ways, making sure that people have access to the opportunity to get healthcare, and we work with our partners at HHS and elsewhere to implement the Affordable Care Act. Yes, we've had challenges. Yes, the President has talked about it. And yes, we will fix those challenges. Because, you know what? The Affordable Care Act is not only a legal and a healthcare imperative. It's a moral imperative.

I saw a guy who's ahead of a major cancer institute who said, "You know what, if you have cancer, one of the biggest determiners of whether you're going to live more in five years is whether you have health insurance." That's a fact, and that's why we're working so hard. And that's why we've already seen benefits. The Affordable Care Act is much more than a website. Ask the three million people under 26 who already have health insurance. Ask the people who now have access to preventive care, mammograms, other reforms of care, and we need to work together. And I'm so appreciative of all the business leaders with whom I have met who get this and who are working so hard. You know, many of them say, and I totally get it, "What's going on in Washington? Why can't you get things done in Washington?"

And I often hearken back to my family. You know, I'm one of five, we're an ecumenical family, three Democrats, two Republicans. You know, my mother, she grew up in Washington Heights, she is one of nine, they were evenly divided between Dodger fans, Giants fans, and Yankee fans. So, they had tough conversations at the table. But you know what, in my family, it didn't matter if you were voting a Republican or a Democrat. We had values that transcended that. We had the values of "We're all in this together. We're all community. We all, in times of greatest challenge, you don't turn at each other or on each other. You work toward each other, working together." That's not simply an experience unique to my family. I've seen that in Buffalo, I've seen that across America, and that's the spirit that we need to invoke because immigration reform has always been bipartisan: Ronald Reagan, Alan Simpson, Ted Kennedy and others.

So many of these other issues -- the minimum wage has been bipartisan. So many of these challenges that we confront as a nation have been bipartisan, the infrastructure that we discuss. Who brought us the interstate highway system? It was Dwight Eisenhower. And so, as we move forward, I really take heart, I take comfort. I am an eternal optimist, because you know what, adversity does build character. And you know what, I come from the grassroots, and I know that if the nation continues to advocate as you have on immigration, on all of these other issues, we will succeed, we will have our "Si Se Puede" moments, and we will make sure that we build a better America. We will reject false choices. We will come together. But we will need your help. This is not a time to sit on the sidelines. This is a time to engage. This is a time to make your voice heard. This is a time to make sure we continue to build coalitions in the spirit of Dolores Huerta and so many others who wrote the book on it. This

is the time to make sure that the better bargain for the middle class is a bargain that we can all be proud of.

Thank you so much for this honor, and thank you, Mickey, for your leadership.

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