

LATINO LEADERS

 NETWORK™ 

HON. MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

**Remarks by
Martin Castro
Latino Leaders Luncheon Series**

**March 24, 2016
Mayflower Hotel
Washington, DC**

Martin Castro: Thank you. Thank you, Janet, for that introduction. It means a lot to me coming from someone like you. You are a Latino civil rights icon and a leader in the United States in your own right so to have you say a few words about me means a lot. I very much appreciate that. Thank you.

Thank you, Mickey, and the Latino Leaders Network for honoring me today. When Mickey first called me to tell me, I actually thought you were joking, because I looked at the list of all the wonderful honorees, some of whom you have indicated are here today and others weren't, I didn't feel that I was worthy of it because I feel that the work that I'm doing is still a work in progress. But I'm very honored today to have this opportunity and to let you know that I'm going to continue to earn this beautiful award. Teresa Niño, if you're here -- I know she's now in charge of DHS Homeland Security -- if you see something, say something. I don't know if I'm going to get this on the plane so I might need a note from you, it's a very sharp-looking object.

Well, I never had a Quinceañera but I got to believe that this is what it feels like, taking all the pictures at the two receptions and seeing all these wonderful long-time friends, making new friends, and being congratulated. It really feels neat. So, 37 years late and maybe the wrong gender, but nonetheless, thank you, Mickey, for this wonderful opportunity.

Mickey brings us all together not to tell a story that is uncommon or unique but a story that is common to all of us,

because he brings us and gives those of us who've been honored to receive this award the opportunity to share our stories because they are so similar to one another. We're not special people. We're all ordinary people, each and every one of us, doing extraordinary things, doing special things. And by doing those things not only for ourselves and our family but for our community do we each and every one of us become very special. Because all of us in one way or another have benefitted from someone else's efforts, someone else's leaps of faith. Sometimes they're our moms, our grandmothers, sometimes they're folks we don't even know, and each of us stand where we are today in whatever positions we're in because of other people.

And so, I would be remiss if I didn't thank some of those people that have helped me get here. Certainly my parents, my dad, Ray Castro who you've heard a little bit about in the remarks and I'll talk a little bit more about him in a few minutes. He passed away 10 years ago but his community service and that of my grandfather before him really did help set the path for me to stand here before you. My mom, Lucia Castro, who hopefully is watching on live stream. She's a big Facebook fan. She hasn't quite worked out the YouTube thing yet. But she came from Mexico in 1960 for the same reason as my grandparents and my dad's side came in the 1920s, for opportunity, for the American dream. And she gave me my language and my culture, and without that I don't think I'd be the person that I am today.

Of course, my own family, my former wife, Amalia and our two sons, Nez and Maximo. They couldn't be here today because they've got to be in school and they're taking spring break next week, so I figure one week off is more than enough. And of course, the people that I work with especially at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. And some of them are here today and I want to acknowledge: Mauro Morales, our staff director -- I'd like you to stand, Mauro; my special assistant, Irena Vidulovic; and my former special assistant, Juana Silverio is over here; and although she's not here, Marlene Sallo, my former staff director. All of them have contributed to the successes that we've had at the Civil Rights Commission in the last five years and without them, again, I wouldn't be here accepting this accolade.

I might say 95 years ago almost, my grandfather first came to the United States. He crossed over in 1920 at Laredo, came to

work in Chicago for three years at the steel mills and the grain elevators, and then he went back home to Mexico. And he had little sisters to provide for, orphan sisters, their parents had died, but he realized that he couldn't make it in Mexico, that he had to go back to Chicago because that's where the opportunity was. And in fact, tomorrow is the 91st Anniversary of my grandfather coming back this time for good to the United States. And I actually have a copy of his immigration papers where he was brought in as a non-quota immigrant. That was the days when they were bringing Mexican labor in because they needed it and they took all the quotas away because they just needed our hard working people. My grandfather was one of them, and he said he was going to go to Chicago and look for work and that's where he stayed, and because of that I'm here today. Now he and my grandmother could never have realized that the American dream that they were looking for would one day involve their grandchild becoming a presidential appointee, the first Latino appointed by the first African American president. That's how beautiful this country is and that's the country he came to.

And they worked hard. They had 17 kids -- as we were talking, Janet, you know there're large families in our community -- and my dad was number four. And he did not finish high school, but when they came here, they wanted to contribute. They didn't come here to beg. They came to build. They didn't come to take. They came to contribute. They didn't come to hurt or injure or commit crimes. They came to build communities and build cities and build families. And those are the individuals that are the fabric of this country today. And my story is part of theirs and part of yours.

When my mom finally came from Mexico in the 1960s, she met my dad and they got married and had me. My dad was working two jobs. He worked at the steel mills and he also was a bus driver for the Chicago Transit Authority. My mom didn't work, she was at home working harder than anybody else, trying to raise me, and so, I spoke Spanish for the first few years of my life. I didn't learn how to speak English until I started in Head Start, and that's an important anti-poverty program that but for that I wouldn't have had the opportunities that I have today and I certainly wouldn't have learned English until much later in my educational career.

But I'm also the product of Affirmative Action in higher education and I'm proud to say that, because oftentimes we let people take those wonderful opportunities that we have been able to use to reach the American dream and we let them twist them into things that they are not. So, Affirmative Action is a positive program. Many of us in this room and many of us listening hopefully know that they've been the recipients and the beneficiaries of that and we need to let people know that it's a good thing. It has contributed to the fabric of this country.

And as was said earlier, I got involved in politics and government early. Literally I was five years old, my dad was campaigning for Bobby Kennedy, and a lot of the folks in the neighborhood weren't opening the door for these young Mexican guys, he thought, "Maybe if I bring my cute little son with me," -- I was a lot cuter back then -- "people will open the door and let me campaign." And sure enough, he brought me and it was a lot easier for folks to open the door and begin to talk about the campaign. And from that moment on, my dad had me at his side in political activities and in the community work he was doing. He started programs that keep kids out of gangs, sports programs, and a number of other initiatives. And so, I grew up with the knowledge that community service, giving back to your neighborhood was something that was part of the fabric of who we are, and as I tell my kids, that's what our family does -- the Castro Family gets involved in helping the community. So, we bring our boys when we can to activities in the community so that hopefully one day they'll be standing here telling you about some of the things that they've been able to do to help that next generation.

But it really was my dad's campaign for Democratic committeemen that convinced me that I wanted to be a lawyer, because as you heard my dad had been pushed away from politics because of his ethnicity, and I vowed that I would never let that happen to me. But when he ran in one, I saw that the people that were making the decisions about my neighborhood, about my community, about my people didn't look like us, they didn't come from our neighborhood, and many of them were lawyers. And actually many of them went to DePaul or Loyola schools so I thought, you know what, that's what I want to do. I want to go become a lawyer and I want to go to DePaul because that's where I think I could have the most impact on my community.

And before that I actually wanted to be the first Latino astronaut and I was very serious about that. I was going to be going to the Air Force Academy, it's a whole other story. Maybe we'll do a STEM event one day, Mickey, and we'll talk about that. But that's when I decided I'm going to go to law school.

And when I went to college, DePaul, I had no idea how to get there, no way to figure out how to apply for financial aid, yet like one of the many series of leaps of faith, the leaps of faith that my grandparents took to get here, the leap of faith my mom took to come to America, I had to take leaps of faith. When my high school guidance counselor told me that despite the fact that I was a very good A student at a Catholic school my parents were working very hard to pay for, that I should not go to college, that I should go work in the steel mills where as Carmen Lomellin, Ambassador Lomellin knows, our families on the southeast side of Chicago, northwest side of Indiana, that's where you went to work, that's where you had the opportunity. My grandparents worked there, my dad. "No. Go work at the steel mills, Mr. Castro." I said, "I don't want to work at the steel mills. I want to go to college." And she insisted that I would not be good college material.

So, I had to go home and fill out my own applications, my own financial aid. My parents couldn't help me because they'd never done it. So, I took the leap of faith and did it myself, got into DePaul and at nights I would -- during the day I would go to school and at night I would help my dad run his political organization. So, I got to see politics firsthand in Chicago. And over time, I eventually started to apply for law school. My undergrad professors taught me how to apply to law school. And I applied to a dozen law schools, got into 11. I couldn't afford the fees because we didn't have a lot of money so they told me about this fee waiver program, so I ended up applying everywhere I could and I got into every school except one -- Harvard. Harvard waitlisted me. And my dad, again, didn't go to college but he knew Harvard was like, "You've got to apply to Harvard. That's important," but in the end it was between Michigan and Wisconsin.

Wisconsin had a program where they were offering me free tuition, room and board, everything paid plus \$10,000 a year stipend, so, \$30,000 in my pocket, or the University of Michigan

which said, "Here is your loan package. Here is one grant or two but here is the \$60,000 in loans you're going to have to take out," what do you do, and I asked my mom and dad, they're like, "Pues, hijo, \$30,000, right?" And I'm like, "I don't know." And I thought about it and I took another leap of faith. I said, "You know what, I'm going to go to Michigan because it's the best --" it was between number one and number three ranked at that time -- "law school in the country. It's going to be an investment in myself. I'll figure out later how I'm going to pay for it." So, I went to Michigan instead, one of the best decisions I ever made in my life.

Not that I'm any better a lawyer than I would've been had I gone to Wisconsin because unfortunately we still live in a society where people of color, especially Latinos, we have to go above and beyond to prove our capabilities. We have to have additional imprimaturs on ourselves to show that we merit being at that table or at that law firm or in that law school. So, the decision I made was a decision to cloak myself in the garb of majority America and it worked. And that gave me an opportunity to work at Baker & McKenzie, the largest law firm in the world, and do some other amazing things throughout my career.

But most of all, I'd always remained involved in civic and community life because that was what we did. That's what Castro's do. I ran for office myself at one point, got to know a gentleman named Barack Obama and someone named Michelle Obama and supported them when they ran and they supported me when I ran, and in the end they continued on in politics and I continued on in the private sector. But when the opportunity presented itself and the president asked me to serve at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, to me it was an amazing opportunity, particularly to take this agency that had been derailed and sabotaged by those who do not support civil rights and to be able to try to bring it back and make it a voice again for the civil rights of all Americans, I jumped at the opportunity. And it's been an amazing five years. It's been tough. It's been rewarding. It's been exhilarating. It's been surprising. Anyone in government, and I know many of you are here, you know the challenges that government provides but you also know the tremendous opportunities that it provides. And I've been in a very unique position where I've been able to be in the private sector and the public sector at the same time.

But I am so pleased and honored and fortunate to be the chair of the Civil Rights Commission at this point in our nation's history because the only other time where this commission and this issue of civil rights has been at the forefront of our community and our dialogue at the national level has been during the Civil Rights Movement. But now -- and I'm not going to talk partisan politics but I am going to talk about some of the hate speech that we hear today and some of the hateful policies that are coming across all of our television sets and our newspapers and our Internet, because at this time in our country's history we're seeing a resurgence of white supremacy, we're seeing a resurgence of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino, we're seeing a growth of Islamophobia, we're seeing misogyny, and it is something that we cannot tolerate in this country and it is something that we will not tolerate as long as I'm chairman of the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

When we hear that Mexicans and Latinos come here as rapists and criminals and degenerates, we know that that's a lie. We look around this room and we see what we really are. We're lawyers. We're doctors. We're waiters and wait staff. We are mothers and fathers. We are people contributing. We are students and volunteers. We are the fabric of America. We are the energy of this economy and we are what has made this country what it is today and no one will allow us to think otherwise.

When you hear in the news that Muslim communities should be under greater surveillance than other communities in the United States of America, the United States Commission on Civil Rights looked at this issue and we made clear that our government needs to work in partnership with diverse communities, with the Muslim community, that we ought not be identifying communities and racially profiling them. We said this several years ago on our most recent report on the topic and we have to say it again in light of the recent news. We will not allow that to occur on this commission's watch.

Furthermore, we talked a little bit about police force. I don't think there's anyone in this room who hasn't had somebody in their family that has been affected by police misconduct. I know I've directly been involved with it. There's a lot of great police officers, the overwhelming majority of them are out there doing good, but there are enough of them out there in our

cities, in our small towns, and yes, in the border patrol that are creating very difficult situations for our community. And it is something the commission has been working on and we're going to issue a report shortly that's going to really outline some strong recommendations on how to address this topic.

Finally, I can't step down here without talking about the work we've been doing on immigration. To me, that has been the most fulfilling work that we've done under my chairmanship. We went down to the border last year, about a year ago, to the Karnes Family Detention Center to meet with moms and kids who would come over from Central America who had risked their lives to make it to this country only to be incarcerated, many by a for-profit incarceration system. And those that were lucky enough to be released unfortunately were being sent back to countries where many of them, according to news reports, are being killed.

And to hear the stories directly of these children and these moms is heartbreaking. One child in particular I was talking to at a cafeteria, there were four little kids about eight and nine years old, three boys and a girl, asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up, three said lawyer, one said doctor. The sad reality is they probably have been sent back and I don't know what'll ever become of them. But as I was walking away, I said to them, "Dios los bendiga," -- may God bless you -- and then the little boy grabbed my hand and he goes, "Por favor, señor, sacame de aqui, llévame contigo," -- "please, sir, take me with you" -- and I started to cry. And to me, that little boy and the things that I heard then were things that we have to share with the president and with the Congress. So, we issued a very strong report to the president and Congress that we need to change the way our country handles immigration particularly when it comes to women and children and families. And we're working hard at it and we're glad to see that there's some movement in Congress. Senator Reid has submitted some legislation that would provide legal counsel to these individuals, but we're going to continue as long as I'm chairman to the very last day to advocate for more change in how we treat our immigrants.

Thank you. So, I'm going to leave with you a little quotation that I read periodically when it gets a little challenging, and it does sometimes in public service as we all know, but we know that we're there for a reason and we have to continue the march that was started by our forbearers, we have to continue the

successes and in many times fight them so that the next generation continues to enjoy the things that we've enjoyed. This is a quote by Teddy Roosevelt called *The Man in the Arena* - - "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

So, many of us have seen victory, but when we see defeat we should realize that defeat is just the other side of victory, because if you don't attempt to obtain something, if you don't challenge the possibility of failure, you will never succeed. And from every failure, there's a success. I had learned that in my life. So, failure is not just an option, sometimes it's a requirement. We have to go out there and make a difference. And I know that each of you is in that arena with me and I will continue to be in that arena until such time as I have the opportunity to step down. So, thank you.

[End of transcript]