



Latino Leaders Network
Keynote Remarks from Dr. Adela de la Torre
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Adela de la Torre: *Mil gracias, Ricardo, Mickey, Lydia.*
To be in the room with you is fantastic. Everybody here today,
I can't tell you how grateful I am.

You know, I have to start with a funny story. When I went
through the convocation, my mom was about 95 at the time and she
couldn't come. My niece was there helping her with the Facebook
live feed, which was really a big deal for my mom. My mom
looked at it and she said just remember to bring -- because they
had also all these wonderful decorations. She needed all the
decorations. And I said to her, mom, okay, which ones do you
want? Everything. Because my mom was the type of mom, she
would literally do this, well, do you know who my daughter is?
And she needed to do that. So, you know, that's what it's
about. It's about making our moms proud. Right? When you
think about it, it means so much.

I want to just start today and thank of course everybody
here, but I also want to take a moment. My mom passed away
about a year ago and I need to thank her. And my sister passed

away also about a year ago. She had ovarian cancer. It was undetected and it happened very quickly. I always say, because my sister and my mom were like two peas in a pod, I said my sister passed away first and I just knew in my heart of hearts -- I wanted my mom to get to 100. You know that was a big, big year. But I knew that the minute I told her -- and I was really, really torn. But you know you can't lie to your mom. You just cannot and I told her. I just knew at that moment, I could see it in her eyes, that she wouldn't last long. I'm grateful that I know that they're looking at me right now. I know they're rooting for me and they're here with me. I'm just so pleased to honor them.

To start a little bit about my story. You know, it was funny. I was thinking so what am I going to say. I just decided I'm going to tell my story because I think who I am is so much. When I look at my life and I talk to my students, it reflects so much of who they are. When I look at my really early formative years and I look at the factors that have made me a president, they really come from my childhood. It occurred with my mom as a single parent and my *abuelita*. Really what was important was they instilled I think the very important values that pushed me forward.

We didn't have a lot of funds financially, but I never felt I lacked anything because my *abuelita* was an absolute genius.

In fact, long before people knew what recycling was, my grandmother was the expert with *latas* and with jars. In fact, I used to think -- because she would use all of the different tin cans. She would take every seed, every seedling. Our backyard was full of *latas*, geraniums, plants, flowers. I really thought that was the only way you could grow a plant, was you had to recycle your tin cans.

So, I really thought at the time, when I looked at my grandma's *macetas*, that she was a genius because she did teach me everything. Everything I could imagine. In fact, even with a dress. Because back then also everything had value. She said, *Adelita, todo puede usares*. I said, okay, Grandma, what am going to do? You see this whole dress? Don't throw it away. Do *delantales*, or a washcloth, or better yet you can make it into another dress.

The other thing I also learned from her was *arroz*. *Arroz* is very important in Mexican culture. It's very important in Latin America. In fact, it's important all over the world, so we would always have *arroz*. We'd always have *frijoles*. We'd always have tortillas. We have a lot of other things too. But whenever we had *arroz* leftover, she'd say, okay, *mañana arroz enfermo*. And she did it perfectly. Just amount of sweetness and a little bit of *canela*, and in the morning it was absolutely fabulous.

But probably my favorite, favorite thing about my grandmother was what she could do with *harina*, with flour. She would make all of our tortillas and she would put them on the *comal*. And she also taught me. I learned how to make tortillas and I also learned how to smother it with butter, with *mantequilla*. That is the only way to have tortillas. You have to have *mantequilla*. If she made her *bollos*, which were the best, right out of the ordinary, yes, you had to put plenty of *mantequilla*.

So, I have to say it was her imagination, her talent, and her creativity that taught me that a lack of dollars doesn't mean you don't have a vision. Indeed, it can expand your imagination in ways you could possibly not imagine.

Now my mother, Ermenia, was the youngest of her three children. She had a lot of early emotional pain and hardship. Early on her father died when she was very, very young - Juan Francisco. What happened was she needed to work early. My mother grew up in the Central Valley. My grandparents were from Mexico. So, she worked with her sister and my Uncle Paco. They worked together to support the family. But she said to me all the time that it was worth working to accomplish something.

She struggled to finish her education. She became a teacher, but it took her a long time. It was always the sense of I could have done a better job. Right? But when I think

about graduating from Modesto Community College in the 1940s as a young Mexican American woman and, yes, transferring to Berkeley and living with my grandmother's *comadre* at the time who lived in El Cerrito, it was a very different place. And she was able to graduate from Berkeley in the '40s, which is pretty remarkable.

Her college degree - and this is what's key - opened the door for her future. She became an elementary school teacher. She taught for 40 years. And I always remember my mom's story because she went back to the Central Valley when she got her degree. She didn't have a credential, but she had emergency credential and she immediately went to teach at a school in the valley. What happened was she went to the class when they put her with mostly Mexican kids. Of course, she could speak Spanish. At that time the principal was this white older woman. She looked at my mother because my mother was spending a lot of time with the kids. She said to her, why are you wasting that time with those kids? And she said, well, what would have happened to me if the teacher didn't spend time with me? And she said, well, you are different. And she said, I'm not different, they're me. And she said it with such grace and conviction.

She wanted me to know at an early, early age that this type of experience would be part of my life. That those perceptions

of me and accomplishments would be critical, but I needed to be strong and be ready to battle. So, in this context, my mom was an amazingly courageous woman. She was an amazingly gentle and compassionate woman. She supported my grandmother, my sister, and me so we can move forward without fear. I say fear because she also suffered tremendously not only by losing her father but also because she was in a horribly abusive physically and emotional relationship.

She almost died in childbirth. In fact, I was her last child and she almost died. In that pregnancy, she had to really make the decision to protect all of us. So she gave me to my grandmother to raise. For the first five, six years I did not know my mother was my mother. I thought she was the lady that lived upstairs. I used to call my mother, or my *abuela, mi mama*. I'd go: *Mi mama, que vamo hacer?. Mi mama, que vamo hacer?* For many, many years my sister and I were inseparable with my grandmother because my mother could not psychologically handle taking care of us. So early on, we had this amazing relationship with my grandmother.

My grandmother was never a citizen. She was a Mexican immigrant. She wanted to be a citizen, but she had to raise her grandkids. She had to work. She worked in San Francisco making flowers. She worked making blinds. She basically worked wherever she could get a little bit of money to help. She also

only spoke Spanish, so my first language was Spanish. It was our home language. But when I talk about that, I see it in a very different way.

We had this incredibly open house. We had our *primos*. We had our *tios*. We had family from Mexico. We had neighbors coming in. So what happened was our language, Spanish, brought us all together. It was a language of love. It was a language of connection. So *nuestra casa* was a *casa* of love.

I did have an important male figure in my life, and that was my Uncle Paco. My Uncle Paco fought in World War II, but he would come every weekend. He was also my *padrino* and he always would spoil me. But what I really remember, and I loved it, was that we'd sit in the kitchen table. You know in Mexican families, kitchen tables are very, very important. I have my *leche* always *caliente* because you have to have warm milk, especially when we have *bollos*. He would put a little bit of *cafe y mucho azucar*. So, I started drinking coffee and to this day I drink a lot of coffee because of my uncle. My *Tio Paco*. It was interesting because my grandmother would look aside because she didn't quite approve. But she would say to me, *Adelita, es un buen hombre*.

One other thing, when you say *es un buen hombre*, it has a real important meaning in our culture. *Un buen hombre* takes care of their family. And she would always tell me *ese un buen*

hombre, cuidado con ese. So, I would begin to understand, as you know *con los indirecta*, because you know things aren't necessarily direct. You did these indirect things, right? You learn to translate.

So, I always had this wonderful sense of family, but more importantly I also had this extended family. Of course, my grandmother's sisters would come, Mama Tita. And Mama Tita was actually my first teacher. Mama Tita would listen to me speak Spanish and then she'd say, *Adelita, que de histe?* I said, uh. You know I always was very respectful. And then she said you didn't use the subjunctive right. I would go, oh, my gosh. But she was my first teacher. Then I had my Aunt Ana who would come, who is my mom's sister. She would come in and she would say to me, *Adelita, con boca cerrada* because you can't eat with your mouth open. Right? But she said, *Con boca cerrada, no entra moscas.*

I constantly had people educating me so that I had this village. And it was a village. It was my world. It became one of the factors that I think defined how I wanted to be part of a world where it wasn't separated by a small group but bringing everybody together. It was the love, the generosity, the humor that allowed me to believe in myself in ways.

The last thing that I was raised, I was raised devoutly Catholic. My *abuelita* was devout to the vision of Guadalupe,

the vision of Fatima, *San Judas* so much that my grandmother insisted that my sister and I after every rosary -- and sometimes we would do it. It would go week no rosary, then it'd be every single day. But there was one prayer that I remember every time in the rosary that we had to pray. Some of you probably know this, some of you may not. *Dulce Madre, no me alejes, tu vista de mi no apartes. Ven conmigo a todas partes y solo nunca me dejes.* Right?

I remember that because it was a prayer that I still every day in my heart I have it. But I have it in my heart for another reason interestingly enough. I mentioned my sister passed away, and it was really sudden. I was fortunate that the hospital allowed me to stay with her and be with her. At that moment, I started praying this prayer. She was, you know, in pain. She was sleeping and I didn't think she heard me.

But I'll tell you something a little bit funny even though this was a tragic event. I didn't say the prayer right. My sister was a Spanish teacher for over 30 years. I said *no me alejas*. She said *no subjunctive*. I thought to myself, oh my god, Judy, even in death you're going to do this to me. I have to say that's my family. They're always there watching out for me, right?

So, when I look about how I was and who I am today, I must look back at when I was a five-year old girl growing up in the

Bay Area con *mi abuelita*, con *mi mama*, with my sister, con *mi tios*, *mi primos* - everybody, right? It was through a collective effort I have to say that I got the best of our culture. They raised a fatherless little girl so that she could become the woman you see here today before you. I just want to mention that because I think that history is a history that many in our community share. And I think it's the pathway that gives us much hope.

So now, as university president, I want to give you some advice of how I think certain lessons learned helped me get there. I have to make one comment because when I became president of San Diego State University, I remember driving in. I'd just get off the freeway there and you'd see the sign and you'd see the magnitude of the institution. I remember telling my husband Steve, I said: I don't believe this. I'm president. I'm president of this institution.

I just thought to myself, well, I'm just going to have to do it well, right? You're going *con ganas*. I just said, but even after three years, I still am in awe of being a university president. I am humbled and I am grateful. I have to say when I look around the room and I see all the Aztecs here and there are a lot, I can't go into a single room in San Diego and not find an Aztec, I feel that I'm privileged to lead this great institution.

But again, going back to what are the things or lessons learned, for a pathway for presidency I think there are important ones. I want to start with a couple of I guess concepts or areas that I think are important. First and foremost - and I think, Ricardo, you exemplify this - embrace who you are and your passions.

I lived in the period of California history when discrimination against Mexican Americans and language discrimination was very, very real. I saw it, I felt it, and I knew it. Nonetheless I would have to say my *abuelita* instilled in me a sense of pride about my *Mexicanidad* and that I needed to recognize that would be a resilient feature - my culture and my language. I didn't forget the sting when I felt it, but I never let it diminish my pride.

As regards to my personal passion early on, it was education. I love to learn. Interestingly enough, in high school I loved mathematics. It wasn't because of my mother or my grandmother because, neither of them, that wasn't their strength nor either my *tios* or anyone else. But I remember particularly in my sophomore year, I really fell in love the geometry. I somewhat attribute that to the fact that my grandmother taught me to sew, to embroider, to do everything with my hands with the idea that it doesn't matter if you have a piece of thread. If you have imagination, you can create

anything. And that's what mathematics did. It was a formula, but you could create magic.

After high school, I was fortunate to go to UC Berkeley. Like many, I worked throughout college. I began to take higher level courses. But the funny thing here again, and this goes to the second important message, is that you have to be able to take risks. Right? The risk I took - Ricardo, similar to you - I started school but I didn't have any guidance. I just kind of started. I decided I want to take calculus, but I had no preparation. I mean I really did not have any preparation. But I said: I want to take it. It sounds interesting. I think I might be able to do this.

I struggled. It probably was a biggest mistake because I wasn't prepared. But I remember I got a B-minus. That B-minus was one of my favorite grades. I was like, oh my god, I can do this. I'm a woman, I can do this. Right? It's interesting because you've heard the story about the students get A's and then the students get B's and C's. Who's the leader? It's oftentimes those students who take the risk and aren't getting the A's and end up being in leadership roles because they take the risk.

Then listen to the *consejos*, the advice. Some of that advice is not going to be necessarily from a friend, or a colleague, or a family member. That advice really is true for

me because of why I pursued advanced education. I never thought I'd get a master's degree or a doctoral degree. That was not on my radar. I was walking on campus. A professor took me aside. I just said, well, what are you doing here? Because I had taken his classes. Oh, I don't know. I'm going to be a graduate. I'm thinking what I'm going to do. And he said: Well, you know, Adela, you're not bad in economics. Have you thought about getting a master's in agricultural economics?

And I said, uh, no. But it occurred to me just by that one comment that I should apply. I applied to three graduate schools. Berkeley. I applied to Davis. And I applied to Oregon State. I got into all three and the rest is history. I fell in love with economics, and I moved on. But that is an example. Advice comes in strange forms. And if you have the opportunity, you take them.

The next one I would say is embrace the challenges set before you with hard work, but *con ganas*. You've got to do things *con ganas*. Otherwise, it doesn't work. I struggled, believe me, with my doctoral training. In fact, I remember I would call my grandmother, okay, you need to -- *tienes que poner la vela para San Judas*. I have an exam. Then I would pray to the *visión visita* because I had to pray to the *visión visita* before I do the exam.

So, there was this whole ritual, but at the end of the day I knew I had worked my tail off. Right? And I walked in with a sense of I'm going to just do it. I'm going to put everything on the line. I know there are people who thought her math skills aren't good enough, she's not smart enough, she's not going to make it. And I really knocked it out at the park. I ended up doing very well. But I didn't have the confidence, but I have the *ganas*.

The other thing that's important is career planning. A lot of people asked me, okay, what are the career plans to become a president? I always tell them most great outcomes oftentimes don't happen with a career plan. It's from unplanned events. And I always tell them, if you look at my resume very closely, you will see me zigzagging. I went from California to Colorado, to Arizona, to California. The thing that really motivated me was my impact, my passion, and particularly my impact on students. So, job security and salary was never a motivation for me. It was really that.

Each time I looked for that challenge, it also came in an unexpected form. It wasn't like, you know, I was applying for a job. I usually had somebody knocking on my door. And then, love what you do. Know your purpose. When I look at myself today, I can honestly, honestly say that I've been blessed to be in higher education for 30 years. And, unlike many presidents,

most of my years have been in the classroom and as a researcher. I just loved every moment of it.

But what I have to say is one of my passions particularly. I just knew it every time I was in the classroom. It was working with students who are like me, who are traditionally underserved. It really needed my voice and sometimes, you know, my loud voice in order for them to move forward. But when I saw them successful, it was as if I had succeeded. It was me and I felt an incredible psychic reward.

Once I was a tenured professor - this is another piece of advice - I had people who saw raw talent. All of us have raw talent, but oftentimes it has to be seen by others. They helped open doors for me and advised me, so I became a department chair. I became a head of a research center. I became a specialist assistant to the dean. I became a vice chancellor, and then I became a president.

The other piece is create a community. When you're the one and only - so, Nora, you're the one and only - you're a trailblazer and yet you're still alone. Right? Ricardo, you're a trailblazer. But you're still alone, so you need to find *gente* or folks. You can either create that group -- and I did that when I was in graduate school. So all the Latinas at Berkeley decided -- you know, we were the only ones in these doctoral programs. So we basically created a group of women

called *Mujeras en Marcha*. It was, for me, very important to have Latinas. I realized because I was in a world of Latinas -- I grew up with Latinas, my *tias*, my *abuela*, my mother. They were women who are always surrounding me. I had to recreate that, and we did recreate it. That was my cocoon. That was my support group. Those were my cheerleaders. They were the ones. They were my sorority sisters, and they were the ones that made a difference in many ways and helping me move on.

Finally, and this is really core to who I am, is *familia* first and *familia* last. Throughout my career and throughout my life, central to who I am is my *familia*. There has to be a balance between your professional career and your community activism. Because without your *familia* close to your heart, then you really have no purpose. Right? So, remember it can be broadly defined, but you need that emotional and spiritual support. You need that because you need somewhere where you can have your *confianzas*, your love, your pain, your anger, whatever feeling or aspirations you have.

In my case, I've been blessed. I have the love of my life - my husband, Steve. I have my two wonderful daughters, Adelita and Gabriella. My nietos - I have Javier, Cecilio Luz, and a new granddaughter the way. They nurture and support me every day, and they also tell me when I should stop talking.

So, I when I started to talk today - and I'm almost done - I started with my journey to the presidency with my childhood memories of *mi familia*. I want to end this talk with honoring my family today. It's in the deep groups of my familia - which are embedded in our Latino culture - that will always, always propel us to succeed as individuals and as a community. Like this pearl necklace - this is my mom's - I wear it today because each pearl is a pearl of wisdom. But know pearl necklaces, they're knotted by hand. Right? At least the old-fashioned once are. And I would say that each of these knots are knots of love. It's really the type of love that we experience that propels us forward.

I want to end with this little story about my grandmother because I used to liked to have *platicas* with my *abuela* and she always wanted to give me advice. But there was one that I wanted when we had a *platica* and I always used to do this at the end of a *platica* with her. I always say, *Abuelita, me quieres?* Well, I knew the answer. Right? Of course, she loved me. I was her granddaughter. But I just loved the way she respond to me, and it always was the same response. She would always say *Hay, Adelita. Como, como, te quiero.* She would always emphasize how I love you. How I love you. You see, to be a leader, you must love and know love. But it is how you love that will make the difference. *Mil gracias.* [End of transcript]