



Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
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Introduction



Mickey Ibarra

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I was an Assistant to the President of the United States and Director of Intergovernmental Affairs at The White House before mustering the courage to publically share my personal story.

President Bill Clinton showed me the way by sharing his story often. First by introducing himself to the American people during the campaign of 1992 using a video biography called “The Man from Hope.” This method had never been used before by a presidential candidate and proved to be an effective vehicle for delivering an inspirational message of obstacles overcome to achieve success.

My experience at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue for nearly four years and observing reactions to the president’s story triggered my desire to help others by sharing mine. Our stories are powerful and need to be told; when we do, it gives readers and listeners confidence to achieve their dreams as well.

Now my story: only in America could a Mexican kid who grew up in Utah foster care end-up being a witness to history, working alongside the President of the United States. Thirty-two years after arriving in Washington, I still feel a great deal of gratitude for the lessons learned from the many people who helped

me along the way. Please understand that I share my story knowing that every detail may not be accurate but rather, is my best memory and understanding of the facts and sequence of events.

My father, Francisco Nicolás Santiago Ibarra, is a Zapotec Indian who came to this country as a *bracero* from Oaxaca, Mexico in 1945. His first job was picking fruit in Spanish Fork, Utah. Eventually he left the fields and landed a job at Kennecott Copper Mine as a demolition crew member. It was a union job with better pay, benefits and security.

Dad met and married my mother who was younger, white and Mormon. In the early 1950's that was unacceptable for most in Salt Lake City. By the time I was two years old, the predictable happened: my parents divorced causing my father to lose his military draft deferment. He was soon drafted into the United States Army and sent to Germany. Soon after the divorce, my mother, who was 18 years old, relinquished custody of my younger brother David and me to the Children's Service Society of Utah. We were placed together in foster care.

For most of the first fifteen years of my life, we were without traditional parents. As kids, we both wondered about who we were and why we were alone, but we coped with our experience differently. I was the peacemaker and negotiator with a lot to say and always feeling a responsibility to help David make it. But despite my best efforts, David withdrew. He was extremely shy, afraid and angry. David would not talk. I literally talked for him. His teachers at elementary school would come and get me out of class when he was acting-up to settle him down. He often would go to the restroom, hide in the stalls and would not emerge for anyone else.

When I was six years old, we briefly reunited with Dad after he remarried and the State of Utah allowed him to take custody of us. However, when that marriage failed, we were right back in foster care. Although we were very fortunate because of Ila and Cecil Smith in Provo, Utah, a white Mormon family who cared for us for more than seven years at the request of my father.

I talked too much but otherwise was doing fine in school; I got along with everybody. Yet, my brother continued to struggle. This was when I first experienced the impact of skin color. David, who is a shade darker than me, was confronted with discrimination and racism. David was resentful about our life in foster care. Often people would ask David the simple yet hurtful question, “Well, if your name is Ibarra—most often pronounced in Utah as “Eye-Bear-Ah”—how come you’re living with the Smiths?” It caused him to fight back with his fists. The same person never asked that question twice, but it dragged David deeper and deeper into trouble.

During the summer of 1966, our father invited us to come and visit him in Sacramento. I was fifteen years old; David was fourteen. By this time my dad had left Utah after using his GI Bill benefits earned during his military service to take night classes at the Hollywood Beauty College in Salt Lake City. He became a hair stylist in Sacramento and was able to achieve his dream of owning a business: The Mona Lisa House of Beauty. Dad operated a successful beauty salon for nearly 30 years.

While vacationing in Sacramento, David pleaded with Dad to let us live with him. He agreed with one condition: we could not split-up. He told us, “You’ve never been separated before and you’re not going to be split-up now.” He required that we remain together.

I was not sure about leaving Utah. I had just completed my freshman year at an elite private four-year high school, thanks to the intervention of my foster mom, Ila Smith. Sports were of supreme importance to me, and I had made the junior varsity football team. In the end, I knew David wasn’t going to make it in Utah so we decided to reunite with Dad in Sacramento.

Our foster parents were very disappointed. They thought we were making a big mistake. But they realized it was our mistake to make. We packed and shipped all of our belongings by mail, got a bus ticket and off we went to Sacramento in August of 1966.

There are a few crossroads that truly changed my life. The decision to leave Utah was a game changer for David and me. Doing so gave us the opportunity to gain self-awareness and helped us find the identity missing in our lives. We weren't "Eye-Bear-Ah" anymore. We had the opportunity to spend time with our father and learn from him.

I have never been around a harder working man in my life or anyone who is more proud of his Mexican heritage. We were able to meet our family and become more familiar with Mexican culture. It was an amazing and positive experience that for the first time gave us a true sense of belonging.

The biggest change was how many Latinos lived in Sacramento and how much more casual California was about race. We felt immediately more comfortable about our identity; it helped set us on a path to leadership. That path started for me with sports and then continued as senior class president and being voted "Most Likely to Succeed." David joined me in student government as junior class president at Luther Burbank Senior High School. Today he is a successful entrepreneur in Salt Lake City, member of the Latino Leaders Network Board of Directors and founder of the Ibarra Foundation to help Utah Latino students attend college.

Since the early years in Utah and California, I have experienced so many terrific professional leadership opportunities as a teacher, union organizer, White House official and now, some 32 years later, representing my clients. The common thread is advocacy. I am an advocate by profession.

Like reuniting with Dad in Sacramento, my experience advocating for President Clinton at the White House was another pivotal crossroad in my life and career. President Clinton taught me a most valuable lesson about advocacy early on during my time there: "Winning is about addition and multiplication; losing is about subtraction and division." I always try to win by addition and multiplication. It can build a movement, win elections,

achieve good policy, fight for a cause and turn-out a crowd. That is the best leadership formula for success in politics and in life.

I realized as we exited the White House on the final day in 2001, it was going to be important for me to figure out how to continue the conversation with so many leaders that I had come to respect during my time there. Nearly four years with a West Wing office made it possible to convene not only hundreds of elected officials but also many non-elected officials, Latino and non-Latino alike. The White House offered a unique platform that most showed up for when invited.

Founding the Latino Leaders Network was in part a strategy for creating a platform to share our personal stories and to help each other succeed. It has embraced a simple yet difficult mission to achieve: “bringing leaders together.” To do so, we organize the quarterly Latino Leaders Luncheon Series and the Tribute to Mayors held during the winter and summer meetings of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

The Latino Leaders Luncheon Series is an opportunity to honor national Latino leaders willing to share their personal stories of overcoming obstacles to achieve success. The gatherings are re-energizing and motivating. They ground us in what leadership requires and how important it is to continue our efforts to help each other succeed.

We honor elected officials and also leaders from all walks of life—entertainment, sports, science, academia and more. We honor a broad cross-section of Latino leaders from different professions and sectors, but also from different ethnicities and backgrounds. We have a diverse Latino leadership community and their stories can help unite us. Yes, we are “stronger together,” to borrow a recent campaign slogan.

Since 2004, the Latino Leaders Network has convened 49 luncheon events hosting nearly 11,000 guests. This book, *Latino Leaders Speak: Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph*, includes 32 keynote addresses delivered at the series as its primary source material. We want to share these stories with everyone in Amer-

ica to learn about our heroes, our role models and our leaders. We especially hope the addresses inspire young people on their paths to success.

While growing up in Utah foster care, I felt different but didn't know why. Reading this book as a young man may have caused me to dream bigger, faster and stronger earlier. We have so much to celebrate and so much to learn from each other.

It is my hope that this book will inspire all readers to dream big, get prepared and get ready to lead.