



**Keynote remarks by Mayor Sam Liccardo of San José
Tribute to Mayors Reception
Antonio Villaraigosa Leadership Award**

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Sam Liccardo: Antonio, thank you so much. *Buenas noches a todos. Muchisimas gracias.* It's good to be with all of you this evening.

I'm really deeply humbled to receive an award that associates me in any way with Antonio Villaraigosa who has really established the gold standard for civic leadership among mayors in this country for his work particularly in Los Angeles. Both personally and professionally, Antonio demonstrated that no mountain was too tall, no challenge too great, building affordable housing, listing voter support for billions of dollars in new transit investment, ambitiously improving L.A.'s most troubled schools and improving public safety. Most

importantly, he did it against incredible odds in a city with a much worse hockey team than my own, and a far worse soccer club.

He set the example for younger mayors like me, maybe we're not as good looking but he set the example, although, we wouldn't necessarily want to emulate everything. Antonio revealed to me when we're talking about bike injuries that he's been in three bike wrecks. I just got in one myself last year and broke a couple vertebrae, so we're jointly forming a support group for mayors who are challenged in being able to say upright on their bikes. But I just want to say thank you, Antonio, for your incredible leadership and for your friendship. I am deeply indebted. Thank you.

I've learned a couple of lessons tonight. One is I'm never going to receive an award after Congressman Tony Cárdenas because, boy, he can speak. That was powerful. And thank you, Congressman, for all the work you do for juvenile justice, for education. Everything you're doing on energy and commerce, thank you for your leadership.

I, of course, want to thank Mickey [Ibarra]. I know it's been said tonight but I need to say Mickey has dedicated his life's work to improving opportunity for others. He is so incredibly generous in every sense of the word. Whether it was helping young Latino students attain their college dreams, helping mayors and cities achieve their goals when he was at the

White House or today providing a convening force for community empowerment in cities like San José and throughout the country. You've become such an incredible catalyst for us, Mickey. So many of our communities are rediscovering foster leadership within our own Latinx communities. I am so tremendously honored by this and I'm so grateful that we're all together tonight. Thank you, Mickey, for your life's work.

So, I would like to talk tonight just for a moment about *La Frontera*. I think a lot of folks in this room are pretty intimately familiar with the phenomenon of *Frontera* communities, border towns like San Ysidro, Calexico, Nogales, and El Paso, seemingly at the intersection of two worlds, featuring a collision of two cultures, a juxtaposition of two realities. With the passing of generations and the evolution of our American experiment, that *Frontera* experience has migrated further north. Particularly, for 11 million of our brothers and sisters who struggle daily in the shadows of their undocumented status, the *Frontera* that seemingly followed them into each city and each neighborhood where all of us live.

America's tenth largest city, San Jose, our 1.1 million people reside far from the border, about 450 miles north. But the *Frontera* in San Jose runs along the Coyote Creek, a few blocks from my house. It's a small un-navigable river that usually dries up in the summertime. But for thousands of San

Joseans, hundreds of thousands, it could be wider than the Rio Grande. East of that natural divide, most of our 350,000 Latinx residents and then roughly 80,000 undocumented residents dwell in vibrant communities, but too often struggle economically in the shadow of Silicon Valley. Their incomes amount too often to a small fraction of those earned by employees of the tremendous multinational companies just a few miles to the west, companies with names like Facebook and Google and Apple and Cisco and Netflix. Too many endure all the challenges of poverty that we know too well in our communities. And the cruelest irony is that many of those families were there first. That is, they were working and their predecessors, they're *antepasados* who were working in the orchards and the canneries and the factories well before the invention of the first semiconductor.

So, San Jose is very much a *Frontera* community at the intersection of two worlds. It's where our engineers develop the first disk drive and where Cesar Chavez launched the first grape boycott. It's the birthplace of both Siri and Steve Wozniak and where Spanish-language radio stations still have the largest listenership. And I have increasingly found my life situated on the *Frontera* at that intersection between those worlds. I want to be clear. I did not experience those hardships myself. I grew up as a child in the suburbs, largely unaware of my own white privilege and perhaps more remarkably

unaware of my own Latino heritage. I was blessed to have parents, Salvador and Laura, who could afford college tuition for all five of their kids and made that commitment to us.

My mother's maiden name is Aceves and several generations of our maternal ancestors emigrated from Mexico to marry other immigrants. Some have lofty social status - became leaders in the Mexican Army, and others had humble origins including our *gran abuelos*. Rosita Flores and Theodore Aceves came from Guanajuato with nothing built a life in San Jose. I had scant knowledge of any of this in my childhood. My mom made *tamales* at Christmas and we all broke piñatas on birthdays. But my uncles, whenever we talked about their ancestors, they denied that they had any Mexican blood. They said, "No, no, no, we're Spanish," whenever my mom would mention our Mexican forebears.

And be sure, my parents were committed to social justice. My dad used to volunteer time as an attorney to help Chicano students who were protesting in San Jose State. He worked on contingency for clients who were recommended to him by Cesar Chavez who represent farmworkers. And my mom would open our home to various folks who come in at dinner time, including one woman with a six-year-old with the name Dolores Huerta. That was remarkable. I wish I would've known then. But amazingly, we just didn't talk about our Mexican heritage. So I really learned about it in the last decade or so with the help of a few

friends and spurred on by my Latina wife Jessica after we moved into our neighborhood east of downtown.

The omissions of my childhood of course were small and really insignificant compared to the silence endured by so many children in all of our *Frontera* communities. I recall Omar, a fourth-grader I tutor at a local elementary school. He didn't speak about his parents because as I knew his mom was undocumented. I think of Miriam [phonetic], my wife's young cousin who couldn't explain to her principal why she didn't go to school the day she was so afraid that ICE would come and arrest her dad who was undocumented. And how many children in all of our communities have been warned not to speak Spanish in public.

This is the silence of the *Frontera*. It's reinforced by the specter of Trump's *muro fronterizo*. It is a silence that's in there [sounds like] solely to the benefit of occupants on only one side of that *Frontera*. Those of us privileged to eat affordable fresh food, so long as we overlook the substandard wages and working conditions of those migrant workers who pick the food. It's the silence that benefits those with elderly parents and young children who affordably avail themselves of undocumented care providers. But the silence is an unconscionable burden to millions of our brothers and sisters.

In some instances, a greater insult to their dignity than the oppressive conditions in which they endure.

The silence deepens the isolation of the *Frontera*. Those on one side suffer while the inhabitants on the other side remain oblivious to that suffering. It's for this reason that this network is so critically important. For many of us whose lives straddle both sides of that *Frontera*, we must communicate the realities about *Frontera* communities to the rest of the nation. We must lift the aspiration and opportunities of those who've endured the hardships of the *Frontera* so that they can share their stories. We must demonstrate the painfully stark implications of a house divided revealing how the *Frontera* has become a metaphor for a nation of deeply estranged people.

As David Brooks recently described it, we remain mired in the Golden Age of Deism, the belief that there is some malevolent "they" out there and they are destroying the quality of life for the rest of us. We have to be able to show this divided nation how they can see themselves within the faces of their own suffering neighbors. I know we have much to do to build the *puente* that links these two worlds and connects dreams with destiny and link struggle with success for the millions of people that we all collectively serve. That work lies at the crux of this community of leaders. I'm so grateful for Mickey's role in leading this community.

Whether from the example of my predecessor, Ron Gonzales, building more affordable housing in San Jose than any Californian city during his tenure, who has spurred me to lead an effort for March ballot measure that would generate more than \$70 million a year for affordable housing. My good friend Robert Garcia's leadership with Long Beach College Promise Program provides a blueprint for our own program which now eliminates the cost of tuitions, fees, and books for 1,600 low-income San Joseans. Carmen Yulin Cruz spoke with us, I believe it was just last year, Mickey, she stood up courageous to the Trump Administration when the federal government failed to respond to the dire need of her San Juan residents and inspired many mayors to band together as we have filed lawsuits on everything fighting the administration's position from DACA recipients to the census. Of course, Antonio Villaraigosa, whose Hire LA program became a model for teen jobs that we launched in San Jose. So, as a result, more than 4,000 young people most of whom are Latinx have benefited from summer jobs and job training as well as financial literacy classes. Thank you, Antonio, for your example.

With all these efforts and many more of so many people in this room, we will break down the barriers of our *Frontera* communities and bring our disparate worlds together. And of course, we're in an election year, a uniquely troubled moment in

our nation's history. We certainly must support the leaders who can heal the divisions of our *Frontera* nation. I was just talking an hour ago at the reception with Topeka mayor, Michelle De La Isla, who is courageously running for Congress for the first time. Let's get out there and support her in Kansas, yes, absolutely. Of course, we must reclaim our democratic institutions and remove their greatest threat, a despotic president who thrives politically by exacerbating the divisions of the *Frontera*.

In the words of a great playwright, Luis Valdez, "*El futuro pertenece ellos que pueden imaginarlo,*" the future belongs to those who can imagine it. This year, we have the opportunity of reimagining a new future for our nation, one united rather than divided by its *Frontera* experience. In the spirit of *Si se puede*, I look forward to working with each of you in the year ahead to make those dreams come to reality. Thank you all.