



**Keynote Remarks by:
Cheech Marin
Latino Leaders Luncheon Series**

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Cheech Marin: It is indeed a giant source of pride to be getting this award today from this august assemblage of leaders of the Latino community. And I agree with Richard, Ricardo Lara, that in times of diversity or in times of seeming negative perception of Latino community around the country, I think we are on the edge of a giant, massive change in this country. Because I travel around this country constantly, every state, and the one thing I can tell you about the Latino diaspora in this country, it is like a lava flow -- you can stand in front of it but I just wouldn't recommend it, because it's everywhere. There is not a state that there is not a large and growing and thriving Latino community.

I was just in Topeka, Kansas recently, a city of 174,000 people. There are more Mexican restaurants in Topeka, Kansas than there are McDonald's. Fifty Mexican restaurants in Topeka, Kansas. So, Donald Trump was afraid of having the taco truck on every corner, but go to Topeka, there's no trucks there. There's restaurants, 50 of them.

We are in an interesting point in our country as far as political perception grows and every once in a while the political system coughs up a hairball, and you just go to, you know. I mean, for me, Trump is like gas, he will pass. It's going to make you sick, you have stomachache, people are going to move away from you, get away, but it will pass, trust me. Because America is too strong. The ideal of America is too strong and it's everywhere that I go -- and people cling on to that concept. It's not a point for them of putting somebody else down so that our identity may grow. Our identity is strong and it gets stronger everywhere I go. I don't care if you go to Maine or Alaska or Texas or North Dakota, which I was in just a few days ago. And if Mexicans can make it in North Dakota, dude, I would be fearful because it was 50 below and the wind, man. I was like, "Oh, dear God."

I've been fortunate and my wife who is from St. Petersburg, Russia, when we first met, she was on a quest to visit all 50 states in the union and she only had four left. And so, okay, we're going to North Dakota and then you will have three. And I met other people who are on the same quest, to visit all 50 states, North Dakota is always in the last three and I can see why. But she represents immigrants to this country, not Mexican or Latino or anyone else or Puerto Rican, who are Americans, but -- I'd like to remind everybody of that. And she's very adaptive right away. She learned Spanish in three months, reads it, writes it, speaks it. And I said, "If she can do that, then everybody else can do that. I'm going to speak Spanish all the time now, man. You've got to adapt to me now."

We're in challenging times but I see the bright future because I've seen the community that we represent and that we are part of all over the United States and it's impossible to stop this or to unweave the Latino influence in this country. They will never be able to unweave our influence nor should they want to. We are a giant contributor culturally, politically, economically to this country and have been since the inception. So, I look forward to where we are going in this country. Every once in a while, you hit a pothole and there you go. But we have to resist the negative energy and we have to insist on the positive energy. Yeah, you can clap. Because America is a great experiment who has succeeded. It's not always going to be a straight road but the idea of democracy is a unique invention of America and everybody bought into that theory and here we are.

I'm really pleased to receive this award especially representing the arts community. I've been fortunate -- can I get some water, please? I'm having -- thank you very much. You drank out of this? Nothing personal but --.

I began this journey by happenstance. I wanted some art to go over the couch. And it was in this city that I discovered the Chicano painters. And I've been studying art all my life, from a very early age, from 11 years old. I was born right here, right here where we sit. I went to Trinity Street School. I grew up on the corner of 36th and San Pedro here. My parents went to Jefferson High School. And I was in this group of cousins that we were blue collar Chicano kids. My dad was LAPD right here for 30 years, all my other uncles were upholsterers, but they had these high-achieving academic young kids, and we banded together to try to make ourselves smarter and we assigned each other topics.

My cousin Louie [phonetic] who was the smartest of us all and my cousin Regine Castro [phonetic], he says, "Okay. Regine, you're going to go on and learn all about Middle Ages, and then you bring it back to the group and we'll [indiscernible]." And Regine went on to earn the first ever doctorate in Chicano studies from Harvard

University. And I was the runt of the litter struggling to catch up, and he turned to me, "Okay. Cheech, you got to learn about art." Okay. What to do [indiscernible]. Well, what do you do when you want to learn about something? You go to the library. So, I went to the library and I took out all the art books. Every one they would let me take out, I took them out and I looked at the pictures, "Okay. That's Picasso. What a weird name. Okay, Picasso. And that's Cezanne and that's Miró and that's Rembrandt." And that's how I educated myself.

So, when it came time to I had some money to actually buy art, the gap in my knowledge was contemporary art. And so, I started going to galleries on the west side of LA and looking at contemporary art and the first group of painters that I ran into were these Chicano painters. And I recognized right away that these painters were exceptionally good because I knew what good painting was because I'd seen it all my life. And I was like, "How come --." It's like discovering The Beatles and it's like, "Oh, I know what this is built on. That's kind of like Chuck Berry and there's some Fats Domino -- [indiscernible] Fats.

But it was built on it but in their own distinctive interpretation. And that's what I saw when I saw these Chicano paintings. They're built on classic painting moves but it's their own interpretation. And that kind of describes Chicano culture. It's a traditional Mexican versus meets American pop and where they mash together and create this other vision is where our community was heading. And they were exceptionally talented.

And I said, "Well, how come I don't even know about them?" Well, they're not getting any shelf space because the museums won't and the galleries won't. Well, you know, I like them. And I was the perfect wave. I was the guy who knew what the art was, had money to collect it, and had celebrity in order to publicize it. So, I started collecting. And once you buy one Chicano painting, you were inundated by 50 Chicano artists, "There's somebody buying." And so, okay. And so, I was very lucky in that all the masterpieces of Chicano art were still out there in the public to be purchased and I did. And I'm an inveterate collector. I've collected marbles and matchbook covers and baseball cards and [indiscernible] for all my life, so I had a propensity to categorize everything and put it in their proper place, so, I started collecting Chicano art.

And the more I collected, the more I could see this pattern emerging that this is not just some cool painters that were hanging out because the school is not informed by any particular painting style. They're not impressionist or expressionist or minimalist. What the Chicano painters do is describe a community not in terms of style but in terms of flavor, the savor of the community. And for every painter who paints from their own particular viewpoint,

you put all these viewpoints together and you get this 360 of the community and you feel that taste and that presence of it much more than if you just wanted to define it by some academic standard.

So, I started collecting these paintings and at some point, very early in the process I realized, well, I got to show this. And friends in the art community started telling me, "Yeah, you got to show this." "Well, how do I do that?" "Well, you do a tour." "Okay. How do I do that?" "Well, you've got to get a sponsor." "Okay. How do I do that?" And so, it was from the process of thinking about doing a tour to actually getting a tour on the road was 10 years. And we went on a tour, the producers and I, and we did our little dog-and-pony show in front of every corporate boardroom in America, from General Mills to General Motors. And the army was going to sponsor the show. I almost did it just to piss the OGs off because [indiscernible] but the army is the biggest employer of Chicanos in the country. That's the number one employer, is the army. And so, I didn't want to be tied to any doctrine there except for Chicanos.

So, finally we were sponsored by the Target stores and Hewlett-Packard, and we went on a historic seven-year tour of 15 major venues in the United States. So, starting with the Smithsonian and then LACMA and the de Young and the Whitney and every other museum in the United States. And showing Chicano art to a heretofore uneducated public that in many cities they didn't even know they had a Latino population, and so they came out of the woodwork and came in record numbers to these museums.

And it was a real eye-opener for the whole country and for the whole artistic and museum community because Chicano art at the beginning was not viewed as fine art. They viewed Chicanos as agitprop folk art. And as such, their beginnings were in the political world because they were the face of the Chicano civil rights movement. And it wasn't Chicano art unless it had a barbwire, a corazon, an eagle, and a cactus. Really. And so, always the museum community viewed them as, "Well, okay, they're going to come and they're going to smoke dope and wear headbands. Get them out of there."

But they persisted. They persisted in developing as artists, reflective of not only their spiritual concerns but political concerns and all their human concerns. And they kept working in diverse areas but coming together to form this idea of what it is, what's Chicano presence, what is the philosophy, who's involved here. And it's an evolutionary category. It's changing as we stand here. Because I'm of the opinion, and it's backed up by all the artists that I talked to now, the Chicano is not strictly Mexican anymore. It involves Central America, it involves Mexico, it involves South America, because it has evolved to that, because

they grow up in the same circumstances, in the same neighborhoods, and the same inspirations. And so, it's just a unique category that keeps growing.

And fortunately, -- you know, I'm of the opinion now that if your motives are pure, good things are going to happen to you or to the community, and out of the blue the city of Riverside came to me and they said, "We want to offer you this museum building to house your collection." And I didn't understand it at first. "You want me to buy a museum? Well, I don't know if I got enough money to buy a museum." But, "No, no, no. We want to give you this museum to house the collection." And it took me a while to realize what that meant.

It meant that Chicano culture will now have a center to radiate this whole philosophy and this whole work of art throughout not only California or Riverside or Los Angeles or United States but throughout the whole world. It's the international center. And so, I quickly --, "We should call it The Cheech." That's a good name, easy for people to remember, The Cheech, "I'll meet you at the Cheech." "Yeah. Okay. Cool." Yeah, that sounds good. Opportunity, you know.

And so, we embarked upon this voyage now to facilitate the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art Industry and Culture at the city of Riverside. And I couldn't be prouder or more humble at the same time that this thing is actually going to, as Richard was saying, "Well, I'm in the AARP zone, it's like walking through a minefield." Every time you wake up, "It hurts there. What does it mean?" "I don't know." I just want to live long enough to see this venture, to this boat get into the water and around the world. And that's what it'll be. It's an international center. So, we will have dialogue with every other country in the world, not only just the United States but sometimes even in the United States your country changes.

My grandmother who died at the age of 95, very early in her life I was going to Trinity Street School here and the assignment was to trace your family's genealogy, where did your parents come from, where did your grandparents come from, blah blah. And so, I [indiscernible] down and came down. And so, the last person that I didn't know anything about was my grandmother and so I went to her and said, "Nana, I got this assignment and my dad says you were born in Mexico but I heard you were born in the United States. So, where were you born?" She goes, "Tucson." And I go, "Okay. Tucson." "Mexico." And I didn't know, is it the Alzheimer's kicking in. "Okay. Well, let me put it this way -- you were born in Tucson and so you're United States." "Yeah, Tucson. Mexico." And so, finally, she looked at me and says, "Tucson was Mexico, baboso." And she was that person for whom -- she didn't cross the border, the border crossed her. And that's emblematic of the

influence of Latino culture in the United States. The bulk of the United States was this shirt that got sewed on to the New England button. It was a small community. The bigger part of the country was from right here, and Spanish was originally European language spoken in this country for over 100 years before any other language came in.

So, now we come to the point where we are now where the spreading and the influence and the gift of this culture is going to be spread out and enter in a dialogue with every other country, artistic country in the world. And we've done a couple of museums overseas. We did Bordeaux, we did Barcelona, we did Madrid. And the reception has always been fantastic, "Oh, these Chicanos are very exotic." Damn right, baby. And we're welcomed wherever we go. I mean, there's massive changes happening here. They're happening faster than we can --.

I'll give you example of the massive change. Yesterday or, no, the day before, last week -- I have trouble with time. In the past, I was asked by the state of California by the secretary of state to film the PSA introducing the new marijuana laws for California, you know. Yeah, baby. I just said, "Okay. I think I know how to do this." Because in the early days, Chong and I were like laughed at. We said, "Well, you know, marijuana has some medical properties." And you should get to be my age and you encounter nausea every day. Who's laughing now, you know? Because I have not heard yet a claim for medical beer but I've heard a lot of claims for medical marijuana and the multitude of applications that it has to make your life better and to combat disease and the aftereffects or the side effects of whatever kind of malady you have. I use it every day in some form or another to combat. I don't like the -- sometimes medicines work and sometimes they don't. Marijuana always works, you know.

I'm just saying as the official representative of marijuana in the state of California. That's where I crack up like Mr. Peanut, Jeff Sessions, "Yeah, we're going to take care of marijuana." There's 39 states that has some form of legalized marijuana. Good luck. You think that every state is getting the benefit of the taxes from that initiative and applying it to the schools is going to, "Oh. Well, Jeff says it's [indiscernible]." That's not going to happen. It's like a lava flow -- you can stand in front of it, I just wouldn't recommend it. Nor should you.

And so, I'm very confident in the future of this country. I'm confident because of the nature of the people that I see as I travel all over from state to state. And I'm beyond happy to accept this fantastic award from such an august body. Thank you very much for having me out here tonight. Thank you.

[End of transcript]