

Latino Leaders Network
John Quiñones Receives Eagle Leadership Award
September 25, 2025

John Quiñones: *Hermano, gracias.* Thank you. Wow. Oh, man. Thank you. Thank you. And Aida Alvarado [phonetic], thank you for watching *What Would You Do?* *Gracias.* Good afternoon, everyone. It's great to be back in my home state of Texas.

I'm incredibly honored, very humbled to be receiving the Eagle Leadership Award and very happy to be sharing the day with my wife who's here, Deanna Quiñones. My number one fan, she keeps pushing me to do more and more of those true crime *20/20* stories. And I'm beginning to worry that she's taking notes.

You know, when Mickey and Rudy Beserra, my good friend, told me that they would be nominating me several months ago in New Orleans, where we were, I really thought they were kidding. It was like, I didn't believe it. What a privilege to be joining the ranks of all those other distinguished recipients who have come before me, including my dear friend and tremendous legendary journalist, Alfredo Corchado, who's here tonight - this afternoon. And of course, former Senator Leticia Van De Putte, former Congressman Charlie Gonzalez, my good friend, and my great friend, Rudy Beserra as I mentioned.

You know, in my core, I'm a reporter. I'm a storyteller. That's all I ever wanted to do ever since I was 13 years old. And the thing that I love about journalism and my profession is that as a journalist I get to shine a light on a lot of issues that people don't want to talk about. You know, they don't want to hear about, they don't want to see. Stories like the Uvalde School shootings where we spent a year covering that story. The story of Vanessa Guillén, which I'm now reporting on a six-part podcast for ABC News. Stories about social dilemmas like the ones we do on *What Would You Do?*

These are tough times for journalists. I hate to say it but these are difficult in fact dangerous times for reporters. It's getting more and more risky to speak truth to power. But that's why I created even a few years ago *What Would You Do?* because 17 years ago actually now, because I wanted to hold up a mirror to American society. We wanted to know how do you unlock the power and the light that exists in each and every one of us so that we're all better equipped to say hey that's wrong, or how can I lend a helping hand?

And what better tool to do that with than with hidden cameras on national television, right? *What Would You Do?*, this little show that we started, poses that very question. When you witness any kind of injustice, racism, bullying, gay bashing, spousal abuse, someone being ridiculed because of the color of

their skin or the accent in their voice, and that little voice condemned because of the religion they practice. And the little voice in the back of your head says, do something. Do you step in or do you step away? What would you do?

I mean, after all, isn't that the very definition of a person's character? It's not what we do when everyone's watching. That's easy. It's what we do even when no one is watching. Silence should not be an option. Silence is complicity. We have to raise our voices today more than ever because these are troubled, divisive times in this country. I've never seen our nation as divided as it is today. And I grew up doing the civil rights movements in San Antonio back in the '60s and '70s.

We are so brittle, brittle these days with anger that's fueled by ugly rhetoric and violence. Just witness what happened here in Texas yesterday at that ICE detention center in Dallas. This is a great diverse nation, a beautiful tapestry, a mosaic of different people and cultures, a nation of immigrants, right? For generations, we've been able to disagree about issues like politics, religion, sexuality, about an issue that's very close to me, immigration. But why can't we continue to do that with a bit of decency and respect? Whatever happened to that?

When we created *What Would You Do?* we wanted to showcase the sense of goodness, understanding, compassion, I think that exists in every one of us. With this little fly on the wall, we get to see the goodness in people with this show and it helps restore our faith in America. And after all these years of doing *What Would You Do?* I found that time and again the people who step in and do the right thing, first of all they're women, women are better at it. You guys sound the alarm much quicker than we do.

But the people who step in and sound the alarm about racism, bully racism, bullying, gay bashing, spousal abuse, they are people who themselves have been marginalized, people who have been through it, right? They sound the alarm because they know what it's like. They know how painful it can be. And that's why, in many ways, I feel like I was destined to do a show like *What Would You Do?* because of where I come from and the world that I grew up in.

I was born in the barrio on the west side of San Antonio. And you know how some people say, we were poor, but we didn't know we were poor. We knew we were poor. We had an old black and white television on the back of the house. And we saw how the other side lived. My father was a janitor who dropped out of the third grade, just like your dad, Carol. And my mother dropped out of the fourth grade to clean houses on the rich part

of town, Alamo Heights. Charlie, you know Alamo Heights. And very well, because that's how divided and segregated our city was. We lived on the west side, and the better off folks had places like Alamo Heights. My mom was a house cleaner.

I didn't speak English when I was six years old. Isn't that wild? Now I make my living, writing, and delivering the news in English. When I was six years old, I didn't speak a word of English, because in San Antonio, you didn't have to learn English. The church that we went through, St. Timothy's, was Catholic, is Spanish. *La tiendita*, where we bought our groceries. It was called *La Chicanita*. I worked there when I was eight years old, is in Spanish. The music that we danced to and loved singing to is in Spanish. And this is before bilingual education.

You know, in the '60s, my family couldn't afford preschool or kindergarten. My two sisters, Irma, Rosa, Maria, and me, we went straight to public school, like so many of us here, right? Straight to Carvajal Elementary in Mrs. Gregory's class. And I'll never forget being there in her class at 10:00 in the morning, twiddling my thumbs, because I couldn't understand what the teacher was saying. She didn't speak Spanish, and I didn't speak English. And at 10:00 in the morning, the school bell rings, and it's recess time. The kids all go out - right - to

the playground. Where does little Juanito Quiñones, six-year-old go? I walked home.

I lived a block away from the school and I still remember I went through my front door. And my dear mother, departed mother Maria said, "*¿Juanito qué pasó?*" I said, oh, Mom, it's over. I love school - two hours. Honest to God truth, she grabbed me by the ear and dragged me back to Mrs. Gregory's class because she knew the value in education, not having gotten one herself.

They used to punish us for speaking Spanish at the Carvajal and at Rhodes Junior High. The coach had a big old wooden paddle with holes drilled in it for extra speed and power. And they would give us three spankings on our rear ends if they caught us speaking Spanish. Do you know what that does to your appreciation of your own native tongue? It tells you that it's not good enough, right? But that's the world we lived in.

I tried to help my father and my mom because he made \$50 a week as a janitor at Brackenridge High School where I went to school. So I would shine shoes on Guadalupe Street. Me and my cousin Joey, we made a little shoeshine box. You know, I think Mi Tierra Restaurant still has the box. They're like a museum. And we would shine shoes and we'd go to the *cantinas*, the bars because the drunk guys didn't realize how much they were tipping you. And we made a killing *como son borrachos*, you know? We

charged just 10 cents a pair but they were like, here's the dollar.

So we did well until I came home one night and we were jumped by a gang on the west side. My community was called El Ghost [phonetic] Town and we got jumped by a gang from El Alto. So they took away all my shoeshine polishes and rags and my shoeshine box and my earnings from the night. That was the end of my shoe shining career.

But then when I was 13, my father was laid off from work. You know, again, he was a janitor at Brackenridge but he was laid off that summer. And me and my two sisters and my mother Maria, the five of us did what a lot of Latinos in South Texas had to do back then. We became migrant farm workers. We journeyed 1700 miles from San Antonio to Northport, Michigan, the cherry capital of the world, with strangers. We didn't know who these folks were. It was a caravan of workers. And I remember my mom - we didn't have much to eat - so she bought a gallon can of green beans and a couple of loaves of bread. And we survived on green bean sandwiches all the way up to Michigan.

There, I was teetering on the top of these ladders overlooking these orchards and orchards of cherry trees with a bucket strapped around my neck. They would pay us 75 cents for every bucket of cherries. And it would take me two darn hours

to fill that. Two hours for 75 cents. We did that for about six or seven weeks.

And then we do what all migrant farm workers do. We follow the crops down to Ohio, a little town outside Toledo called Swanton, Ohio, where we picked tomatoes for 35 cents a bushel. And man, with these hands, I did 100 bushels a day. That's \$35, right? And my father would do 150 bushels and my mother contributed and my sisters contributed and we learned the value of a family in times of difficulty pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps and getting over that financial hump.

But I'll never forget being on my knees on the cold, hard ground at 6:00 in the morning with my father, Bruno, looking at a row of tomato plants that for a young 13-year-old boy's eyes seemed to go on for miles and miles. That's what I had to look forward to that day of picking tomatoes. And my father, Bruno, said, *Juanito, vida*, do you want to do this for the rest of your life? Or maybe do you want to get a college education someday? It was a no-brainer, you know.

I knew I didn't want to do that kind of backbreaking work on my knees for the rest of my life, but no one believed in me. When I came back to San Antonio to Rhodes Junior High, I would ask my teachers, you know, how do I prepare for the SATs? How do I start studying for the AC? I'm going to go to college

someday. How do I take advanced placement classes in math, biology, or English?

Do you know what my own teachers would tell me? They would say, Johnny, Johnny, it's great that you want to be a television reporter, because I want to be a reporter since I was 13. I used to watch Geraldo Rivera in *20/20*. He's the only one with a Latino last name, right? And they would say, it's great, John, that you have this dream that you want to be a TV reporter someday, but we think you should try woodshop or metal shop or auto mechanics. Not that there's anything wrong with those great trades. A lot of people make a good, hard living, but I want to go to college, and my own teachers and my own counselors would do what people do on that TV show, *What Would You Do?*

They judged me by the color of my skin, the accent in my voice, the fact that no one in my family had gone to college, the fact that I didn't have great grades in junior high or high school, the fact that I didn't have any money to pay for college. They basically were asking, what gives you the audacity, John Quiñones, to think you're college material?

Well, thank God for my mother, those Mexican women, my mother Maria. She was the one who said, *mijo, vida, mijo*, my son, *mijo*. Don't be embarrassed about having to wear the same clothes to school every other day. At least we wash them, right? They're clean. They're clean clothes. She would say,

mijo, don't be so embarrassed about having to take bean and tortilla tacos for lunch when all the other kids are taking their fancy baloney and white bread. Now we know beans and tortillas are better for you, right? They have more protein. But Maria would say, what matters, *mijo*, is what's in here in your *cabeza*, in your brain, *mijo*, and what's in here, in your *corazon*, in your heart.

She was the one who kept me going. I went to Brackenridge High School. And then along comes this government program called Upward Bound, right? And I was one of the Upward Bound students. Basically, they gave kids from the *barrio* extra courses on Saturdays and during the summer of my high school. Just what I had been asking for, you know, how do I get better? Because the government knew, the government knew that the schools were doing a terrible job of not preparing anyone for college in those neighborhoods. And I wound up going to St. Mary's University. I know we have some St. Mary's grads here.

I got a job as a radio intern when I was 18. I was a drugstore delivery man at Blanco Pharmacy. The owner of the drugstore could hear me in the men's room practicing. Because I would practice into a cassette recorder my delivery, right? Because typical Mexicano, I spoke really fast and I would say, these are my shoes, this is my shirt. Nothing wrong, I love accents. But I knew that I was, if I was going to be like my

heroes, Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, Walter Cronkite, that I would have to get rid of my accent. So I did. I would practice.

But the owner of the drugstore, Mr. Teniente, Richard Teniente, heard me and he said, Johnny, do you want to go into broadcasting? I was 18. I said, yeah. He goes, I know the general manager of a radio station here in San Antonio and they're looking for interns. So he introduces me to them. And I got hired for \$2 an hour as an intern when I was 18 years old.

And you got to be from Texas to understand this. This audience would understand it. The disc jockeys, you know the guys who played music at the country music station, KKYX, had horses in the back of the studios that they would use in parades and public appearances because they were like local celebrities. My job as an intern was to feed the horses and pile up the horse poop in the back of the corral. But at night I would sneak into the control room where it had beautiful microphones and real recorders and I would practice and read whatever I could get my hands on.

The only problem was it was midnight and all the professionals who could criticize my work were gone for the day. The only one left was a janitor and his name was Pablo Gonzales. And Pablo's English was worse than my father's. But he was my critic. I would drag him into the control room and say, Pablo,

listen. ¿Cómo se oye? How does it sound? He would go, *más o menos*. You know, this is pretty good, pretty good. Jesus Christ, that was it, man.

Then they let me do the news in radio. This is the slow by slow step, you know. The great Martin Luther King once said, in times of adversity, you got to have faith. And faith is taking that first step. It doesn't matter if you can't see the entire staircase. Just take the first step, because tomorrow there will be another step and the next day another.

My first step at that radio station was to do the news between 2:00 and 4:00 in the morning, between all the country music station. Who the heck is listening at that hour? I think we had four listeners, my mother, my father, my two sisters. But that's how you do it, step by step. And from there, I got another job in Houston at KTRH Radio.

And then no one would hire me in television. I've really a message for the young people here. Don't give up. I can show you 70 letters of rejection that I got from every TV station in Texas. They wouldn't hire me because I didn't have any television experience. I was a radio reporter. I had a nice voice, but that was it. And they also would say, we already have a Latino. We don't need another one.

It was so depressing that I was going to give up journalism and go to try to get into law school at the University of

Houston. But instead, I wound up applying to Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. And I got hired, I mean, I got accepted to the program in New York and I got a master's in journalism.

And then I went to Chicago, I got my first TV job there where I did a story that I wanted to do for a long time. I was only 26 years old as a local reporter in Chicago. But I wanted to do a story on immigration. An issue that's of course is a hot button issue today. And I convinced my news director to let me go to Mexico and go undercover and pose as a Mexican trying to get into the U.S. I know it's a stretch, me posing as a Mexican, but -- no, no. My family's been here seven generations in Texas, right? But I wanted to pose as someone who was trying to get into the U.S. - right - from Mexico. I wanted to tell their story from the eyes of the immigrant.

So I went undercover, I spoke only Español, pure Spanish, right? I dressed down, I looked the part. I was 26 years old. I found a coyote who for \$300 sold me a fake birth certificate and a fake Social Security card. He had no idea I was a reporter. He thought I was just another, you know, young man trying to swim across. And he said, okay, okay, here you go. And tonight I'm going to put you in an inner tube and we'll float across the Rio Grande from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico to Laredo, Texas.

So then I go and tell my camera crew where to hide in the bushes. And I said, okay, tonight at 7:00 I hope I'll be coming across. I went back, met with my coyote. He tells me to take my clothes off, right? Because when you're swimming across the river, you have to put your clothes in a plastic bag so it doesn't get wet. Because if you get to the other side and the border patrol knows you're wet, they have an idea what you just did.

So I was nervous because I was wearing a wireless microphone - right - and I was by myself. And the coyote, you know, would get pissed if he saw I was wired. But he didn't care. I said, can I keep my T-shirt on, I said in Español. He said, okay, I don't care. It's fine. And he puts me on an inner tube, and I floated across the Rio Grande to Laredo. And I didn't stop there. I went back to Chicago, because remember, this is for the station in Chicago.

I got a job at a restaurant where we had heard that the owner of this restaurant had seven undocumented workers working for him, and he had not paid them in 17 weeks. And every time they complained, he would say, hey, guys, you get to sleep here in the basement. You get to eat all the food you want. You keep complaining, I'll call immigration and have you deported, which, as we know, is happening again 50 years later here today.

So I went there, and I got hired. [Indiscernible] *puro Español*, you know, I pretended that I just arrived from Mexico. He hires me as a dishwasher. With a hidden camera, I'm bussing tables working with those other seven Mexican workers. And then at night, I went down in the basement and I slept with the other workers. I still wonder what they must have thought because by day I was one of them washing the dishes. And then at night, I pulled out a little camera and I started interviewing them about their lives.

And through tears, they told me how they were being held against their will. Well, the story, a few weeks later, the story goes on WBBM in Chicago, my story about swimming across the Rio Grande, a three-part series, and then working at that restaurant. When that story aired -- oh, before that, the next day, I went to work with a camera to interview the owner of that restaurant. Can you imagine how his mind was blown? One day I'm his dishwasher and now I'm wearing a suit with a camera crew behind me speaking fluent English. And we had to chase him through the parking lot because he didn't want to tell us what he was doing to those young men.

But the story, the day after it aired on CBS Chicago, the U.S. government moved in. They shut down the restaurant, they arrested the owner, and they got the Mexican workers the money

they were owed and temporary visas to remain here while they worked on -- and then they --

And I knew then that those are the kinds of stories that I was destined to tell, and perhaps as a Latino reporter, I could tell better than anyone. I call journalism the candle in the darkness. Imagine this room, there's been an awful storm, God forbid, outside. The electricity's out, you know, it's nighttime. We're all running around here. We can't find the exits. We can't see our hands in front of our faces. Well, the journalist, he or she, is the person with the little candle or the little flashlight. They can shine it on the darkest corners of the room to illuminate injustice, to illuminate corruption, to illuminate civil rights violations, human rights violations when journalism is done right. We're not doing it right all the time, especially these days, but when journalism is done right, those are the stories we should be telling.

That story won my first Emmy Award from Chicago. And ABC News was watching and they hired me. So my dream came true to work at the same network where Geraldo Rivera had worked, with the great Peter Jennings.

I remember one of the first stories I had for Peter Jennings. I was a rookie reporter and I was in Nicaragua covering the civil wars in Central America. I had an interview with the president of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, who by the way

is the president again today, believe it or not, all these decades later. I called New York and I said, Peter -- getting an interview with Daniel Ortega was a big deal back then. So I promised them and they said, wonderful. John Quiñones we're going to have you on *World News Tonight*. And then I hang up the phone with Peter Jennings. The president's office - I'm in Nicaragua - calls again and says we're canceling the interview, so then I'm shaking in my boots.

I mean my idol Peter Jennings, you know, he was like, you know, James Bond, this guy. And I'm shaking in my boots in Nicaragua and having to tell him that what I had promised him I wasn't going to be able to deliver. And Peter Jennings gave me some words of advice that I carry with me to this very day. He said, listen young man. This is going to happen again in your career where someone promises you something, and then they don't deliver. But listen, don't worry so much about talking to the movers and shakers of the world, you know, politicians, presidents of countries, generals, presidents of corporations. John, don't worry so much about talking to the movers and the shakers of the world. Concentrate instead on talking to the moved and the shaken. In other words talk to the real people, you know, the real victims of war, the real victims of natural disasters. Those are the folks. Because as a Latino you can go

to places in Latin America that even I, Peter Jennings, he said, even I can't do - give a voice to people who don't have a voice.

That's what I try to spend my career doing all these years. I've been at ABC News 43 years. Can you believe that? Crazy. Whew. I mean, I was 12 years old when I started, the youngest correspondent. No. And I loved it. And then I started doing this TV show called *What Would You Do?* And that's the one that's made I think more connections with young people, especially and older folks, too, obviously, because it went viral on social media my show, *What Would You Do?*

When we started doing it, it was doing COVID for a while. Then my kids called us and I said, dad, do you know you're blowing up on TikTok? And then kids started doing their own what would you do scenarios. We're hoping the show will be back in a few months, back again. But in the meantime, I'm doing *20/20* and of course, *Good Morning America* and all those other shows.

But I want to leave you with the last -- people ask me what's been your favorite *What Would You Do?* scenario, right? There've been so many. We've done 1500 scenarios over 17 seasons. But one of my favorite is the one we did about what do you do if you're going down the sidewalk and the person in front of you collapses? Now, you don't know if they've had a heart attack or if they just fainted, right? And we did it at 7:00,

8:00, 9:00 in the morning when all the folks are getting on the train to go work in New York. We did it in Newark, New Jersey. And first we did it with a well-dressed business woman. She's walking along, you know, walking along. She faints. Immediately people helped her. It was amazing, even in Newark, New Jersey, who would have thought?

And we were impressed, but then I said, wait a minute, what if instead of a well-dressed businesswoman, it's a homeless man who is elderly, disheveled, dirty, you know, smelly, 88 years old, and he's carrying a beer can in his hand. So we found an actor to play that part. In New York, you can find all these actors, you know? He's an elderly man who's a stunt artist, so he falls very convincingly. So he's walking, he collapses. When it's a homeless man, elderly man, 88 people step over him, and no one was stopping to help.

One lady made the sign of the cross and kept walking. She said, well, this is a beautiful view of Newark. It's like the parable of the Good Samaritan, right? So we were like, wow, we were blown away. I said, shoot, man, I guess if you're homeless, you're not going to get a lot of help. If you're a well-dressed businessperson, you will.

So I'm about ready to come out, when I come out with the cameras and tell everyone it's the show. But before I could get out there, I heard the tapping of a walking cane on the

sidewalk. Tap, tap, tap. And then into the frame of the hidden camera comes this beautiful African-American woman who's stumbling along with a cane because she has suffered a stroke. And guess what? She's homeless, too.

And guess what? She's the one who stops and tries to help. She starts asking people, excuse me, does someone have a cell phone to call 911 for this man? He's white, she's black. Not that that should matter. Thirty-seven more people - we're counting them - go by. No one is doing anything. She then did something we didn't expect. She gets down with her walking cane and she takes the beer can out of the actor's hands.

She thought he was really homeless, right? And she stumbles over to the trash can and throws it away as if she was thinking maybe if we give him a little bit of dignity and people don't think he's a drunk, maybe they'll help. It didn't work. Forty-two more people are going by, stepping over him. No one is doing nothing or anything. The camera, the hidden camera is really tight on her face and she made a fist to the heavens, I remember, and she was like cursing God saying, how can you allow this to happen?

And then she stumbled down again and we could hear this because the actor on the ground was wearing a wireless microphone and she said, sir, she said to him, sir, I don't know your name, but I'm going to call you Billy. She said, Billy, my

name is Linda Hamilton and I'm homeless too, man. So don't you worry. I'm going to stay here until help arrives. And then finally a woman stops and calls 911. Thank God. And in all the commotion when I come out, people are excited. They get excited. They get crazy.

We're having people sign releases. But in our commotion, we lost our hero, Linda Hamilton, the homeless woman who stopped to help slipped away. But a few weeks later, we put the scenario on *What Would You Do?*

And man, after it aired, we got hundreds of phone calls and emails and social media folks saying, who was that woman? We want to help, because we said she was homeless. We want to help Linda Hamilton. They created a GoFundMe page on Facebook - our viewers, like yourselves, and they raised \$10,000 for her. So now my producer called and said, John, we've got to go find her and give her the money, right? How do you find a homeless person?

So we put pictures of her all over train stations and homeless shelters and liquor stores all over Newark, New Jersey. And we said, have you seen this woman? And the Facebook page for her was called Touched by an Angel, the GoFundMe page, where they raised all that money. So two weeks later, we found her, and my producer said, John, you've got to come to Newark and we've got to show her the piece. Bring your laptop.

So I bring my laptop. I sat on some church steps with Linda Hamilton, and I showed her the piece. And I said, Linda, remember the man who fell? And she said, ah, yes, I remember. I said, well, you caused quite a scene, man. You caused quite a stir. So we got her the \$10,000 in the bank. We got her an apartment that ABC provided for her. We got her medicine that she was supposed to be taking for her heart condition. And the thing that made her most excited, we got her, her own cell phone. So she was jumping up and down with joy like a 12-year-old. And I said, Linda, the next time you witness an injustice, you can call 911.

But at the end of my interview, I said to her, Linda, people are calling you a hero. They're saying -- they put up *Touched by an Angel*. Do you consider yourself an angel or a hero? She looked me straight on the camera. And she goes, no way, John Quiñones, no way. She said, let me tell you what happened. She said, I think God put me on that corner, on that street, on that day, because he knew you were there with your *What Would You Do?* cameras. And he wanted to teach people a lesson. And who better to teach that lesson than someone who has walked in the shoes of the homeless?

So today, I leave you with that message. The next time you witness any kind of injustice, and the little voice in the back of your head says, do something, remember the words and the

actions of Linda Hamilton, this woman who was homeless, who had suffered a stroke. Yet she stopped to help a stranger on the ground, not because she was going to be on national television. She didn't know that. Not because she was going to get \$10,000 in the bank. She didn't know that. Not because she was going to get her own apartment and medicine for her heart and her own cell phone. She did not know that. She did it because, as my dear mother, Maria, would say, her *corazon*, her heart, told her it was the right thing to do.

Muchas gracias. It's been a pleasure being with all of you. It's really great, man. Thank you so much.

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