



**Remarks by
Congressman Xavier Becerra
Latino Leaders Luncheon Series**

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Congressman Becerra: Thank you. Esther thank you for your words. It's great to see all of you here, to Mickey Ibarra and the Latino Leaders Network, congratulations on the success of an idea that has now become something that we all benefit from when we eat the fruit of these great luncheons. To all the sponsors who make it possible, especially to our main sponsors—Coca Cola and Verizon. To Peter, thank you. To Rudy, thank you. I've been told that we may have votes soon, so I probably will keep my remarks a little briefer than I expected. But I've also, for all the Tejanos who are in the room, I've learned very well from a Tejano who once said to me "Remember your speech is no different from a long-horned steer we're accustomed to seeing here in Texas. A point here, a point there, and a lot of bull in between."

I know that congressman Mike Honda was here, I believe he had to leave; and Congressman Filner, I believe he also had to leave. I want to thank them for having come and recognized the importance of this luncheon. To Ambassadors Sarukhan and Descallar I want to say thank you for being here as well. To all of you, leaders in your own right, thank you for being leaders and for recognizing the importance of coming together to network and learn from each other. I think we're all very blessed; I know for a fact I am very blessed. It's really interesting—you're always told, once you start to have an opportunity to do things, don't forget from where you came. Don't forget. And for many of us, I know for me, those origins were very humble. My father got through about the sixth grade. My mother came from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico when she married my father at the age of 18. And while they never had a lot to give, they always gave back to this country. But what I have learned is that too often is that we're so busy trying to remember from where we came, that we forget to leave a little bit of room

to work towards where we have to go. Sometimes we're a little too humble. Sometimes we're a little too appreciative of what we've accomplished. Sometimes we forget that a lot of it was a result of our own effort. People helped; but recognize when the force of your own will and the sheer effort behind your tenacity has given you a chance to be where you are.

Not long ago my daughter—she plays softball, she's in the fourth grade—was at bat, and a good friend of ours—a neighbor friend, he's always trying to cheer on the team—he would always yell to all the kids. And when Natalia, my daughter, got up to bat, he said the same thing. It struck me when he said it, when I started thinking about some words I was going to give at a future speech. He'd always get up there, by the diamond, and say to the kids "Be a hitter! Be a hitter!" Because most of the time, you know, when these kids get up to pitch, they don't throw anything else but balls. So all the kids just watch as they get on to the base free, because there's so many balls that they're throwing that they don't have to worry about strikes. So he was always telling them "Be a hitter! Be a hitter!" Be a hitter. I want to be a hitter. I want to remember my humble origins. I want to thank those who made it possible for me to rise. I want to help those who didn't get help. But I want to be a hitter. Because if I just spend my time thanking people and remembering from where I came, I won't have time to hit that ball out of the park. And I got to hit it out of the park because there are too many people who will never go to that plate to take the bat to take one swing at that ball. And so I better be a hitter. So Mickey, I say to you thank you for being a hitter, and knowing the importance of bringing all of us together, so we can all have our turn at the plate.

Now, I've witnessed and experienced a lot in my 16-plus years in the Congress. I've halted legislative activity on the floor of the house to defend legal immigrant seniors—elderly who were being told they would have to lose their supplemental security income so we could play for the unemployment benefits of people back in 1993, when we were suffering in another recession. I captained the defeat in 1994 of a proposal on the floor of the house to bar children from attending school, simply because they happen to be the children of immigrants, whether legally here or not. I stood up against the impeachment of a president of the United States. I experienced the shock and eerie silence of an abandoned capitol grounds on September 11, 2001. I challenged a president's rush to war in Iraq in 2002 as one of only 128 to vote against a resolution to authorize war in Iraq, out of 435. I stood up early to help elect the first president of the United States of color. I authored and helped pass the legislation you've been told about, that

established a commission that I hope in the near future gives us a chance to break ground on what will be the Museum of the American Latino here in Washington, DC. I was offered a post in the President's cabinet, but I'm still here. And along the way, I had chance, with my beautiful wife, to have three children. But there's something I remember that I was told the first year I got to Congress, in 1993, that I remember so very well. It was told to me by Congressman Esteban Torres, one day, as we were in the rush of activity in committee, and a vote was called, and we were hurrying to get on the floor of the house before they closed the rolls. And as we were rushing up the steps of the east capitol, I turned to Esteban and I said "you know sometimes I forget where I'm about to go." And he stopped me right there and he grabbed my shoulder and said "Xavier, never forget where you're about to go, because very few people in the history of this country have had a chance to walk up these steps and enter through those doors where you're about to go." And that has stayed with me for so long, because Esteban wanted me to be a hitter.

And I think about that more and more and I wish to myself 'Esteban why didn't you tell me that 30 years before—not in 1993, but in 1963 ,when as a five-year-old, I saw my mom crying in front of the television set, not understanding why a television set would make my mother cry. And then learning a little bit later why she was crying, but still not understanding why a woman who was born and raised in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, and only nine-plus years in this country would cry for a president she never met who had been assassinated. Esteban, had he been around only a couple years later, when I started school, and all of a sudden I went from being Xavier for all of my life until the age of five, all of a sudden I got a new name—Xavier (Ex-avier). Esteban, had you been there, you would have helped me understand what was going on. Esteban, had you been there, you would have helped me understand, as I was growing up and people would ask 'what does your dad do?', 'what does your mom do?', and I would have to tell them my dad's a worker in construction and every day he gets up with the sun and doesn't come home until the sun's down, and every day when he comes home he doesn't come dressed like me, he comes very dirty. Esteban, you could have helped me understand that I should not have been embarrassed to explain to people what my father did, even though people would say 'Johnny, don't you grow up to be like that guy on the side of the road there digging those ditches', because that was my dad digging those ditches.

Esteban, I could have used you the day I got to Stanford University, living two hours from there, being raised in Sacramento, California, but never having been there before until

the day I was set to enroll. I understood that I hadn't grown up middle-class the way I had thought. When I drove through Palo Alto, right around Stanford University, I realized 'Wow, this is middle-class, huh? This isn't bad. Thank God I'm going to college.' I could have used Esteban Torres's words a little earlier. I suspect a lot of us could have used the words of someone like Esteban Torres a little earlier, to tell us "Be proud of who you are. Know who got you here. Don't ever forget from where you came." But someone has to stop us in that moment where we're thinking we're on top of the world and say "Stop. Know where you're about to go." You know, it's that Star Trek moment—go where no man has ever gone before. And so I remember what Esteban said. I remember him fondly for having told me that. And today, I can tell you a few stories of what it means to go forward. Today, when someone asks me 'What did your father do?' I say "He built America." Because he really did. I don't know about some other folks, but I know my Dad put shovel in the ground, put pick on the hard dirt, and every day he built America. And one day, my father was working in a crew, and I had a chance to be in that crew because I had to help pay for my education in college, and I had the great privilege of being able to pull the jackhammer away from my father's hands. And that's one of the most proud moments I could think of because that was the day that it really hit me how proud I was of what my father did. Because I could help him with what he was doing, but I knew he was helping me to do what I would get to do.

And so Esteban, I wished you could say to me earlier in life, why I should say about my father, not when I was in my 20s, but when I was in my teens, how proud I was of what my father did with a sixth-grade education. I can tell you today, that on that day in 1994, when I decided to captain the opposition to an amendment on the floor of the house to deny kids access to our schools unless they could prove that their parents were here legally, that the day before I had sat with a friend who is no longer with us, may she rest in peace. Her name was Congresswoman Patsy Mink from Hawaii. She was a fighter all her life. I had gone to Patsy, we were on the same committee of Education and Labor, and I said to her "Patsy, I've been told that we're going to have an amendment on the floor that's going to keep kids from going to school unless their parents can come in and prove that they're here legally, and I've been told we don't want this amendment to go up because we're afraid it's going to pass, and I've been given an alternative that would soften it a little bit, not make it as bad an amendment." And Patsy Mink, she was about four-foot-nine, she was a power plug all the way through—she said, "Xavier, you just got here, right? Did you come here to compromise your values so soon?" You know I'm looking down at her thinking 'this little lady's telling me what

to do.' And so the next day when I was asked by some of the members of then the Democratic leadership "are you ready to do this alternative amendment?" I said "no, let's go forward.

We'll see what happens." And that debate started with very few of us on the floor, because no one wanted to debate immigration in 1994. And a few of us were there, and we stood there, and we said our peace why we should oppose this amendment. And then something very wonderful happened. Before you know it, I started to see a few other people trickle in. The one I remember most was a gentleman by the name of Kweisi Mfume, who was then the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. He came in, was always an impassioned speaker and said "This isn't about immigrant kids. This isn't about Latino kids. This is about our kids. A fight to keep a kid in school is not just a fight. A fight to keep a kid in school is my fight." And before you know it, we started to have more members coming into the chamber to argue. And before you know it, those who were for the amendment came to us and said "are you ready to compromise, cut off the debate, and take a vote on it pretty soon?" I said "no, no, no, let's let this amendment go its course."

In 1994, in California, we passed Proposition 187. On the floor of the House of Representatives, we defeated this amendment to keep kids from going to school, and I'm very proud of that. You learn a lot. But you don't realize it until a lot later, until someone like Congressman Torres stops you, talks to you, and wakes you up. I remember in 1990, I had gotten elected to the state legislature, and shortly after taking office I started going around the district, and I had the chance to go to a chamber of commerce luncheon to meet many of the people in the city of Alhambra, which is the city I represented. And I was having a good time, meeting some folks in this small crowd. I had one woman say to me "we really like you as our representative. You blend so well!" And I remember thinking at the time 'complement, or insult?' I take it as a compliment. And I take it as that because I don't have time to dwell on the past. I have to recognize where I'm going. And fortunately for me, I was good enough that she thought I blended well, and that I could keep moving forward. Now, in 1994, as a Democrat, we suffered a major defeat as we lost the House of Representatives. Interestingly enough, I had a lot of my white colleagues come to me and say 'this being in the minority is a bear', and I said "get used to it." That was one of the times that put things in context that life is not so bad. I have gone through things that some are barely getting to experience. They're babes in the woods when it comes to some of these politics. We've had to go through this for so long in our life. When I turned 18, and

went to Stanford University, I regained my name. I became Xavier Becerra again. Why? Because I realized I'm Javier, not 'Ex-avier'. So today, to this day, I can still tell you who my friends are and when I met them by when they come to me—"Hey, Ex-avier!" I know that was a high school friend.

I suffered some real humiliation in the fourth grade, when being in the band and having performed for all the parents on that school night, we had finished our song. And you know in those days when you're in fourth grade you can play maybe a range of five notes, so it was basics 'I Want to Hold your Hand'. We had finished, we were all leaving the stage on the sides. My parents rarely had a chance to come to anything I did in school, they were there in the audience. As we were walking down the sides of the auditorium filing out, I see my mother get up. All the crowd's clapping, and I see my mother get up. And then I see her start walking through the people that were sitting there towards where I was heading. And it was like a guided missile kind of thing. And I thought "Mom, sit down, sit down."

And before you know it, she caught me. She gave me this big bear hug and a kiss [and said] "mijo, estamos tan orgullosos de ti" I thought "oh, Mom, why did you do this? This is the most embarrassing thing that could happen." Afterwards, we were all celebrating, having a little lemonade and Kool-aid and cookies, and I said "Mom, why did you do this? Now I can't go talk to my friends" I was so embarrassed. She said "Mijo, que querias que hage? Sentiamos algo tan..." She couldn't say it. "tan orgullosos. Nunca te habiamos visto tocar." We had never seen you perform before. I said—you know, when you're in fourth grade it doesn't make any difference—"oh Mom (stammering)". Like that jackhammer incident, I now realize why my mother so was so determined to make it through that line of parents and get to her son. Because I think she saw many things that could come for that child. She started with so little. They came from Mexico, when my father married her, with nothing. And so to build up was for them a major achievement. And so when I was graduating from Stanford University, I fully expected my mother to do another beeline at the graduation ceremony. She was very good; she didn't. She spared me. I would have been okay with it by then, because I had learned to understand and appreciate that hug.

But the reason I mention that story about the fourth grade is because today I have a fourth grader—my daughter, Natalia, who is a softball player. And I want to mention this story to you as I come close to concluding my remarks. WE recently told our three daughters—my wife and I—that we were going to move the family back to Washington, DC, because it's just too much of a bear to go back

and forth every week and try to spend enough time with family and still do work in the district at the same time. And while we actually lived here as a family in the late 90s—in fact, my fourth grader was born in Washington, DC before we moved her back at a very young age—now they're teenagers, almost all of them. The 11-year old is not a teenager. And it's a little tougher; they've got their own life. And it wasn't something they wanted to accept readily. And as much as we expected our oldest—our now 16-year old—to give us the most difficulty, breaking her up from her friends, those relationships, she's becoming very independent, it was our 11-year old who was insistent. 'We're not going. We're not going to do this. We're going to stay where we are. This is where we live, and we're going to stay.' And over the course of several weeks, kept talking about it, kept talking about it, the older one started getting better—'we're going to get our own room? Okay.'

But the little one—'I don't know why you guys keep talking like that. We're not going anywhere.' One day, I came back from DC and I told Carolina, my wife, and the girls "I went and saw some homes and there's some pretty nice ones out there." And the older one said 'well let us see the photos of the homes'. I showed them, but the little one didn't want to see them, didn't care to see them—'we're not going. I don't know why you guys are looking at that stuff.' And finally I said "Mija, we're going to go. I'd love it if you'd take a look at these photographs. Give me a sense of what you like and what you don't like." She left. My wife and I were looking at each other—'what do we do?' Just give her time, just go with the flow. So later that evening, at night—it was Sunday night, so I was getting ready to take the redeye back to DC. I was working on my computer upstairs in the office. And Natalia comes up to the room. I turn around and I see her. She comes up to me and she doesn't say a word. She has a little piece of paper, and she hands it to me, and then she walks away. I open up the little piece of paper, and written on it is one word with an exclamation point—"congratulations!" I had just gotten elected to be vice-chair of the Democratic caucus, and that solidified to make the decision to make the move to Washington, DC.

And I still have that little piece of paper where she said congratulations because—she still doesn't want to move—but I think my daughters, I hope my wife and I are working as a family to know what's coming next. That as much as we want to remember our humble origins, as much as my daughter doesn't want to leave what is secure, as much as we sometimes don't want to deal with the unexpected—feel like we're going to lose that amendment. As much as sometimes it's more comfortable to remember, and only remember, from where we came. Natalia, Maria Teresa Becerra, my mother,

Manuel Becerra, my father, and I hope Xavier Becerra, have learned what Esteban Torres tried to tell me that day in 1993—"don't you ever forget where you're about to go." And so as we move forward, it's not to talk about what we've accomplished, or what I've experienced.

It's to talk about what's coming next. Those kids who in 1996 as immigrant children were denied access to healthcare simply because they were immigrant kids, this year with a new president, are now back receiving healthcare under the SCHIP program with the signature of President Barack Obama. This year, if Harry and Luis, if we hit them out of the park, we might have healthcare reform the way we really deserve it. This year, if we're smart and recognize that our time is running out, we may actually start to deal with energy the way we should and understand it's not free. This year, and by God, this is where all of us have to go to the plate, with the help of a president who understands this, but more importantly with a network of Latino leaders, we can hit it out of the park and give dignity back to all of our immigrants and say we will reform our immigration laws to give them what they deserve. And so I want to thank you for letting me come and chat with you about my experiences. But more importantly, I just wanted to let you know that Esteban Torres is still in my mind. His words are still with me. I'm going to be a hitter. And I'm going to remember where I got to go. I hope you'll join me because there is much to do for people like my parents, who made it possible for us to enjoy this lunch today.

Thank you very much.

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