

LATINO  LEADERS
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HON. MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

**Remarks by
María Elena Salinas
Latino Leaders Luncheon Series**

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Maria Elena Salinas: Thank you so much. I'm very, very honored to be here. You mentioned, Alex, 1981 is when I began and you and I have always said when I have to say when I started, I'd say, well, I was only eight years old, but that's not working anymore. I just don't say dates anymore. We don't talk about dates anymore.

When you look at the list of speakers who have participated in these luncheons, it's a really very impressive list. The majority of them are accomplished politicians or community leaders, so it's always very odd when you're included as a journalist in this kind of a list, because there's an unwritten rule for journalists that we're not supposed to become the news, we are supposed to be on the sidelines reporting the news, being witnesses to history. The people who speak at this event are the people that I interview, whose success stories I cover and I tell. So, needless to say, I'm honored and I'm definitely flattered that you invited me. Mickey, thank you so much. Thank you so much for considering me.

Well, they asked me to talk about some of the challenges that I have faced in my career. You like to use the word "obstacles" but to me obstacles and the worst obstacles are the ones that we have in our minds, the ones that tell us, no puedo, we can't, it's too hard, it's too difficult. So, those obstacles, we clear it out of our mind and they don't exist anymore. But there are challenges and there are many challenges. So, when I started thinking about it, I said, "Okay. What challenges have I faced?" There are two different sets. One is as a woman in the news business and the other one is as a Latina journalist.

As a woman, there's one clear answer. The biggest challenge is dealing with machismo, sexism, double standard,

however you want to call it but it does exist in our industry like it does in our culture, unfortunately. If it's true that women have to work twice as hard to get half of the recognition that men do, women that work in Spanish language media have to work three times as hard to get one-third of the recognition that men do. But the good news is that we can because we have that God-given ability as women to multitask and to do many things at the same time and also we learned it home. I know, at least I did.

My father was a brilliant man. He was a wonderful, loving, caring man, but he was kind of old school. He believed that the woman's place is in the home. And we have to understand that he was born in 1909 so it's the sign of times. He believed that it was important to educate his daughters so that they could make a good wife for someone one day. Yes, he taught us morals and he taught us values, things that were very, very important to him. And on the other hand, there was my mother, my mother who worked and worked and worked and worked. She was a hard working woman. She was a seamstress. She worked long hours behind the sewing machine and cutting table and was the best mom that anyone could ever want to have. We were very poor at that time but somehow we never felt that there was anything missing in our lives. We led a happy life.

You know, when I brought my daughters to Los Angeles and took them to a place where I used to live, it's right across the street from sports arena on Figueroa, as I was coming here I stopped on Figueroa and that's where I had to make a left turn because I like to come to L.A. and drive. It just makes me feel like I'm at home. I don't care if I get stuck on the 405. I don't care if there's smog or traffic. I just feel good. It just feels like I'm home. When I saw Figueroa, I thought, "My God, that's where I grew up." That house we used to call -- and Mickey knows because he read my book -- La Casa de las Cucarachas. It was an apartment that had -- when I woke up in the middle of the night from my closet because my bedroom was a walk-in closet, it was a two-bedroom apartment, one for my parents, one for my sisters, and the walk-in closet was for me. And so, I woke up in the middle of the night, went to the kitchen, boom -- cucarachas por todos lados. So, now, the Casa de las Cucarachas is a parking lot. But still, when I drive by there, I have those memories. And I really thank my mother for never allowing us to realize that we were poor, that we were missing anything, that there was anything lacking in our lives. We were just very happy and we had very good example from them.

You know, growing up in a home with an intellectual dad and a hardworking mother kind of prepared me for what I do, for a career in journalism. I inherited from her a strong work ethic and I inherited from my dad a social conscience.

I've always said that women can do everything that men can do and we do it better because we do it in high heels. If not,

-- really. I mean, can you imagine Jorge Ramos being pushed out of Trumps' news conference wearing stilettos? I don't know if he would handle that very gracefully. Jorge has the fight with Trump and I'm the one that gets the hate mail and they tell me, "Go back to your country. Go back to Mexico." So, here I am in L.A., the city where I was born, in the community where I was raised, in a country that I love and that I owe loyalty to. It's incredible that I still have to prove that I'm an American. I'm an American. I'm a Mexican-American. Hyphenated or not, I'm an American. I'm as American as apple pie. Even if I eat the apple pie after a nice plate of chilaquiles, which is my favorite breakfast.

Anyway, so that leads me to the challenge that I have faced as a Latina journalist.

Thirty four years ago, I started working at Channel 34. Thirty four, the magic number. It's a good number. Things were very different then than they are now. Some are, some are not. KMEX was a small station, considered by many low-budget, low-quality station that no one watched except for recently arrived immigrants So, as a rookie reporter I covered politics and there are some people in this room who remember that and who I interviewed during that time. And when I covered politics, I remember going out and trying to get interviews and the kind of response that I would get especially when it was national interviews with a national campaign was, "You're from Channel thirty what?" They didn't know we existed unfortunately. And the picture became clear to me when I realized that they didn't know we existed because we were not participating in the political process.

As many of you know, in the early '80s in Los Angeles, although we were 25 percent of the population, we had no political representation. Not in city hall, not on the board of supervisors, not on the board of education. That's why when Mickey introduced the council members that are here, really I got chills because I thought, my God, I remember how it was exactly that situation that marked my life -- and I will talk about it in a minute -- that marked me and that really set the tone for what my career would be. And here we are several years later, having a roomful of representatives from this city. I am so happy to see that.

So, when a seat opened all of a sudden, it was in the early '80s. Some of you might remember, I don't know if it was '82 or '83, but a seat opened in the city council. There was a possibility of a Latino being elected, there was a Latino running. So, I went out and I did interviews on the street. It was in the Boyle Heights area, I remember. I interviewed 16 people and out of those 16 people, 15 people were not voting. They didn't know there was an election. They weren't participating for whatever reason. They weren't registered. They weren't legal. For whatever reason, but they were not

voting. So, in fact, and I told my news director, Pete Moraga, que en paz descanse, that I couldn't do the story because no one was participating in the election, so how can I do a story about who they were going to vote for if they weren't going to vote. And he explained that your story is right there in front of you. We don't have political representation because we're not participating. Because Latino's still disenfranchised from mainstream America. So, it didn't only give me a good journalistic lesson but that incident marked my career. It set the tone for what I knew would be my mission -- the political empowerment of Latinos in the advancement of my community. I knew from that moment on that my reporting had to go above and beyond the daily news. My reporting had to include informing Latinos of their rights but also of their responsibilities in what was to many their newly adopted country.

There were about 14 million Latinos in the U.S. at that time. Fast forward three decades and we are now 55 million Latinos. Los Angeles is, correct me if I'm wrong, about half Latino, about 50 percent Latino. We have plenty of political representation at all levels. KMEX is now the number one station in the country regardless of language. I'm no longer the rookie reporter trying to explain to politicians why Spanish language media is relevant. Yes, we've come a long way. We in Spanish language media have grown hand in hand with the Latino community. No more low-quality, low-budget stations that nobody watches. We compete with mainstream media in quality and in quantity of viewership. Our audiences have become more sophisticated and more demanding. And we don't want to keep it all to ourselves. We wanted to share it with those who are not lucky enough to speak Spanish or understand Spanish. That's why now Univision News has a daily brief in English.

If you're interested, by the way, in receiving every day through e-mail the daily brief in English, it's a summary of the most important stories of the day that we cover in Univision, you can apply univisiondaily.com. Univision Daily. That's my commercial for the day, univisiondaily.com.

You know, there's so many people including many or most of you in this room that have worked so hard for so long to defend the rights of Latinos, to elevate our image, to highlight our many contributions, to be recognized as an integral part of society. And it's worked. Look at how many of you are here representing big corporations, how many of you are here as elected officials or appointed officials, how many of you are running a business or leading a foundation. Now high school dropout rates among Latino students have dramatically dropped and more and more Latinos are going to college thanks to the work that many of you have done.

In politics our influence has been felt also. I now see and I've seen in the past couple of decades how just about every major campaign include staffers to work with the Latino

community for Latino outreach or deal -- "deal," that's an interesting word -- with Spanish language media. I'm not saying that they love us now or that we have a love affair with the campaigns and with the politicians, but they are paying attention to us because they know that they can't win an election without Latinos. And they know that the best way to get to Latinos is by having respect for them and by having respect for their language.

As you can see, what happened the other day when Jeb Bush spoke Spanish and was criticized the following day by another candidate that shall remain nameless, it died right away. He said, "No." They probably told him, "You can't get into that one. You better be careful."

You know, there is so much to celebrate and so much to be proud of. Unfortunately, it's not all good news. We've been reporting these days how a disproportionate the number of Latinos are arrested and end up being victims of police brutality. Tens of thousands of families have been separated to deportation. Thousands of Central American kids have been separated and have been jailed, detained at the border. Sadly, there's one thing that through all of our hard work we have not been able to overcome or to change and that is racism.

You know, we don't really have to worry about that guy who comes out and says immigrants are criminals, drug dealers, and rapists. He's eventually going to disappear. I'm convinced. I'll bet on it. I'll put my money on it. But we do have to worry about the millions who buy it, who support him, and who agree with him and who keep him at the levels in the polls that he is. He's not there because of fake numbers. He's there because there's actual people who believe what he's saying and who have those pent-up feelings inside and think that now it's okay to verbalize them and to show them. Those are the people we need to worry about.

The political climate for Latinos has definitely suffered a setback and that represents a new challenge for you as community leaders and also for me as a journalist and for many of my colleagues in Spanish language media. You, of course, need to continue leading by example, and I as a journalist need to continue to denounce injustice and oppression when I see it, calling prejudice and discrimination by its name, to question authority, and to condemn abuse. I can't be a bystander and I won't. I need to tell success stories of people like you in this room and I also need to tell the stories of those who are victims and are rejected by society.

You know, this has been a good year for me journalistically. I've been very lucky to have won three awards: A Gracie Award, a Walter Cronkite Award, and a Peabody Award. And now I'm nominated for an Emmy Award. Thank you. And it's all for a program that I did last year, the children's border crisis, *Entre el Abandono y el Rechazo*, *Between*

Abandonment and Rejection. By the way, that's a name that one of my bosses didn't like. He said, "No, it's too long. No, it's too convoluted. No, people won't understand." Well, when I came back from my journey to Central America, I knew that that was the only name because when you talk about these kids, you understand that they are entre el abandono y el rechazo. Abandoned by society, by their government, sometimes by their families, and rejected in a country that is not willing to take them and bring them in and open the door to the land of opportunity. But I'm not telling this story to brag about my accomplishment but because of the important meaning of these awards. You know, the Peabody's are given to stories that matter. It's 17 judges and they all have to agree, it has to be unanimous, and they all agreed that mine along with the other awardees were stories that matter.

And as far as the Walter Cronkite Award is concerned, this is what was said about my story: "It was balanced and revealing reporting from the point of view, not of politicians, but of families in their countries of origin which brought viewers face to face with women and children directly affected. This is a kind of story often left out of the immigration debate." And this is what the Walter Cronkite Committee said about my story.

So, you know, while mainstream media was focusing on the political battle at the border with this issue, where politicians were accusing each other, pointing the fingers, accusing each other of causing the crisis and the children were being put in detention centers or deported, my crew and I went to Guatemala and we went to Honduras and we went to El Salvador and we showed the conditions of violence and poverty and drug wars and gang-infested neighborhoods that drove these kids out of their countries. This was a humanitarian crisis that needed a human face; it wasn't just a political debate.

Now, there's been a lot of talk lately about advocacy journalism. I know that we are accused of being advocates. We're not journalists, they say, we're advocates, as if it was an insult. You know, like when they call you, "You're liberal. You are a Liberal," and you say, "Eh? So, what? Are you trying to insult me?" Okay. So, when they say, "You are practicing advocacy journalism," I don't feel insulted by that. I don't feel insulted because wasn't that what they called Ruben Salazar when he reported on the injustice toward Mexican-American community, first in El Paso and then in Los Angeles many years ago? What an honor to be in the same category as Ruben Salazar.

I believe that reporting the trials and tribulations of immigrants is not advocating. It's contributing to a healthy debate on the issues that otherwise would sound like a monologue with everyone accusing Latinos for all the ills of this country. Now, I've been reading a lot about Ruben Salazar to look for some perspective especially on what's going on right now and I found an interview that was done by Bob Navarro with Ruben

Salazar. When he left his job when he was a reporter at the *LA Times*, he left his job as a reporter and went to work for KMEX Channel 34 and they couldn't understand why would he do that, why would he leave such a reputable job to go work for a station, like I said before, that nobody watched, low quality, low budget.

So, this is what he asked, this is the exchange. What Bob Navarro was telling him during this interview that he had with Ruben Salazar is that he was becoming an advocate because that's what they did in Spanish language TV, they were advocates. So, this is the exchange that they had. This is three months before Ruben Salazar was killed -- Bob Navarro asked, "But is advocacy the name of the game? Can you work as a functional day-to-day reporter in the position of advocacy?" And this was his response, Ruben, "I'm only advocating the Mexican-American community just like the general media is advocating really our economy, our country, our way of life. So, I'm just advocating a community within a community which, by the way, the general community has totally ignored. And so, someone must advocate that because it's easy for the establishment to say, 'Aren't we all the same? Aren't we all Americans?' Well, obviously, we're not. Otherwise, we wouldn't be in the revolutionary process that we are now."

Can you believe that was 45 years ago? Forty five years ago and here we are having the same conversation in this country. Well, some things have changed and some things have not. We're not the same Latin community that we were in the '60s and '70s or even the '80s when I started my career as a reporter. Hoy si tenemos voz y voto, y por eso ahora si haremos la diferencia.

You know, there's a silver lining to all this and to this climate of immigrant bashing. It has united the community in a way that I have not seen in many, many, many years. Latinos are finally realizing that they have to take control of their destiny more than ever I see Latinos motivated to go out and vote. As Alex mentioned, I have been a spokesperson for Ya Es Hora for many, many years, motivating Latinos to come out and become citizens if they qualify to register to vote, to come out and vote. Like I said, it's been my mission. I dedicated my whole career to informing and empowering our community and I feel privileged to have had that opportunity. But my mission is not over. Now we have to start again. But it's okay. I'm not afraid to start over again. I'm not afraid to work. My momma taught me how to work. She gave me a good work ethic. So, I'm ready to continue taking on the challenge and I'm sure that all of you are too. Thank you very much for inviting me. Gracias para los que estuvieron aqui para servirles.

[End of transcript]