



**Remarks by Mónica Ramírez
The Cafecito Series**

October 8, 2020

Mónica Ramírez: Thank you so much, Mickey, for the warm introduction. I'm grateful to you for all your leadership and for everything that you do for the Latinx community. I'm also excited to have the opportunity to share a little bit about my personal journey during today's *cafecito*.

I consider myself a rural Latina. I was born and raised in rural Ohio where I live today with my family. My family in both my mother's side and my father's side were farmworkers, the daughter and granddaughter of migrant farmworkers. My family used to travel the migrant stream picking crops around our country. My mother talks about days when her family picked cherries in Michigan and my father started working in the fields when he was eight years old picking cotton in Mississippi.

When I was growing up, my parents told us to be proud of where we come from. When I was little, I thought that they were talking about having pride in our Latinx culture and community. I certainly was raised with the deep understanding of our

community and our culture. But as I grew up, I came to understand that part of what my parents were trying to ensure was that myself and my siblings would also be proud of the farmworker tradition in the farmworker community. You see, we are the first generation in my family that did not have to migrate for the purposes of work as farmworkers. And so it was really important to my parents to tell us about the farmworker community and the ways in which farmworkers struggled then, and unfortunately, many farmworkers struggle in the same way still today.

My father talked to us about the poor housing conditions and discrimination that workers faced. He talked to us about the low wages and the other kinds of dangers that exist for farmworkers. And so it was with this understanding that we were growing up eyes wide open to not only the farmworkers' struggle, but my parents also made it a priority to ensure that we understood the importance of giving back. Really it's because of them that I was introduced to social justice and to the desire to do work on behalf of our community and for the public good.

So when I was in the fourth grade, I was learning about Martin Luther King and all that he was doing in the Deep South through the civil rights movement, and the ways in which he was defending the rights of African American community members. So

I went to my father and I asked him whether there was anyone who was fighting for us. My father responded by telling me about Dolores Huerta and César Chávez. That was when I first learned about the farmworker movement and the work that was being done to fight for farmworkers in our country. I was inspired and as I grew up, I continued to learn more and more about the farmworker movement. I'm very proud of all the farmworkers in our country do to feed our nation, and the ways by which our community has suffered and been denied rights but continue to do the work that is literally life sustaining.

And so it was this understanding of the farmworker community and the rights that farmworkers are denied that probably allowed me to be conscientious enough that when I was 14 years old and the local newspaper came out and I opened it up and I saw that there was this headline that said, welcome back fishermen. That I had the curiosity around why there wasn't a welcome back farmworker section of the newspaper, because farmworkers returned to my town in June every year just like fishermen do.

And so my father told me that I should ask about it. And because I came from a very, very little place, I was able to just hop on my bike and ride down the street and go to the newspaper. I asked the editor, who happened to be the father of some kids that I went to school with, why was that there was no

welcome back farmworker section of the paper. He didn't have a good answer, but he made an offering. He gave me the opportunity to write about farmworkers for the newspaper.

And so at the age of 14, I started my newspaper beat writing about farmworkers and the Latinx community in my area. Really what that did for me was it helped me to understand several important things. It helped me to understand the importance of telling our stories, because if we don't tell our stories, basically, it's tantamount to erasing us and our experiences.

I also recall interviewing people for stories. I saw their eyes light up because it was as if someone had finally taken an interest in them and what they thought and what they cared about. And so really that was I guess the introduction to my work on storytelling. It's the work that I've continued now in different ways through different platforms. But it's also work that I consider completely absolutely essential.

As I continue to grow up through my teen years, I eventually made the decision to become an attorney and I specifically wanted to defend the rights of farmworkers. It wasn't an easy road. When I was in my first year of law school, I actually almost dropped out. I had a bad experience with a professor who told me that the other students probably didn't want me there, that they probably didn't think that I deserved

to be there. I was one of a few Latinx students who were enrolled in my law school. Hearing that from that professor was extraordinarily difficult, and so I had my mind set on dropping out. But my mom wouldn't let me. And I don't know about you, but I listened to my mother. She told me that I had to go back to school. And so I did. And before I graduated from law school, I actually proved that professor wrong when I became the first Latino/Latina to be elected student body president. So that was one obstacle that I confronted and was fortunate enough to overcome.

When I became an attorney, it was also challenging in its own way. I didn't have other attorneys that I could really turn to for advice. I didn't have anyone in my family that was an attorney. And so I had to figure out how to create this project that I created, which was the first legal project in the country specifically focused on ending sexual harassment and gender discrimination against farmworker women.

The project that I created was with the local legal services organization in Florida. The wages were so low that at one point, I actually wasn't able to afford my rent. Thankfully, the managing attorney was gracious enough. They let me move in to the law library, and I got a part-time job at a restaurant called the Taco Lady. So I was an attorney by day and by night, I was making tacos and scrubbing pans in order to

make my way. So my road to becoming an attorney was a little bumpy, but I stuck with it and I was able to eventually create Justice for Migrant Women, and The Latinx House, and co-found Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, and some of the other initiatives and projects that I have started. It was hard, but it was worth all the struggle.

Over the years, it's become incredibly important for me to continue to tell my story both about being from a farmworker community and also about the challenges that I faced along the way. I think it's important for people to understand that we have different stories. We are not a monolith. We're 60 million people strong. And when I stand in front of a crowd and I talk about my background, I feel completely excited and satisfied when young people come up to me and talk to me about how their parents are also farmworkers, and how no one had ever talked about being from a farmworker family before in public places, and certainly not with pride. And so it's really meaningful to me.

But I think that we have to continue to tell our stories whether we come from a farmworker family or whether we're from rural America or from urban centers, whether we're immigrants or whether we were born here. We have to tell our stories because people need to understand that we are very different. Their history in the United States differs, and that we all have so

much to offer no matter where we come from or when we arrived in this country. We have to keep telling our stories because that is how we can correct some of the stereotypes that people are telling about us. It's also really important because as you know, our community is experiencing a rise in hate crime and the violence against our community unfortunately is happening with more frequency.

People need to understand that our community is contributing in so many ways. We're working in different industries and different sectors. We're business owners. We're political leaders. We're community leaders. We're students. We're showing up in so many different ways in this nation. And people need to understand that we have so much to offer, that we take pride in our community, we take pride in our culture, and we take pride in our work. And that we will continue doing all that is in our power to uplift our stories and to uplift each other to do the work that is necessary to continue to elevate our community and to elevate this country.

Thank you so much for all that you do and for who that you are and for telling your stories. We all need to hear them and I'm excited for the opportunity to learn more about all of you and how together the richness of our beautiful culture makes this country better for all of us.