

LATINO LEADERS NETWORK™

MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

Remarks by:
The Honorable Luis Gutierrez
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Luis Gutierrez: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

I want to obviously thank Tom Saenz for the very kind and generous words of introduction, and to share with him, as I know we all do, that we're delighted, happy, excited that he's at the helm of MALDEF, doing the kind of work that is so necessary. I've had the opportunity to be able to talk to him and gain from his experiences, his insight, and his knowledge, and I'd always be thankful to that and to his friendship.

Mickey Ibarra, I've known for a much longer time. And I want to thank you, Mickey, and everyone at the Latino Leaders Network for this wonderful opportunity to address you and for the recognition that you give me here this afternoon. I really, really appreciate it. Thank you, Mickey. It was wonderful meeting with you this morning in my office.

I have to say -- I know there are so many of you that are wonderful friends of mine, but I do want to reach out to someone I was -- in 1984 I ran for Democratic committeeman so that I could become part of that Democratic Cook County machine -- I ran against Dan Rostenkowski, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, because he made a decision that Harold Washington, a Democratic congressman, won the primary, and he and other Democrats decided that a Republican would do better and they started a campaign in '83 that was called, "Epton: Before It's Too Late." And so, I kind of responded viscerally to that kind of prejudice within my own party, my own Democratic Party, and the next year I decided, well, you know what, the best way to deal with this is to take them out. So, I said I'll take them out. So, I was driving a cab back then -- it was a little difficult driving a cab running against the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, but I didn't get my taxes audited for that year at least. But on a very serious note, I got a whopping 24.8 percent of the vote.

And I still remember, it was seven o'clock on that election night in March 15th, and you know, the radio at seven o'clock, it kind of does a little toot-toot-toot, little music, and says the polls have closed. And I remember my wife looking at me because a tear came down my eye, and she said, "But don't cry. You don't even know how badly you've done yet." And I told her -- and it's very serious -- I said, "Honey, seriously, I'm just happy it's over." You know, I didn't quite understand what I was getting into. I'm tired of knocking on people's doors. I'm tired of asking people for money. I'm tired of them putting up my poster, taking down my poster. I'm tired of -- all our neighbors -- Dan Rostenkowski was very good at politics, he got all my neighbors to put up his poster, and it was difficult to drive home, Rostenkowski posters leave, Rostenkowski posters --. Anyway, I told her I was really crying because I was happy I'll never do this again. Of course, I didn't keep that promise. I did it again.

But there was someone who reached out to me and did see some promise in spite of the dismal results, right, 24.8 percent. Someone did see some promise in me and said, "You know, you really shouldn't be driving a cab. You should be doing something else. You should be organizing and you should be helping people register to vote and organizing and galvanizing the community and empowering that community." And he told me growing numbers doesn't mean growing influence unless we organize. That was Juan Andrade who hired me after that devastating debate, and I want to thank him very much. He is here today. And I tell you that to say that we're all here because somebody at some point extended a helping hand, gave us encouragement sometimes at the points of our lives when it seemed most unlikely that we were to succeed.

My mom and dad came to the United States of America in 1952 from Puerto Rico. They didn't speak English, they didn't even have warm coats so they could get through the winter when they got here but they came here with a determination and with a desire to do better for themselves, and with an understanding that back in Puerto Rico there wasn't much of a future for them. So, as a 21-year-old father of mine and my 19-year-old mother who had never passed ninth grade, who couldn't speak English, they came here to forge a better future for themselves. And I still remember as I research and I look at how they were received, many times we forget and we think only about the current migrants that come to this country. How in New York City, there were articles in the venerable *New York Times* about there were too many Puerto Ricans and they're bringing diseases, tropical diseases, and they're over-running our welfare system and our housing system, and how they're a blight on the city of New York.

There's a famous story about the *New York Times* photographer being sent out to the Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York City on a Sunday and he was looking for a picture, except, he says, "I can't take a picture back to the paper, they asked me to take this picture." And I said, "What's the problem?" He says, "Well, it's Sunday and all these kids have their little suits on and their ties and their shoes and they're all --" "That's the way

we dress up when we go to church." And he couldn't find a picture that would fit the stereotype of what it was supposedly to be Puerto Rican in the urban area. And I know that from a personal experience.

And you know, my mom and dad, they worked really, really hard, and they didn't have a financial adviser but they saved their money. I mean, this was before the time of financial advisers, right? You know, I'm a big supporter of reproductive rights and women and knowledge of reproductive rights, but you know, my mom and dad, they knew -- and my mom came from nine, my dad came from 14 -- they only had two of us because they were really -- they didn't have, like, classical education but they were pretty smart. They learned to live on one check and save the other. They learned that maybe a Luisito and Nala two was enough so that they could move on. And they worked really hard, and so in '69, they fulfilled their dream. And the dream of Puerto Ricans is always to get back to Puerto Rico, right? It really is.

And so, they bought their Chevy -- sorry if Ford is here -- they bought their Chevy and their French provincial furniture and they got Luna plastic covers to cover them so that nobody would mess with them, and they moved back. And they really didn't let my sister and I -- because we lived in a bilingual household, right? We spoke to my mom and dad in English and they spoke to us in Spanish, and we understood each other perfectly well -- a bilinguist, virtually bilingual. And I still remember getting off the airplane as we arrived in San Juan, Puerto Rico -- and of course, I'd prefer Chicago, it gets warm there, but it was like July in Puerto Rico, and I said, "Papi, can you buy me a Coke?" And he looked at me real sternly, and he says, "Hijo, estamos en Puerto Rico, aqui se habla en Español." And I was kind of -- you know, today your kids will tell you, right, but back then you didn't share with your parents your most intimate thoughts. So, I didn't say anything like, "You've had 15 years to let me in on this, right?" So, I kind of said, "Okay, I guess it's time to speak Spanish." But I tell you that because it was a wonderful experience and yet it was such a terrifying experience for me, and it really helped to define who I am today.

And so, they sent me to school, and I still remember Professor Hernandez and it was -- in Puerto Rico, you start high school in 10th grade, and so I was a freshman all over again. And I remember filling out the form to enroll myself in my homeroom, and -- say your name, and I put Luis Gutierrez, right? And the teacher takes the card and he says, "Para un monentito, hombre." So, I got up, and he's like, "Cual es tu nombre?" And I thought, you know, my name has been -- I've had so many pronunciations of my last name -- because I was in the public school of Chicago and every year I get a new teacher, so it was Guterez, Gutierrez, every year it was a kind of different pronunciation. I was good with it. I never felt -- I'm not claiming discrimination or anything here today. It's just different. And I said, "I have variety of ways," so I wasn't quite sure which one to pick so I said, "Luis Gutierrez," and the whole classroom started laughing.

Now, you have to remember that I'm 15 years old, and I'm in Puerto Rico. This is adolescence. Ustedes han estudiado la palabra adolescencia? You know what it's made up of two words, right? "Adolescencia" is made up of two words, right? Dolor-y cencia -- la cenia del dolor. No, I'm serious. Look it up after you leave here.

So, I'm 15 years old, and I'm really going to understand what adolescence is all about: the pain. And so he said, "I don't know what it's like in Chicago, but here a minimum requirement is that you know your complete name." And he was very, very mean and very, very tough, and very unfair to me. And he said, "You need to go home." And so I left, and I went home and I went home crying. And I said to my mom, they won't let me enroll in school, they say I don't know my name, and they keep bringing up this thing, que si yo no tengo madre. Because you had to have your mother's maiden name because that's your full name in any Latin American country, and Puerto Rico -- I don't want to cause a political stir here -- is a Latin American country, populated by 3.7 million American citizens.

And so, luckily for the mirror, right, the best friend of any adolescent, and that night I learned something wonderful for the first time in my life: my name. And I kept saying it, "Luis Vicente Gutierrez Olmedo. Luis Vicente Gutierrez Olmedo." And I really liked it. And I kept saying, "Tu sabes maybe I can write the next best novel or tu sabes, por que sonaba como un nombre interesante." And I practiced all night, and I went back to school the next day, I filled out the card, and before the teacher started the class, I went to the young girl in the corner and I said I'm going to make sure I practice this before a small group before the big group, and I went, and I simply said to her, "Hola. Mi nombre es Luis Vicente Gutierrez Olmedo." "Y como tu te llamas." "And what's your name?" Something you do when you're a sophomore in high school a lot. And she raised up her hand and said, "Mister, mister --" that's what they call teachers in Puerto Rico, "mister." "Mister, mister. Si, que te pasa. El gringo mes ta molestando."

Now, you see how you laughed? And I tell you, feel free, because I want you to laugh. Its okay to look back, because we grow sometimes laughing; because if we're sad and sullen and hurt, we don't grow and we don't prosper. And so, I want you to laugh. That's the same way all of the other students laughed.

And I have to tell you something -- that particular point in my life, I can't think of a time that I felt more alone and more isolated and smaller than any other time in my whole life than being an adolescent at that age. And I knew what it was truly to be kind of this immigrant, this foreigner, this person who was different, this person who was laughed about, this person who didn't understand the language and the mores and the idiosyncrasies, the kid that didn't fit in. And I've got to tell you something, it drives me every day when I see new immigrants that come to this country and they're laughed about and they're ridiculed and they're exploited and nobody stands up for them.

Well, you know something? There were some really good friends in that high school in Puerto Rico who didn't laugh. They extended me a warm hand and they taught me the language and they accepted me and they embraced me and they made me feel human once again, and they made me feel powerful because of their friendship. And that's all I try to do every day, is to say to the immigrants in this country, "You have a friend that is going to make you feel powerful and whole and human, too, in spite of the fact that you may be exploited."

And so, I go around the country raising the issue of immigration, and I'm going to be in Pittsburgh this Thursday with Congressman Doyle. And the great thing is it's the stories that we listen to in each one of the events. I'll be in Minneapolis-Saint Paul on Friday with Yvette Clarke with Caribbean immigrants and Brooklyn, New York on Saturday. And the following week, I'll be with Congressman Polis, and with Congressman Polis in Denver, we'll make sure that we have a couple from the LGBT community that wants to get together also, and that the immigration system doesn't allow their families to come together. And then, we'll go to Seattle. And I'm going to continue to go from city to city, create event to event, hear the testimonies of those that are affected by our broken immigration system until we fix it because it is necessary to fix the kind of destructive force that our immigration, our broken immigration system has.

I couldn't think -- I remember when I was with Bob Menendez and Albio Sires in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and this Puerto Rican man gets up there and says, "I'm a Puerto Rican veteran. I served this country. They want to deport my wife because they say she's here illegally. And although I'm an American citizen and I've served this country, that she has to go 10 years back to where she came from, congressman. I served this country. I paid the highest tax any citizen can pay, the risk of their limb and their life and their blood. Can you do something because I've got three months to live before I die of cancer? And can I please leave her with my children?"

I went to Napa Valley, and a woman came up and she said, "You know what, I was deported after I got married to my American citizen husband. They deported me. They said I had to stay 10 more years in Mexico before I could come back. And I was pregnant, congressman. And I'd like to read you the letter that my husband wrote me." It was a beautiful, beautiful love letter that her husband, obviously heartbroken that they were separated as he was in California and she was stuck because of our broken immigration system. And she read the letter and she said, "I was pregnant at the time he wrote it," and she said, "This is my three-year-old son." And I started saying, "Why'd you say, my three-year-old son?" And then she said, "I just want you to know my husband couldn't deal with the separation, he committed suicide."

I just want you to know that we all don't deal the same way with adversity, and our immigration system is there are four million American citizen children, four million who have one or two parents. Those four

million American citizen children, you know what they fear? They fear the government of the United States of America is going to come and knock on their home one day and take away their mother or their father. There's something fundamentally wrong when you have four million American citizen children who are going to be four million American citizen adults, and the first thing they learn about their government is to fear their government because it will destroy their family. That's wrong.

We have 65,000 kids. We have 65,000 kids. They graduate from high school, class valedictorians. They're admitted to Princeton and Harvard. They're the best and the brightest. Given the rate of kids dropping out of school, just think about all the adversity they face. They're smart and they're as American as our own children that were born here. They pledge allegiance to the only flag they know, the one of the United States of America. And what do we do? We want to deport them. You know, they want to go on to college and succeed. And clearly, you don't have to be a lawyer to know that a three or four year old cannot premeditatedly violate a law, a law that he cannot understand the condition. They are truly innocent and we should do something about that and allow those young men and women to integrate themselves fully into the fabric of our society, go to college, serve in the military, and help us grow and create a better, stronger, economic nation of the United States of America.

And moms, if you would only know about the thousands of American citizen husbands whose wives are under order of deportation, American citizen wives whose husbands, the families, that's what we're really -- you know something, you want to use the immigration system so that you can ratchet up the deportation of gang bangers and drug dealers and rapists and murderers who prey upon my community and your community, I'm with you. But there are certain people that are working very hard who have long roots in this country, who work and sweat and toil at some of the toughest jobs and they only want to raise their children and become part of the fabric -- don't deport them. Let's find a system that will integrate them. That's the American way. And look, it's nothing new.

And so, that's what I -- and I'm so proud to be a member of the Hispanic Congressional Caucus. I can't wait until we have more members so that we can be more powerful and more influential. And so, I'm going around the country saying I know that the Congress failed to pass and enact Comprehensive Immigration Reform, and I know that the president of the United States is not a king, and I know that he can't rule by edict. I know that. But I also know that within the framework of our laws, the president of the United States has immense prosecutorial discretion. And he should use that discretion in the same manner as this administration, when it saw the devastating impact of the earthquake in Haiti and said, "We will not send anyone back to Haiti regardless of their immigration status until a society is established there, they can receive them, they can nurture them and can keep them safely," and we've done that. That's the right thing to do. We shouldn't deport a million young men and women that are going to

school and to college that came here through no fault of their own. We just simply set them aside. There are more important things for us to do.

And so the Hispanic Congressional Caucus is engaged in a conversation and a dialogue with the president of the United States and asking him, "Mr. President, won't you use that prosecutorial discretion that's conferred to you. You don't need a new law. You just need to use the one that we have." And many -- I've heard from the administration say to me, "Oh, Luis, if we do that, then the Republicans will take it away." Well, you know, if you use a law to keep people from discrimination, you're worried that you're going to allow them to continue to be discriminated, if you're going to use a law to keep people safe in the workplace and labor laws, and you think they're going to take it and you're going to let people die, I mean, that's what -- and change takes courage. And this is a very particular time.

And I'm so happy that Tom Saenz brought up the fact, 51 percent of all those polls in the Latino community now feel that immigration is the top issue. And I'm going to share with you -- and I think as you know why. Because they don't live in a vacuum. It isn't as though these undocumented -- you know, the kind of stereotype that dehumanization and portrayal that criminal -- they show portrayal that they put on the TV, especially on FOX news. I mean, have you ever seen me on FOX news? They've got me and then they've got people who I'm afraid of in the background of those things. No, I mean, TV is such a powerful medium, right, and that's what they do. And it was wrong. And so, they learned that Willie Horton ad worked back in the 80's, and now they want to make us the immigrants, the Willie Horton's of this particular time that we live in. But we're not going to let them. We're growing -- 51 percent.

And so, my hope is that the president goes to Puerto Rico and drinks a piña colada, wears a guayabera, goes out to El Paso and gives a great speech. But I want the president of the United States to understand, and I hope we all, because that's my task. And let me tell you, I would many days prefer to get invitations to the balls and the dinners at the White House, I would prefer to be on Air Force One. But you want to know something? I have to tell you that this is too important because I never forget that 15-year-old kid that everybody laughed at in his classroom, and I know there are people just like me today. And that's what should inspire us. Let me end this.

There was a wonderful gift that I was given one day in Chicago. I was in Back of the Yards over on 47th and Ashland, and this tall man came up to me. He must've been, I don't know, like 250, 6'3", 6'4", big guy, Mexican, and he stretched out and he said, "Hola, Gutierrez." And so I shook his hand, right? And he said, "Te quiero felicitar por el trabajo que haces en el congreso." And I kept thinking, I hope you let go of my hand really soon, because he was very enthusiastic. And then he said, "Pero quiero decirte una otra cosa mas." And I said, "Dime." And he said, "Tu Español a mejorado muchísimo." And I thought to myself, it's all those times

repeating those words in front of the mirror. And then, I said, "Gracias, pero sabes porque me español a mejorado," and I'm thinking, what does he know that I don't? And he said something very interesting, he says, "Porque cuando te escucho suenas mas y mas como Mexicano"

Now, for those of us who all know there is no such language as Mexican or Puerto Rican, it's all Spanish, but what was his message to me? That I speak for him, right? That the values that I uphold, the fight that I fight are his values, are his fight. That he sees a compatriot, someone just like him. And I'm going to tell you something. It's true, 500,000 Latinos turn 18 every year, 500,000 turn 18 every year. There are 50 million of us; Seventy-five percent of all the Latinos, in spite of everything you've heard on the news are actually citizens of the United States of America. If you're under 18, 93 percent of all Latinos under 18 are citizens of the United States of America and that other 25 percent that isn't, let me tell you something about those, 20 percent of those are permanent residence -- eight million of them who can become citizens tomorrow. But you know how we're going to turn them into citizens and turn them into power, that if we come from Bolivia, that a Colombian doesn't hear a Bolivian. He hears a fellow Colombian, cuando el Boricua habla el Dominicano escucha otro Dominicano y cuando un Mexicano habla el Guatemalteco escucha un paisano del y no un Mexicano; Y cuando nosotros aprendemos hablar con una voz clara y sencilla y única que nosotros podemos. Cuando usamos lo que yo he venido aprender como vernáculo de Dios el español de una manera en la cual mostros podemos transformar este país.

And so, that's -- I just figured, you know, there was a reason my mom and dad took me back to Puerto Rico, and it was to learn about the idiosyncrasies and to learn the language and the mores, so that one day, I could stand up for those that didn't have a voice. And to everybody here that's Puerto Rican, I want to say to you, you remember what it was like when no one would stand up for us, when there were no voices of power to defend us. You know what, we've been blessed with a powerful presence here and a powerful history of fight in this country, so I'm proud of the fact of the history of Puerto Ricans here in this country, and we're not going to allow it to happen to anyone else while we're on our watch. Thank you so much for having me here.

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