



The Eagle Leadership Award  
Keynote Remarks of Alex Padilla  
The Sutter Club, Sacramento, CA  
April 13, 2023

Alex Padilla: I want to thank Mickey Ibarra for making sure that we did not pause for lunch, so that I can have a little extra time before we hit that 2 o'clock mark to say what I got to say.

Good afternoon, everybody. It feels like a homecoming. Thank you all for being here. A lot of thank-you's, starting with my brother, Congressman Tony Cárdenas, for his kind and if you couldn't tell, heartfelt remarks and introduction. I want to thank my friend Mickey Ibarra for bringing us together, the Latino Leaders Network, your entire team for gathering us and organizing this event. To my friend, our lieutenant governor today; anybody need a commission appointment, a board they're interested in, now is the time.

You know, for me, it is absolutely special to be here in Sacramento, not just receiving but sharing this award because Sacramento is our state capital. It's also where the Latino

Legislative Caucus is celebrating its 50th anniversary, 50 years of making progress. The state capital is also where I served for eight years in the state Senate, for six years as Secretary of State, before becoming the first Latino to represent California in the United States Senate. All done. You didn't let me finish - first appointed by Governor Newsom and last November elected by the people of California.

And so as I look around the room I see many friends, many colleagues, many leaders and champions of the Latino community who have gathered here today. I, on behalf of both Angela and myself, just tell you how much it means that you are here as we accept this Eagle Leadership Award together.

Now, in 2017, I was honored with the Eagle Leadership Award but as Secretary of State. At Mickey's request, as he does with all the honorees, he asked that I share the story of my upbringing and why I pursued public service. And I did. I shared that with the crowd gathered in San Antonio, Texas at the luncheon that day. And look, my story is one that many, many, many of you already know. There's a couple of new friends here, but we've been on this journey together for many, many years.

Yes, I'm a proud son of immigrants from Mexico. My father worked as a short order cook. My mom used to clean houses. I grew up in the working-class community of Pacoima, California a couple blocks from our Congressman here, and a couple of blocks

from Assembly Member, Luz Rivas, with dreams of playing professional baseball. Odds are hard. I used to like math and that, you know, somehow did well in science. That explains the engineering degree from MIT.

But it was Proposition 187 in 1994 that got me to quickly put that engineering career behind me when I was shocked into the realization that I had no choice but to get involved with government and politics if I want to do my part in defending our community, defending the American dream, and influencing the trajectory of our state.

But today, I've actually chosen to share stories from a different chapter in my life. Mickey, stories that are equally defining of who I am, of the leadership I try to provide, and of the spirit of the Eagle Leadership Award.

Now the first story - this may come as a shocker from what we've heard already today - the first story is the story of my first date with Angela. Tony, you've already taken the glory and the credit for making the introduction. So after that bowling night, I asked Angela out to dinner, and a couple of weeks later, we went out for sushi.

And as I vividly recall, before I could even get an order in, I began to listen to Angela share stories about what it was like growing up as daughter, caretaker, and advocate to a single mom with a mental illness, specifically bipolar 1 with

schizoaffective disorder. I learned about battles with doctors and hospitals and the health care system. I learned about the struggles of too few resources and services that are available. And this was 20 - 30 years ago. We're talking about the need for more investment in mental health. Now, imagine the experience of people decades ago.

And I learned the stories of her family, her uncles and aunts coming together to support *Tita*, my mother-in-law. So, by the time the check came I thought I was being a gentleman, lending an ear. And I thanked Angela for trusting me and confiding in me to share what I thought was pretty sensitive for her family. I assured her that I knew how to be discreet. And she replied to me with a, no, you idiot. I'm not telling you so that you keep it to yourself. You're in a position to do something about it. And it's only by talking more about mental health that we raise awareness, improve understanding, and overcome stigma that stands in the way. So, do you see why I fell in love so quickly?

I was immediately enlisted into Angela's mental health advocacy army. And now all of you are too. I pulled out of the swag bag -- when you go through your swag bag you'll find this little pouch. These are the beads Angela referenced. Feel free to wear them or pass it along to somebody who may need them, or may not know need them.

The second story I'm going to share is from 2012. A few months after our wedding - Mickey, this is going to sound familiar - a few months after our wedding we were flying to Orlando, Florida to attend the annual NALEO conference where I was going to become president of NALEO for the first year. And it must have been somewhere, I don't know, over Oklahoma, Arkansas, somewhere. I'm on the plane going through the materials in preparation for the board meeting where I'd become president. I came across one of the documents that gave the mission and the history of NALEO. Many of you are familiar with NALEO. Right? The mission is to ensure that Latinos are represented in every facet of our democracy, founded by the late Congressman Ed Roybal many, many years ago. And I thought, well, this is a great synopsis instead of me having to try to explain NALEO.

Honey, read these two pages, because I'm about to become the president. So she read it. And she says to me, honey, this is a big deal. I said what's a big deal? She says, well, NALEO. You're about to become the president. And I said, well, you know what that means for you. She paused there. What does it mean? I said you're about to become the first lady of NALEO.

It was a little bit of a joke, but I shared that story with Arturo Vargas after I became president of NALEO. Arturo actually took it seriously. He said, well, you know, we've

never had a first lady or a first gentleman of NALEO. If Angela's interested in having some sort of formal role let's think about what it could be.

And so, if any of you have attended a NALEO conference in the last ten years, you now know how the community service project was born. That was Angela's idea and Angela's role because of her incredible vision and her incredible heart.

Now, I share these stories with you because I love her and because I could not serve in the Senate without her love and support. She makes me a better person. She makes me a better leader. But I also share this because I recall Angela's challenge from that very first date to not keep sensitive or uncomfortable experiences or perspectives to myself, but to share them as a way of educating others, tackling problems, and arriving at solutions.

Now, many of you have asked what it's been like for me for a little bit more than two years now serving in the United States Senate. As I've reflected on the question over and over again, I keep coming back to this. I mean, among the biggest opportunities and responsibilities that come with serving in the Senate is sharing stories, Mickey, our stories, our perspectives as the Senate and Congress as a whole discusses and debates the biggest policy issues for our country and the planet.

And as the Latino Leaders Network has us gathered here today to celebrate leadership, I think it's important that we're mindful that it's not just important to recognize the issues that we fight so hard for. Whether it's tackling climate change or access to health care, improving education, voting rights, equality, and more. I think of leadership to be celebrated.

I'm reminded of this every day when I think of Angela and our boys. It is rooted in the values that drive us in those fights - ethics, integrity, respect, inclusion, valuing diversity and humanity. And so take that all in.

I'd like to think that in my first two years, I've lived up to those values when we negotiated the American Rescue Plan earlier in the pandemic, working to ensure an equitable distribution of resources to combat COVID-19. It was a new way of thinking. When we negotiated the Infrastructure and Jobs Act or the Inflation Reduction Act, we wanted to make sure that we prioritized, not left behind but prioritized low-income communities and communities of color who are too often on the front lines of the devastating impacts of climate change - a new way of thinking.

I've been aggressive - not shy - I've been aggressive about nominating and helping confirm federal judges, the most diverse group of federal judges and cabinet members in history, including several from California. We've worked to reduce

student loan debt by providing direct resources to college students, a lot of Latino college students in California, as well as supporting Hispanic serving institutions and more. I can go on and on and on with the litany of impacts I'd like to think that I've made by serving in the Senate.

Those of us in public service know that every time we celebrate an accomplishment, we're also quick to say, "But there's still so much more work to do." And there is, from gun safety, to improving mental health, to modernizing our immigration system. And only because I have a couple of minutes so I can manage one more story.

I wasn't planning to but I'm going to because I think it's a good one. You know, we talk about how we're impacting Congress and the outcomes of Congress. It is a people business. Sometimes it's tough enough convincing other Democrats to do what you think is right. Imagine reaching across the aisle, trying to convince Republicans especially on this intractable challenge of immigration.

And so when I first got to the Senate, I'm a member of the Judiciary Committee, whether it's an informal Committee in this bipartisan roundtable, you know, can we find a middle ground here and get something done? Unsuccessful despite our efforts. You know, so there I go knocking on Republican senator doors one at a time, one at a time. You know, behind closed doors let's



get to know each other. Let's talk about what's doable in your mind. And frustrated as all hell at being told, look, Alex, I'm with you. I'm for Dreamers, but Biden, the border, fentanyl, blah-blah-blah. No, don't get me wrong. Farm workers, I get it. But Biden and the border and fentanyl, and blah-blah-blah.

Like they say all the right things, but they can't get themselves to separate a family or an individual coming to our southern border seeking asylum, from someone who has been here 10, 20 years or more working, paying taxes, contributing to the success of our nation, and working on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic. We ought to be able to do right by them while we figure out the other challenges.

And there was this day when I was sitting with one of my Republican colleagues who shall remain nameless. This is, Alex, I'm getting to know you. I hear good things about you, so I don't want you to get me wrong. We are pro-immigrants in my state. It's a pretty red state. And I get it, I see immigrants that are in in my state and they work in factories. They raise their kids and their kids do well in school. They're so proud of their kids and they graduate high school. Some go on to college. Some become teachers or firefighters or sometimes even work in the plant and become managers and supervisors. We're very proud of that.

And so, I kind of took a deep breath and I kind of leaned in. And I said, you know what else they're capable of? One of them can one day serve as a United States senator. And you should have heard the gasp. I wasn't sure if it was him or the staff or both. But I think he got my point.

I think I might have changed the mind or a heart that day. Still working on the vote, still working on a few more votes, but little by little we keep chipping away. I just want you to know that's not just the mindset but the heart that I'm bringing to the job.

I'm not naive about how hard all these things are, right? None of us sought positions of leadership because it's easy to make change. I mean think about Congress. Congress was designed to be inefficient. Congressman Cárdenas can give you example after example. In the Senate, even worse. We have this filibuster that we have to overcome to make progress and make change.

But I also know that every single leader in this room and the Latino leaders that have come before us nobody has pursued these positions because we thought it was going to be easy. We do it because we know it's important. It is important. It is hard. But it is possible to make progress. Yes. *Si, se puede.* We must continue to make progress by bringing leaders together and continuing to work together.