

LATINO LEADERS NETWORK™

MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

Remarks by:
The Honorable Janet Murguía
Latino Leaders Luncheon Series

May 15, 2013
The St. Regis
Washington, DC

Thank you so very, very much. I am overwhelmed by all of these incredibly kind words and generous statements. It's an honor and it's quite humbling to be here today in front of all you and to receive this wonderful award. I can't thank the members, Senator Menendez, and Xavier enough for taking time from their very busy schedules. As Senator Menendez mentioned to you, he is extremely busy, but I want to make sure you all understand the important role that he has played in leading the efforts on so many issues, but in particular most recently around immigration reform. Without his voice, we would not be where we are today in terms of this process and in terms of the prospect that we have for seeing this transformative change. He has done so much on behalf of so many families over his great career. I remember when I started as a young girl - a young woman I will say - in the House of Representatives, it was something to be able to look up and see Latino members of Congress and Latina members of Congress. But at that time, Congressman Menendez not only was a member of Congress from New Jersey but he ended up being the chair of the Democratic Caucus and, of course, going on to the Senate. So we have been on a journey together, and I am proud to call him our champion and especially proud to call him my friend. He has been a friend to all of us. I want to thank you for everything that you have done for us.

As you all know, Congressman Becerra is our leader in the House. As the only Latino in the leadership of the House of Representatives, he has been our voice on critical issues facing our community and our country. He has been a strong advocate on so many issues, whether it's taxes, the budget, immigration or the need for a national American-Latino museum,

something that has been near and dear to his heart. We know it's not easy advocating for all of these issues, but he has been steadfast and courageous. He is right. We worked together. When I first was in the White House in the Office of Legislative Affairs and one of my jobs of course was to work with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and at that time, Xavier was the chair of the Caucus.

It was an interesting engagement that we had because he was fighting for the interest of the Caucus and for the interest of our community, and I was fighting for the interest of the president and the interest of our community. I have to tell you I've learned so much over the years, and I couldn't be more proud to see him now in such a position of leadership, and to see both of these members really emerged into these positions of leadership. Xavier, I want to thank you for your courageous leadership and for the work you're doing now as well on the House side on immigration reform. But I also want to thank you for keeping the bandana close, and I know we trade it back and forth. You look great in your suit, I wear my dress, but those bandanas are in our back pockets or in my purse. We pull them out when we need to because we understand that we're fighting for the best interest of our community as well as our country, but thank you for your great friendship.

What can I say about this force of nature that is Sonia Gutierrez? I'm sorry that she was limited to three minutes. But as you saw for yourself, no one is more passionate or more devoted to her community than Sonia. I'm very proud that she's part of our NCLR familia. I'm very proud of the role that she has played in making Carlos Rosario a model for so many non-profits, and one of the most respected non-profits here in Washington D.C. area, and really a state-of-the-art learning center for those most in need. What she wasn't able to tell you, and I hope that you will look at her story, but she was a true pioneer and trailblazer for Latinos here in Washington D.C. It's because of people like Sonia Gutierrez that there are Janet Murguía's leading non-profits at the national level so, Sonia, thank you so very much.

I hope you'll indulge me as I just continue a couple more acknowledgements, but I want to acknowledge my former colleague and dear friend, Mickey Ibarra. Mickey has not only been a good friend to me in NCLR but I know to many of you who are here today and certainly to the Latino community. One of the things that I think I appreciated the most about Mickey is that he is a man of his word. He is someone you can trust. He is dependable. He is reliable. If he tells you that he is going to do something and get something done, you can count on it.

It's pretty unusual in this town anymore to see someone who really sees the importance of keeping his word and building those relationships around this integrity. He's one of the hardest working people I know, and I will forever treasure the bond that we created as colleagues in the Clinton White House because we were in the trenches then, but we managed to find a way to remind ourselves how fortunate we were; despite the incredible sacrifice and hard work, how fortunate we were to have those roles in the White House. I learned a lot from Mickey, and I continue to learn a lot from you. I just want to thank you for this great honor that you've given today to be here and to accept this award. So thank you, Mickey, for all your tremendous leadership.

You'll hear a little bit about my family because I'm going to talk about them in my remarks, but I do have a family member here and I just want to acknowledge him, my nephew Ryan who is a great young man. He is a graduate of Yale University and went to North Western Law School. He is now working as a trial attorney in the Department of Justice in the Office of Civil Rights. Someone who doesn't have kids - we love our nieces and nephews - and he is our pride and joy and we appreciate him very much. I want to acknowledge someone else who's been very special in my life. He has put up with my schedule and has given me tremendous love and support, but Mauro [phonetic] thank you for everything you have done for me.

So Mickey asked me to talk about my story. He says, "You talk about issues all the time. You talk about all the work that NCLR does all the time. People want to hear your story." So some of you have heard my story because I've tried to work it in to different issues that we talk about because I draw on my parents' story, and on my heritage, and on my roots when I come to work every day. It is what sustains me. So I am going to tell you a little bit about not only my story but really the source of that strength for me has been my family - they are my inspiration - and my roots growing up in a Mexican-American neighborhood and, of all places, Kansas City, Kansas. I'd like to tell you a little bit about my family because the high honor that is bestowed upon me today is really a tribute to them.

My father came to the United States in the late '40s. He was born in Oklahoma but returned as a young boy, not even 10 years old, to Mexico where his parents were from a small rural community in Michoacán, Mexico called Tangancicuaro. With very limited English, he actually came back to report for military service towards the end of World War II. Like most immigrants, he was also looking for a better way of life. He tried different jobs, a little bit at an ice plant, worked a little bit in the stockyards, but then finally worked in the steel plant as a steel worker. Once he settled in, he sent for my mom and my oldest sister and they moved to Kansas City, Kansas.

Both my parents could be described as simple, humble, and modest people. When my mother and father were reunited in the U.S. in the 1950s, the contrast between their lives in Mexico and this country was quite dramatic. Growing up in rural Tangancicuaro in the 1920s and 1930s was like growing up in the rural U.S. in the late 1800s. My father talked about riding a horse to deliver goods for the shopkeeper he worked for, and my mother washed clothes and dishes in a nearby stream and iron-clothing with the kind of metal irons that needed to be placed on hot plates. Neither one of my parents were able to pursue an education in Mexico due to very difficult personal and family circumstances. My dad's father died when my dad was 16 years old, and he had a family of 12. My mom's mother died when she was 14, and she had a family of six. They've been moms and dads for a long time. But you know what? They were awfully good at it. They lived like pioneers during these times, even after coming to the U.S.

With seven kids - my six brothers and sisters - my mom didn't work outside the home. But the nine of us lived in a very small house that had only one bathroom, and some of you may appreciate this because I think we all know that we had to do a lot with very little. We had basically one room where the kids slept dormitory style. I remember Mary and I would put our shoes and clothes in a box, in a closet, and that was where everybody had their things. When we go to school at the time we were growing up, it was rough but we were together and my parents really provided for us. I remember Mary and I going to school and we'd have our Monday-Tuesday dress and our Wednesday--Thursday dress and then our Friday dress. We didn't get a phone in our home until I was in the eighth grade. I'm the youngest. My mom washed clothes in a ringer washer with no dryer until I was college so we knew about going to the lavandería and having to dry our clothes and fold them and do all of that. My parents worked hard and sometimes it was tough going.

Society presented its own set of challenges as well. There were times when my dad was laid off from work and that we had to rely on some government assistance. You know what? It was really tough to see my dad go through that period of time because he was a very proud man. So he would take work wherever he could, but somehow we got through it. In Kansas City, in the '50s when my parents went to the movie theater, they had to sit in a separate section of the theater. My father and other persons of color early on in his workplace had to use a separate bathroom at the steel plant where he worked. So I know about the challenges that our community has faced over the years. My dad worked very hard, taking overtime whenever he could. My mom pitched in by babysitting and getting some money there, but then he never made a lot of money.

By the early 1980s, though, five of their kids were in college, all at the same time, thanks to scholarships, work study and financial opportunities and a lot of hard work. After all was said and done, six of the seven kids have received postsecondary education degrees. My oldest sister, Martha, the one who didn't get to receive a postsecondary education degree, is mentally challenged. But you know what? Even though she didn't have her degree, I think that she has taught us the most of all in our family. She taught us a lot about the human spirit and character because Martha worked for over 30 years at a downtown restaurant in Kansas City and she took three buses to get to her work. So even Martha who didn't have her degree made sure she was contributing in her own way.

Interestingly enough, four of us went to law school. My brother, Ramon, was the first in our family and in our community to attend Harvard Law School. It was a great moment of pride for my parents. Today, Ramon is a lawyer in private practice in Kansas City and a civic leader. He's one of the founders of the Greater Kansas City Hispanic Scholarship Fund now with more than a million dollar endowment. He's one of the first Latinos who serve on the Board of Trustees for the Kellogg Foundation, one of the largest philanthropic foundations in the country.

My brother, Carlos, was the first Latino to be a state court judge in the state of Kansas. He served in that position for 10 years. In 1999, he was confirmed by the U.S. Senate to be a federal judge in Kansas after being nominated by President Clinton. Carlos is the first Latino to serve as a federal judge in the district of Kansas.

Then there's my twin sister, Mary. Yes, she looks a lot like me so be careful, but you can't tell us apart. I'm just a little better-looking, but you have to look very closely. We'll just keep that between us. It's our little secret. Mary is a judge on the United States Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals after having served for more than a decade as a federal judge in the district of Arizona. She was the first Latina to serve as a federal judge in Arizona. She and my brother Carlos are the first brother and sister in the history of the U.S. to serve on the federal bench together. I know that we're capable of contributing and of making history.

As for me, I decided to go into government service instead of practicing law, and I ended up working in the west wing of the White House. Looking back, it is obvious that education was very important to my parents and to each of my siblings. Despite my parents' own lack of formal education, they recognized that education really wasn't just a goal. It was a value. I share my parents' story because I believe my parents are primarily responsible for what I and my brothers and sisters have been able to do. It is because of some very basic principles and values that they

believed in and that they instilled in us: faith in God, a strong work ethic, love of family, knowing the importance of a strong community, lots of sacrifice, and a clear appreciation for what we have and what is offered in the United States. I saw these values played out in so many ways. El ejemplo y los principios que nos dieron - were lived out in front of us.

My mom who only had a fifth grade education would be in the kitchen usually by the stove or with dishes in the sink, all of us kids, but here would come in my Madrina Virginia, my madrina de bautizo. She was older and she didn't know how to read or write at all. She'd carry her letter from her daughter from Mexico, and back then we didn't have all the access to telephones and everything else, and so that letter was her lifeline to her daughter. My mom would clear the trastes, clear the table. And there she and my godmother. My mom in her limited reading capacity would read this letter to my madrina and then would sit and write out a letter even if it was phonetically back to her daughter.

I think I had learned compassion from my mother and about service in the most simplest of ways. She'd always be the one thinking about Doña Carmen down the street, who was the elderly lady, and maybe she needed some caldo because she wasn't feeling good that day. She'd send us off to deliver the caldo for Doña Carmen, even though Doña Carmen would always kind of regañar us for not wearing dresses, playing with my brothers when they played football and everything else. But there we were because my mom had said we needed to go there.

My dad, boy, he was one of the most toughest and resilient people I know. He worked for 37 years in the steel plant where in the hot Kansas summer, it was 10 times hotter than it was outside in that plant. He would cut steel in this heavy full gear, heavy steel toe boots, the big hat and the big jackets. In those deep freezes that only Midwesterners know, he would work just as hard and never faltering even if he was sick and should have stayed home.

This is an extraordinary nation when you think about it. Two people with very few means from a very small town in Mexico who worked very hard, sacrificed much, and dedicated themselves to the education of their family and service to their community. I am a witness to and, in many ways, evidence of their American dream. I have seen it come true for me and my family, and I know it is also true as I look out at each and every one of you in this audience. It is a credit to them and a credit to this country. They wanted us to know that despite the challenges that in this country no matter who you are or what color you are, there is opportunity if you are determined to find it. My dad had his own way of expressing this. He would say to us, "Remember, you're no better than anyone else, but you're no less

than anyone else either." He would remind us, "el sol sale para todos", the sun shines for everyone. My mom would say, "con Dios por adelante todo es posible", with God's help all things are possible.

My parents' words and my parents' values are what led me eventually to Capitol Hill, to the White House, and now to NCLR. I wanted to help families like mine who just needed a helping hand, a leg up, or just an open door. I had mentors and supporters who opened many doors for me because no one gets where they are alone. One of those doors led to a job in the White House, and I needed those doors open since I didn't have the type of connections a lot of my colleagues did. At my first White House meeting, I'll never forget I sat in my legislative affairs meeting at the Office of Legislative Affairs. On my left was the gentleman by the name of Goody Marshall, and on my right was Paul Carey. I found out that Goody Marshall was Supreme Court Justice - Thurgood Marshall Jr. was his son - and Paul Carey was the son of three-time New York Governor Hugh Carey. I thought to myself, how did I get here? The doors kept opening for me during that time there.

I was privileged to be able to ride on Air Force One several times across the country and across the world. One moment I'll never forget was when I was privileged to be able to fly in Marine One with President Clinton, playing cards with Bruce Lindsey, and I'm sitting next to Melanne Verveer, and we're flying right over the New York skylight at sunset eye level with the Statue of Liberty. That's the privilege that I had been given because I had a chance, and someone opened the door for me, and President Clinton believed in me enough to give me this chance to work in the White House.

I know with those privileges come great responsibilities. I know that for my parents, it was always really hard for them to understand exactly what I did. I kept explaining I work on Capitol Hill, and they quite never got it, right? You all know. "Eso que es, okay que bien". Okay, my mom would say "pero ya vente". And she goes, "ya pon todas esas cosas en una caja y ya vente". But I would say, "well, I'm in the White House now." My mom would just kind of go, "okay, está bien, pero cuando vas a venir". But when I was able to go home and show her a picture of me, the president, and Pope John Paul II, she looked at that picture and she says, "está bien, tienes un buen trabajo". Now, that impressed her. But moms have an amazing way of both being your biggest fan and one who brings you back down to earth. I remember one time, because I would call her regularly at certain times, and I remember that time and days slipped by, and that was not good. But I thought she's going to understand this, I was doing work with the First Lady. I'm like, "mamá no te pude hablar porque estaba con la Primera Dama y no podía llamarte". Mom, I couldn't call you. I was with the First

Lady, I couldn't call you. And she listened. And then she said, "yo soy mas primera que la Primera Dama".

So I'll be honest with you. My parents always had a way of keeping me grounded. In fact, I'll never forget when my mom and my Madrina Sally, another madrina, one of her comadres were talking in the kitchen. Mary and I were outside. My Madrina Sally says, "comadre debes de estar muy orgullosa de tus hijas. Una es juez y la otra trabaja en la Casa Blanca". She would say, comadre, you should be very proud of your daughters. One of them works in the White House, and the other is a judge, a federal judge. My mom sat there and she said, "You know what? I'd be really proud if they knew how to make flour tortillas." Estuviera muy contenta si supieran hacer tortillas de harina. So we're still working up to achieve my mom's full view of success.

But look, I had the privilege of working in the White House when I know not everybody else got that chance. But I did realize that I could compete, not in spite of but because of my story and what I brought to the table. That was hammered on to me when I had my most proudest moment in the White House, and that was when I was able to take my parents to see the President in the Oval Office. I know some of you have heard this story, but I want to share it with you because to me, it was a defining moment. Here my parents were, their journey had led them to come visit me here in Washington D.C. and to see the President. I remember my mom being so self-conscious about her shoes because she had to do a lot of walking in the city that day and she said she didn't have her good shoes on. They were so nervous. But I'll never forget, when she walked in the doors of the Oval Office, tears were coming down her face. She said, "¿Cómo llegamos hasta aquí?" And the president welcomed them in. My dad stuck out his arm and he said, "Mr. President, thank you for giving my daughter this opportunity." President Clinton put his hand on my dad's shoulder and he said, "You know what, Mr. Murguía? I hired Janet. She walked you into this office, but you're the ones who got her here."

That is the story of our community. That is the story of our contributions, and each and every one of you know and understand that story. I am proud to now be at the helm of the National Council of La Raza to work in partnership with so many other champions and with each and every one of you, because, you know what, our journey continues. There's much more work to be done, and I know that we can count on all of us working together to get that immigration reform bill done and get it over to the finish line, and to get Tom Perez on the Cabinet as Department of Labor Secretary, and to continue to do so many other things. Muchísimas gracias por todo su apoyo. Thank you all very much.

