



Latino Leaders Network  
LLN LA 2025 Eagle Leadership Award  
Jose Antonio Tijerino

[Start of file - 0:09:00]

Jose Antonio Tijerino: Thank you very much, Janet. Thank you, Mickey. You can keep the award because being recognized by the two of you is beyond any award I could receive.

I want you all to know who we're dealing with here. I know her title is impressive enough as the President and CEO of the most influential Latino organization in this country, but Janet Murguia is much more than that. She has firsthand knowledge of the American dream as the daughter of immigrants and has never lost sight of her responsibility to make that dream a reality to millions of others through her tireless presence as an advocate and activist. There is a difference between the two. Advocates advocate; activists act. Janet does both.

Not surprisingly, at one point in the '90s she ended up working at the Clinton White House with none other than Mickey Ibarra. Mickey served, as we talked about earlier, the Assistant to the President and Director of Intergovernmental

Affairs which made him the highest-ranking Latino and an important member of the President's inner circle. I remember feeling a sense of pride and comfort with Mickey in that position.

Before that Mickey was an educator. Sometimes I feel like we're in a classroom when we all gather like this and he stands in front of us. We all still have a lot to learn from him, I will say that.

I also have to acknowledge someone else I met in the '90s that was working at the White House, Miguel Bustos. He's now Reverend Bustos or, as I like to call him, Irreverent Bustos because he's so irreverent. But in all seriousness, not all spiritual leaders live in their beliefs, but Miguel does. Although I do pray nightly for his wonderful husband, Alex. Believe me he needs a lot of help. Living with Miguel that is.

I also want to congratulate Senator Lena Gonzalez and Lupe De La Cruz who inspire me with their courage, their faith, their love of family. Your speeches were tremendous. I hung on every word. Thank you for your accomplishments. It's a privilege to share this stage with both of you. You're both very deserving.

Okay. So Mickey mentioned I'm supposed to focus on my story. But my story would be pretty incomplete without the presence of so many here, including friends in the audience that

traveled from across the country. We don't always get recognized, so give me a moment to recognize some folks.

Marco Davis is here. Thank you for always being *presente*, Marco. You're much more than a colleague. I appreciate also, I see Tony Cardenas is here. He and Norma have always been there for me. As an aside, you defined the highest measure of friendship last week when you picked me up from the airport in LA during rush hour and drove me to dinner, then drove me back to the hotel, and then drove back. So that was easily four or five hours of driving that they did.

Carlos Vera, we need your leadership more than ever. Don't ever wait on anybody.

Eli Murillo, Kevin Mendoza, just a whole table of folks that are here, I appreciate your presence in my life.

Also my friends from Aventiv bought a table. I'm on their advisory board. They surprised me by telling me they bought a table and then helped me fill it. Thank you very much, Aventiv. Thank you for all the work you do. It's a privilege to be a part of that mission. I'm happy for them.

I'm shouting out *nuestro padrino*, Rudy Besera. You're always there in so many ways. And you started a lot of what I do, just thank you. Also, *luchadora*, Brenda Castillo making sure we're represented in the media. A couple of other friends

because we share a few sponsors. You said I got 20 minutes. I'm using every minute.

Ruben Barrales from Well Fargo and our friends from JPMorgan Chase, Verizon, and a lot of other our friends. And Lidia Martinez from Southwest Airlines. You always get me everywhere safely.

I am also very moved that Molly Snyder from Target came across the country to be here today. Thank you so much, Molly.

I have to shout out my plus-one here, Nick Gonzalez, a great actor that always supported our organization and being able to count on you. I do remember I always say that you're as good as the call you can make and the call you can get.

I remember during the start of COVID, when I remember reading that farm workers weren't considered essential workers, I got a call from Mario de la Torre and Yvette, his wife, who are here and who's a designer. They said that they had a bunch of sewers in the fashion industry that were willing to volunteer their time to sew masks.

I read about how farm workers weren't being protected, who's more essential than those that are bringing us our food, and so I called Monica Ramirez. Then we said we need a celebrity spokesperson. And I called Nick and he was like, what is this, what are you getting me into. He and Monica were the reason why we ended up putting more than 2.2 million masks on

farm workers at the beginning of COVID. Trust me when I tell you I basically held Monica's beer while she went to work.

But also I want to thank Mar [phonetic] who's back at home. I benefit from the tremendous advantage of having her to lean on for advice, comfort, commiserating encouragement, humor, or simply to escape. I can't ask more than that.

My colleagues at Hispanic Heritage Foundation, including Jessica Herrera and Juana Pacheco who are here, it's a privilege to work with you. I simply try to stand in the reflected brilliance of your commitment, collaboration, and impact to our community through the work. Always the work.

Thank you to HHF's board of directors for believing in me and to all of the HHF partners, including some I rattled off, for believing in our mission in our community.

To my children that Janet was referencing, who are back in D.C., thank you for embodying the blanket of values that they have been swaddled in since their birth. They are their own people, but I'm beyond grateful that they have some of us in them. My three children understand this work and share in the commitment and the visceral reaction to injustice.

Also the joy and energy from hundreds of people that have stayed at our house. The protests that they have attended, the constant volunteering, the responsibility that they have to

building community and supporting communities across all spectrums they have lived it.

The hardest part about this work, and many of you are doing this work, is that we just can't walk away from it. No matter how hard things get, there's a whole lot of people that can walk away from their work. We can't. It's not a choice. I remember mortgaging my house at one point many years ago to keep the organization going. But I believed in the mission. I believed in my community, in my team, and in myself.

I'll never forget getting a call from Raul Yzaguirre telling me he did the same thing in the '80s. He made me feel like I had a *compadre* in what I was doing. Over the years I've had a lot of *compadres* and *comadres* surrounding me, and many are here in this room, but also across the country and the world. No matter where I go, there is someone that's there that's building a system of support and that ecosystem that Janet's talking about.

At times like this, when leadership can feel isolating, I count on countless sources of comfort, inspiration, solidarity, and the challenge to do more. It's nothing new. We've always had to do more as Latinos. It's not like things have ever been easy. When people ask me how are things going with a concerned look on their face about the difficulty our community is dealing with, I always respond with it's tough but we're tougher.

We are tougher and we are compassionate. I wake up every single day ready to love or fight. Every single day for 24 years in this job, I can't wait to get to work. We are in the business of hope, unity, opportunity. Our currency is hope, unity, and opportunity. Our community, our values and our value, our future, are all worth fighting for. The golden door referenced at the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, that symbolized the entry point for immigrants simply seeking opportunity and freedom is worth fighting for.

I immigrated from Nicaragua as a child to Washington, D.C. and felt like I didn't belong. That is way too common. I remember being put in the first grade the very next day without speaking a word of English. And my parents didn't speak a word of English. I was being ridiculed by the other kids. I didn't need a translator to know they were making fun of me and that they didn't want me along because I didn't belong. They made fun of my hair, my clothes, my language, my music which is kind of interesting.

Fast forward to now, the *gringuitos* putting on *brillantina* in their hair, ordering empanadas and listening to Bad Bunny sing in Spanish. But back then it wasn't that cool.

I remember the teacher pinching my arm really hard to get a sound out of me because they thought I couldn't speak at all. They couldn't figure out that the reason I didn't say anything

for the entire year was because I couldn't speak English. So they left me back to repeat first grade, but this time I learned English. Shout out PBS for teaching me English through Sesame Street Electric Company and all the other things. Thank you, PBS, for broadcasting our awards. It's been a full circle relationship.

As an aside, the cruel joke was that I didn't speak any English then and then I learned English. Now my Spanish isn't perfect. You see, my parents desperately wanted me to assimilate so they pushed me to speak only English.

Please know *yo me defiendo en español y ablo mi español imperfecto con gran orgullo y sin pena, pero para muchos es traumático*. So please keep that in mind when you see someone being shamed and told they're not Latino enough because they don't speak perfect Spanish or they don't speak perfect English, or are too black, or too white or too indigenous, too queer, too disabled, too Jewish, too Muslim and so on.

As a community, we have to deal with imposter syndrome *outside* of our community. We shouldn't have to deal with it *in* our community. I know what it feels like to be an outsider and to be bullied, but I had a special friend when I was a boy that stood up for me whether he knew it or not. It was Roberto Clemente.



When kids made fun of my accent, well, Roberto Clemente had an accent. My clothes, my food, my culture, Roberto Clemente, the best baseball player and the best person in the world, had all of those things in common with me. He was my hero then and my hero now. That sense of tremendous responsibility to help those in need cost him his life when he was taking supplies to help the devastated earthquake victims in Nicaragua. That spirit is a part of me in everything I do.

Speaking of Nicaragua, and Mickey wanted me to focus on kind of my story that I usually talk about, civil war was starting and our family had to leave the United States because my father's job with the Nicaraguan government was being pushed out. My mother and sister had to go to Paraguay where they were born. So now I was back in Nicaragua except this time I didn't fit in where I actually came from. So that's something that we call *ni de aquí ni de allá*, not from here and not from there.

As the civil war escalated and my *padrino* was killed and my cousins were being kidnapped, my brother and I were sent to live with relatives in rural Illinois. At this point, I'm actually from DC now. But I had to go back to Nicaragua and then ended up in the Midwest at a large school that had maybe five minorities out of thousands of students.

The living situation with my relatives didn't work out. So my brother and I had to spend many nights in a car. I had to

buy the car with the little money I had so I can get a job and work. It wasn't too bad. There was a 74 Grand Torino, so pretty much the size of a studio apartment but still. I want to make this clear too, it was an adventure for a 16-year-old and a 14-year-old. But it's not for a lot of people that face homelessness and don't have a safe place to go.

So here we were. We had no documents, had no money, no direction, except for the ones we figured out as we went along and trying to make it through a very cold winter in what seemed like a very cold place.

So now it was *ni de aquí ni de allá otra vez*. I remember asking a girl, I'd like to go to homecoming, and she actually said yes. But then she said for me to say that I was Italian, that I think we can get away with it, when I picked her up to meet her parents in case they ask me where I was from.

I was also dealing with racist comments not only from students but from a gym teacher that was trying to be funny. Please know that up until this point I didn't really feel so Latino. I just felt like me. But now I understood that being me was being Latino. It's how others defined me. Except I didn't realize that it was more important for me to define myself. So what do I represent as a Latino to me and to everyone else?

That was when I became an advocate, an activist, a representative not just of me but of my ancestors and every Latino that some folks will ever meet. I took it seriously and have ever since. No, I didn't end up going to the prom with the girl. I ended up trying to fight every single person that made a racist remark at me big or small, including the gym teacher. It wasn't about winning a fight. I lost a lot of them. It was more about the fight. It was more about me knowing that I was worth fighting for and that them knowing that they were going to get into a fight.

Just like now there are marginalized and targeted people that need to know they are worth fighting for and that we are willing to fight. Everyone has value. I had value as a lost high school kid. At some point they got tired of fighting and we realized what we have in common.

A lot of friendships were fomented, that's why I have hope for any situation to get better. Just like the current situation in America will get better with more understanding. I learned to appreciate Midwestern values, work ethic, honesty, humility, and warmth from that time period. Sounds familiar, right?

I ended up going back to DC and graduated with a journalism degree from the University of Maryland where I always wanted to go. Now, I didn't graduate until I was 27 years old because I

had to work several jobs, including waiting tables at an all-you-can-eat seafood restaurant. Believe me, try getting a date when you smell like baby gulf shrimp and cats are following me around. But that was the most valuable experience in my professional career. I love hiring staff that have waited tables or worked in retail, by the way. What a foundation for any job for the rest of your career.

I didn't become a citizen until I was about 28 years old, after my mother came back to the States and married an American. That's how we got our citizenship. I went to my swearing-in ceremony with her when she told me that we will always be immigrants and that we have to earn our stay in this great country. She said, *hijito*, we weren't born into the privilege of being American. We had to earn it.

She passed away 28 years ago, but those words are alive with me, and I pass them on to my three children who are first generation. I remember when she was dying she held my hand and asked me to be a good man. I said, mommy, I am a good man. Then I went off to rattle all the bad stuff that I didn't do.

She looked at me deeply, deep into my soul, and in a loud whisper - which is all she could muster at the time - she said, "*Hijo*, not doing bad things makes you an average man. Doing good things makes you a good man. I want you to be a good man."

And that's the question I ask myself and ask all of you, what else can we do?

Martin Luther King said everyone can be great because everyone can serve. We have all had a chance to be great every single day by serving. I am blessed, truly blessed, to be able to do it through my work. I worked at big companies and firms, just at Nike, traveling around the world. But there was more, I just didn't know it yet.

So I got a call from Dr. Pedro Jose Greer who I had met when I was at Fannie Mae Foundation as an architect of an award for youth that we were patterning after the Hispanic Heritage Awards. He was about to become the chair of the organization that put together the Hispanic Heritage Awards. He liked my unconventional approach which was so different than anybody had seen up to that point.

So Dr. Greer wanted to see if I'd be interested in running this nonprofit as he took his position as chair. When he took the job, he told me to follow my instincts, follow my heart, follow the mission of the organization, and follow our community. Then I said, okay, but I'm going to rewrite the mission if I'm going to follow it. So I did. He let me expand beyond just doing the big awards and allowed me to focus on education, workforce, societal impact, and leadership.

Half the board left because they didn't know why they hired someone that was unknown. I mean unproven all over the place and wanted to change everything, including the actual organization that we changed the name and everything. That's actually when the Hispanic Heritage Foundation started.

But he said he believed in me. That is such a powerful statement for someone to believe in you. Let me make this clear. The two greatest motivators in my life are when someone believes in me and when someone doesn't believe in me. They work just as well. I prefer the former. The constant is that I always believe in myself. But when I took over, there was a lot of drama and I was trying to get my footing as I figured things out.

I also believe in the power of being vulnerable and benefiting from some great people that are around me. I love asking for help, especially from people I admire and trust. And I got great answers from Lisa Quiroz, Raul Yzaguirre, Lorraine Cortez-Vázquez, and of course Dr. Greer and many, many others. Hey, Janet, I miss Lisa.

Sponsors also believed in what we are doing. I've been able to do it not just with their support but with their guidance. With them challenging me and realizing the impact that we can have together, right, Molly? I mean this is what we're doing with our partners. You see, I truly believe that

anything you can imagine can be real. I truly believe in what's possible being the starting point to any equation.

I actually think my greatest attributes are also my greatest faults, but I have to live with them. I love being naive. It makes me try to do things that seem unrealistic. Naivete is such an underrated attribute. I'm also audacious. I'm impetuous, and emotional, and collaborative, and creative. I'm not interested in doing the things that had been done because we need new approaches to old problems.

I'm very impatient and consider myself an impatient activist. That's usually a negative. Impatience is considered a negative. Unwanted [sounds like]. All my life that's all you hear. Carlos, you're hearing that right now. Wait your turn. Why should we be patient with a child being torn from their family? Why should we be patient with hard-working, God-fearing contributors to our society being terrorized? No, I'm not patient. That's why I want to keep that uncomfortable sense of urgency in everything I do.

I'm absolutely all over the place, but the needs of our community are all over the place. If I'm in your lane, it's because I want a carpool. I'd rather be actionable than being perfect. I know my role. My relevance is through others. My relevance is through Carlos, through Kevin, through Ellie. Preparing them, encouraging them, connecting them, believing in

them and following them. Right, Marco? I also believe in America. I believe in America as an immigrant. I will always be an immigrant.

I have to take a moment being here in LA and the Mayor was here a second ago. I lost my dad a year ago. The last conversation I had with him was after the -- we watched baseball. That's how we bonded. It was right after the World Series and he was in his last moments. I got the chance to talk to him about it. Then this year I just watched. Once again the Dodgers win, but it was with my dad. Los Angeles have an extra angel in my dad while I was thinking of him watching those games. It's fitting that we're in Los Angeles where one out of three Angelinos are immigrants and over 140 countries are represented here.

DC, where I'm from, hosts immigrants from 193 different countries and territories. *Y aquí estamos. Aquí estamos.* That simple statement means so much. We belong wherever we are and whoever we are. In these times of division, even in our own community we need to understand that one of us is all of us. From our home countries to our borders, to our communities across America, including in our nation's capital where many of our laws and policies are made that affect us. Right, *tocayo*?

Those laws and policies need to factor in humanity and the tremendous value immigrants present to America. Divisiveness is



a strategy and we can't fall for it, especially within our own community. We are bound by a radiant culture that shines across everyone that sees the light, whether it's a flicker or a raging brilliance. That glow of hope is critical for all of us, but especially for our most vulnerable communities. We are not helpless. Immigrant and migrant communities need our help the most of all right now.

I'm not talking about violent criminals. I'm talking about a critical part of our workforce that builds, creates, nourishes, innovates, and provides care for all of us. So far this year, with the migrant arrests, only 7 percent have had violent crime conviction. That means 93 percent didn't. And 70 percent of the people being detained had no criminal conviction at all.

This is a numbers game with human lives. I'm talking about parents, children, and neighbors who contribute every day to our communities and pay billions in taxes. Their only crime is to want to provide a better life for their families and contribute to our great country. When we arrest, detain, and deport our migrant refugee and immigrant *familia*, we actually weaken our economy, our culture, our future.

Our migrant communities are an embodiment of the American resilience, sacrifice, and hope. The same values that drew my family and centuries of immigrants to this country, including

our founding fathers. To lose them is a loss for all of us. And I'll say it again, every one of us is all of us. Americans can't afford to lose the brilliant mind that's somewhere in the shadows.

The next breakthrough in AI, clean energy, or medical research will likely come from someone whose family arrived here just a generation ago. The next chapter of America's history will be written in large part by Latinos and immigrants. We are here, America needs us, and we are looking straight ahead into the light. But we don't simply want to follow the light. We want to create the light because innovation is in our blood and spirit. Innovation along with hard work is what America needs to compete globally. We are here for it.

Seventy-eight percent of all new jobs will be filled by a Latino over the next five years and we want to make sure we're prepared. At HHF we've taught 100,000 students how to code and are now teaching AI, cyber, and other skills with credentials to youth and adult learners across the country. The LOFT Leadership Institute has connected, prepared, and supported tens of thousands of Latinos to maximize their vision and brilliance.

Youth is the key to all of this. Did you know the median age for Latinos is about 30. The rest of the Americans is 40. But here's the one that really gets me. The most populated age, so the age that has the most people in it, for the rest of the

country is about 55. For Latinos, it's 14. Now where are you going to invest? You cannot afford to be myopic with the Latino community.

Keep in mind a 14-year-old with access to a laptop and the internet - so thank you again, Senator - can reach more people than Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Cesar Chavez could in their lifetimes combined. Think about the power that's in our youth right now if they're connected. We are leveraging video gaming to engage and teach youth about STEM career paths, tech, and the environment. The Latino Explorers game with Minecraft was played by over 30 million children in about 30 different languages with a parent's guide and a teacher's guide.

Our award-winning community *charlas* allow us to listen and react to our community because our community leads us. It's not the other way around. We are focused in making sure that mental health is a priority because it affects everything.

We are launching, supporting, and helping small businesses including the startup space to continue to power America's entrepreneurial spirit. The *Fritanga* podcast that I host highlights our stories and visions for greater understanding, and appreciation of our experiences, and the differences that bind us. We need to tell our stories, define ourselves, and radiate that cultural pride. We are very powerful, but we need

to flex our power while protecting the most vulnerable. Again, remember, every one of us is all of us.

So *aquí estamos*. We are here. We will continue to continue *con ganas y sin frenos*. Thank you very much.

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