

LATINO  LEADERS
NETWORK™

MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

Remarks by:
Lily Eskelsen Garcia
Latino Leaders Luncheon Series

March 13, 2012
Capital Hilton Hotel
Washington, DC

Lily Eskelsen Garcia: Gracias, gracias, gracias. Thank you so much for this. I'm so nervous, and I never get nervous.

Okay. So, my story, it's an incredible story. My grandfather was born in Nicaragua. He never spoke a word of English. My mother was raised in Colon, Panama. She met my father when he was a soldier in the Canal Zone, and they raised six noisy kids and moved every two or three years, the way military families will do. I was born in Fort Hood, Texas, lived in El Paso, Warner Robins, Georgia, Fort Wainwright, Alaska, Seattle and then, my parents decided when they retired to take their little Catholic family and move, of course, to Brigham City, Utah where diversity means you found a Presbyterian. And I was 17 years old and in high school when my husband asked me to marry him. He was much, much older, he was 18. And we got married a week after I graduated from high school.

Of course, I had to work, and so -- all I knew was I wanted to work around children. And so, I applied for a teacher's aide at all these schools and daycare centers, and finally I got to a Head Start Program, and they said, "Well, we only have an opening in the cafeteria, in the kitchen." "A job's a job. I'll take it." "Wow, great." I have to tell you, I was an incredible lunch lady. And I actually need to admit that by calling myself a lunch lady, I'm actually padding my résumé. I was the salad girl. I was not up to hot food yet but I loved being around the kids, so I would just make up names when they came through my line, like, "Hey, boyfriend, you're going to eat those peas," "all right, cutie-poo, let's finish that milk," and they'd laugh and they liked going through my line. And

when there was an opening as a teacher's aide in the kindergarten, the principal asked me if I wanted it.

Yes, I was so excited. I have got to tell you, I was an incredible teacher's aide. I would bring my guitar. I taught five year olds how to sing all the words to the classic, "Don't stick your finger up your nose because your nose knows it's not the place it goes," and we sang it with dignity. And after I did that for a year, the kindergarten teacher said, "Lily, you're really good with kids. Have you ever thought about going to college and maybe becoming a teacher?" I was 20 years old. That was the first time in my life anyone had suggested that I might want to go to college. But there was this little seed and this, like, Redwood forest grew out of my head and I went, "Oh my gosh, I could go to college. I would be an incredible teacher. I should go to -- I wonder how you do that? How do you actually go to college?" No one had talked to me about it because it wasn't in my parents' experience. They weren't against me going to college but no one in my mother's family had ever gone to college, my father never finished eighth grade. When I told them that I was going to go to college, they were so excited.

By the time we did figure out how to go to college, my husband and I had a six-month-old baby, and so, we figured we could do this college thing with his GI bill and folksinging on weekends in every bar in Salt Lake City, both of them, and so, I had Jeremy in his stroller and I would like be pushing him around the campus of the University of Utah while Ruel was in his biology class, and then, I'd shove the stroller over there and I'd run to my political science class, and we just went back and forth for four years. So, we both went to college. And actually, our little baby at the end of four years had gone through four years of college -- what a gifted child.

Now, I started teaching at Orchard Elementary fourth grade, and I've got to tell you, I was an incredible teacher, I truly was. My kids organized -- I had my kids do all the work that was the secret to my success. My kids organized the science fair. My kids organized the blood drive. We organized the pen pal project with some senior citizens in a nursing home. We were studying World War II, and it occurred to me as I was driving to school and passing by the Golden Living Center that those folks all lived through World War II. So, I pulled in and we had this great pen pal project. I would drop off my kids' letters and pick up their letters.

And then, one day, I was dropping of the letters and one of the nurses said, "I want you to meet Mildred." So, I go over and I meet Mildred, and she said, "Mildred, this is the nice teacher with the pen pal letters. Tell her how old you are." And Mildred looked at me and she said, "Well, I'm 103 going on -- well, just going on." I loved Mildred. Mildred was so cool. And I loved Dave. Dave was married to the teacher who taught next door to me, and he was in a wheelchair. He had had an accident as a teenager and he was in this wheelchair and he was telling the kids while he was teaching them origami for an art

class how hard it was for him to compete with able-bodied shoppers for the handicap parking spaces, and my kids were so mad. They loved Dave and they wanted to do something to help him.

Now, in my classroom, the closest I ever came to violating that church-state thing was my bulletin board that said, "Though shalt not whine." All right? If you were going to complain about something, the next words out of your mouth had to be, and here is what I'm going to do about it. So, they're going, "Well, that's not fair. We should --" finally someone said, "We should do something about it." We had this immediate class meeting, they voted unanimously to form little vigilante committees and systematically egg the illegally parked cars. So, you know, I threw in some new vocabulary words like "bail," and they voted, I think wisely, to reconsider, and we wrote instead a public service announcement in the form of a handicap rap from Dave's point of view. And we published it, we got the newspaper to publish it. They played little cassette tapes on the radio of my kids singing this. Their favorite line was, "Park in my space, if you dare, and I'll run you over with my wheelchair." My favorite line was, "Is your need any greater than mine, you wimpy, worthless, walking slime." I mean, Neruda would love this poetry. I mean, this was just amazing.

After 10 years at Orchard Elementary, I really needed something different, and I asked for a special assignment at the homeless shelter school that a public school located at the Travelers Aid Society, homeless shelter right in the middle of Salt Lake City. It was the best gig in the whole wide world, because it was an entire loving community that cared about that whole child: healthcare, counselors, people working with parents, a dentist, a doctor who would come in. It was the most amazing kind and loving community that cared about that whole child.

And I will tell you it was then that I got really annoyed with my mother, because so many of my students were Latino students, so many of their parents only spoke Spanish. And my mother had not raised us speaking Spanish, *Mi español es muy malo, pero la culpa es de mi madre.* Okay? Not my fault. Then I said, "Ma, how could you do this to me? How could you not teach me Spanish when my brain worked?" And I said, "I would be gold. The principal would be waxing my car, you're kidding me." And she said something I didn't understand. She said, "I didn't think it would be good for you." And I said, "What are you talking about? Taught to be bilingual," I said, "how can that not be good for me?" And she started to cry. She just -- just the tears started coming. And I'm like, "Whoa, whoa, what did I say?" She said, "When I came here in the '50s, there weren't a lot of people to speak Spanish to. And when I would find someone like in a store that I could speak Spanish to, I noticed people would stare at us, and they didn't look like they were happy with us, and I didn't want people to stare at my children like that, so I decided not to teach you, and I know it was a mistake." Wow. That was the moment I realized all teachers can learn another language.

And I've got to tell you, I am not an incredible student. So not. So not. I'm really bad at doing my homework. I blame the teacher for not motivating me. And I shamelessly used all of my students at the homeless shelter to practice my Spanish, kids like Julio. Julio was eight years old, we was one of the older kids, a third grader. He was the angriest human being I've ever met in my life. He hated his parents for their poverty. He hated that they were making him live in a homeless shelter. He hated the other kids for getting in his space and for being younger than he was. He hated me for making him pretend this was a real school.

But one day, I was sitting on the playground at recess, pretending to watch the kids, but I was actually doing my Spanish homework that was due that night -- please don't turn me in -- and I heard Julio yell something across the playground in Spanish, and I got the best teacher idea I've ever had in my life. I said, "Julio, Ven te necesito ayudarme," which I really hope means, "come over here, I need you to help me." And he came over, I said, "Julio, my mom is going to kill me. She is going to kill me if I can't pass this class. You have to help me do my homework." And he was intrigued. He sat down next to me. And I was repeating some of the things, and he was going, "No, no. Not like that," and he'd made me say the sentence over, putting the words in the proper order this time. He kept saying helpful, encouraging things like, "Estupida maestra loca," which he told me means, "Good job."

And I started calling him, "Maestro." I said, "Maestro, recess is over. Get the kids lined up." He got the kids lined up. I said, "Maestro, I'm going to get the second graders on the computer. You take the kindergarteners over to the reading rug and start the story," and he took the kindergarteners over to the reading rug and started the story. By the end of the week, he would pop into the room and he wouldn't even ask if I needed help. He'd just come in and he'd go, "Okay, I'm here." And I said, "Oh, Buenos dias, Maestro. Can you do the color flashcards with Chester?" And he'd grab the cards and he'd go, "Man, she can't do nothing without me," and then, he'd do the color flash cards with Chester. And I said, "Oh, Maestro, you're so good. You're such a good teacher. You should go to college, come back here and be a teacher with me here at the shelter school." And he just laughed, he said, "I ain't going to be no teacher." He said, "When I go to college, I'm going to be a wrestler with the World Wrestling Federation." Luchador.

He said, "When I go to college." He said, "When." Maybe a little seed. Maybe a little Redwood forest will pop out of his head. Maybe not, pero creo que si.

Mickey wanted you to hear my story. I happened to have been in the right place at the right time many times of my life to win some fun prizes and some really cool titles. I love titles. They are so - - you need to get yourself a title. People give you microphones, you get to hear the sound of your own voice. Teachers love the sound of

our own voices. And they give you a microphone and people listen to you. I don't care why people listen to me. I need people to listen to me. I need people to be on my side.

If you're going to have people on your side, you can actually influence those people with titles and they pass something wonderful like the DREAM Act. If you get enough people on your side, then you can stop something as terrible as the anti-immigration laws in places like Arizona, places like Alabama. You get enough people on your side, people can go to the doctor, kids can go to a pre-school, some kid can afford to go to college, you get into a pipeline, into a STEM career, into a university. I have seen such amazing things happen when you get enough people to believe in something good and they're willing to come together and work for it. Incredible things.

My work has been a big part of my life but so is my family. My family is a very big part of my story. It's a made for TV Lifetime original movie waiting to be -- my sons, my two boys, they are incredible human beings, young men who won their struggle with drugs and who are today strong and healthy and happy with families of their own. I was married to that 18-year-old boy for 36 years until he died last year. He lost his struggle with depression.

Mickey did a very dangerous thing asking me to come and tell my story because it's a very long story and I want Sandra Bullock to play me. And I have to tell you though, it's an incredible story like your incredible story. I have never met another human being that doesn't have an incredible story inside of them. Our stories are just the funny, touching, tragic things that happen to us while we go about the business of living, and my story is no more important than your story, really.

The most boring things about people's stories are usually their résumés and the titles. Thank you, Juan, for not reading off the résumé, although it's an incredible résumé. I could have taken 20 minutes to talk to you about my run for Congress, which I won, second place, took the silver -- work with me here. Okay. But then you wouldn't have known anything about me. You wouldn't have known what's in my heart and makes me get up in the morning. My life is full of the stories of children -- my children, other people's children -- and their education is not just a job for me. It's my cause.

A big part of my story is my union, my National Education Association, my beloved NEA, which where a good teacher like me, an incredible teacher. My NEA, is the best chance I have to fight for something better for the students, the children I have loved, para todos los niños, todos nuestros niños, for all our children. Education is el camino. It is that path that will lead them to their own incredible lives.

And for me and for my colleagues, over three million educators in this country working in America, pre-schools to graduate school, it's

a mission that we live. It's not a mission on our website. It's a mission that's written across our hearts, like it's written in my favorite poem, "Give me your hungry children, your sick children, your homeless, your abused children. Give me your children who need love as badly as they need learning. Give me your children who have talents and gifts and skills. And give me those that have none. Give them all to me, in whatever shape they come, whatever color their skin, whatever language they speak, wherever they find God, give them all to me. Because this is a public school. We will give you the doctors and the scientists and the carpenters. We'll give you the lawyers and the ministers and the teachers of tomorrow. We've give you the mothers and the fathers and the thinkers and the builders and the artists and the dreamers. We will give you the American dream. We will give you the future." And that future is that every blessed child deserves to have an incredible story to tell every day of their lives.

Thank you for the honor. Thank you for the honor of being here to tell you my story. Mil gracias, mil gracias. Thank you.

[End of transcript]