



# Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of  
Struggle and Triumph

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Edited by  
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



## Dolores Huerta

Civil Rights Activist  
Dolores Huerta Foundation

**November 18, 2008**

Born on April 10, 1930, Dolores Huerta has spent her life being a fierce advocate for Latino farm workers, immigration and women's rights. A labor leader and civil rights activist who worked with César Chávez to found the National Farmworkers Association (which later became the United Farm Workers), Huerta worked tirelessly to improve the social and economic conditions of farm workers. In 1965, she, along with César Chávez, helped organize a nationwide boycott of abusive grape growers, which resulted in the California table grape industry signing a three-year collective bargaining agreement with the United Farm Workers in 1970.

Not only has Huerta helped thousands of workers and directly influenced policy to better the conditions of Latinos in America, but she also has continued to be a mentor and an inspiration to many of our leaders today, who are guided by the phrase Huerta coined, "¡Sí se puede!"

My dad was a volunteer for the mineworkers' union in New Mexico. His name was Juan Fernández. He was such an avid union man that shortly after he was elected to the state assembly of New Mexico, he got expelled because he punched out a fellow assembly member, José Montoya from New Mexico, because José Montoya had made a derogatory remark about mineworkers. My dad took it upon himself to take him out right then and there.

My dad was a really strong union person, but unfortunately my father did not raise me. My mother left my dad; she divorced him because my dad was too macho. My mother said, “I’m not going to take that.” She took us to California where I was raised in a town called Stockton.

My mother was a businesswoman. She was an entrepreneur, a small businesswoman, a very, very smart person, way, way ahead of her time. She was very much a feminist and very involved in the community.

I was fortunate to have these kinds of role models in my mother and my dad in terms of my upbringing. In Stockton, I had the opportunity to join an organization, that was then starting, called the Community Service Organization—this is the organization that both César Chávez and I came out of. And when we think of the organizations in the Latino community . . . The first Latino organizations were the *honoríficas*, the mutual aid societies, where people got together and pooled their resources. For instance, if somebody died, they paid the funeral expenses. They would also celebrate the Quince de septiembre, the independence holiday, Cinco de Mayo, etcetera. We also had the veterans’ groups some of the oldest ones, of course, are with us here today and those are the League of United Latin American Citizens and the American GI Forum. These were the *veteranos*. They came back from World War II and they’re still here today working on behalf of our community.

The organization that became the first mass-based organization to really get thousands of Latinos involved was the Community Service Organization. The person who led that organization, I call him the Padrino of the Latino Movement, was a man named Fred Ross, Sr. He was such a great organizer that nobody knew who he was, right? That’s how great he was. Someday, more of his history will be taught to all of us. He is the one who got César Chávez and me involved in organizing, as well as Cruz Reynoso, who became a California Supreme Court Justice; Herman Gallegos; and many, many others. What an organizer does is go into a

community to find the leadership there and get it involved. That man, Fred Ross, was responsible for so much of what we did.

Some of the issues we fought in the CSO are really successes that still impact us today. We got rid of citizenship requirements, because before, unless you were a U.S. citizen, you could not get any kind of public assistance. That was one of the first issues we took on and won. We were able to get driver's licenses in the Spanish language. Before, you couldn't get a driver's license unless you spoke English. We got the ballots in Spanish. These are things that we still have today, and we kind of take them for granted. We've got disability insurance for farm workers. We've got the right to register people door to door, because before that, you couldn't do that. You had to go down to the county courthouse and take an oath. All of these were really groundbreaking achievements that came out of the Community Service Organization. And then, of course, César and I left that organization to form the Farm Workers Union.

But interestingly, what goes around comes around, and sometimes back to the future. One of the big issues too that we fought then was to get rid of the Bracero Program. This was a foreign worker program called Public Law 78 that brought hundreds of thousands of people from Mexico into the United States, and they were very mistreated. I remember they would tell them "*Aquí no hay 4 de julio, no hay 16 de septiembre.*" "You came here to work, and we expect you to work, and don't expect any holidays." And people were very, very mistreated. But right after we got that program stopped, our government, the United States of America, legalized more than 500,000 ex-braceros without any legislation. There was no law passed. It just kind of happened.

César and I got involved. We were arranging the documents for all these people to be able to come in to the United States, but then the government was saying, "well, they couldn't bring in their wives and their families." So, I flew to Washington, met with the Deputy Secretary of State, and we changed that regulation. Not only could the ex-braceros come in, but they could also

bring their wives and children. That was a really fantastic thing. It happened back in 1964, and of course we used that to help us organize the Farm Workers Union.

Look what's happening today. In California, while the rest of us are fighting for legalization, they now have guest workers in California. They have over 1,000 foreign workers in Salinas; they have foreign workers in Sacramento; they have foreign workers in Calexico and foreign workers in Yuma, Arizona. This comes on top of the hundreds of thousands of deportations that they have had where they have split up families, these terrible anguished conditions that so many families have gone through, taking away the parents and leaving the children behind. We're doing community organizing with my Dolores Huerta Foundation. We had a young man who committed suicide because they deported his mother. These are such atrocities that our government is committing. It's almost like the message is, "Here, we want your work, okay? We want your contributions to our own economy. But we don't want you to be here. We don't want you to live here. We don't want you to be residents. We don't want you to be citizens."

Even though we have been celebrating our great achievements in this election, we can see that, institutionally, we still have a long way to go. Yes, on May the 1st of 2006, we had millions of people marching for legalization against the Sensenbrenner Bill. We had millions that were marching, yet we know that we couldn't get a bill passed in Congress. The deportations happened right on the heels of what was going on. Even though we showed that we care, that we participate in the democracy, we still have a long way to go. That's something that we really have to reflect on.

We know that Proposition 187 in California, which tried to take away citizenship from people whose parents were not citizen—that was part of 187, and it was in the Sensenbrenner Bill—that really helped California come together. We had this little revolution in California where we were able to get Antonio Villaraigosa elected to mayor of Los Angeles. We have almost 40 Latinos in our California state legislature. The Sensenbrenner Bill did

the same thing for us nationally; it brought us Latinos together. It gave us this common cause that we have to work for to get another legalization bill. But in order to do that, we're going to have to do so much work. It's not just enough to come out there and march again like we did on May 1st of 2006, which by the way, we should think about because that march was the largest number of people on the street on one issue in the history of the United States of America. That is how momentous that was.

I've been getting a lot of questions as I travel around the country. People say, "Oh, wow. Now that we got Obama elected, we're going to get legalization." Wait a minute, okay? We know that Obama is going to do great and wonderful things, but he doesn't have that magic wand. We know that the only way that we're going to get legalization is if all of us work very, very hard. We've got to start focusing especially on those Congress people that we need to educate and all those senators that we need to educate so that we can at least get the bill on his desk. I don't even think we should ask Obama to do anything on legalization until we do the work we need to do in our communities.

We saw this phenomenon in this last election, where the young people left their homes in California and they went to Pennsylvania and they went to Colorado and they went to North Carolina. Well, we've got to do something like that. We've got to do something like that. We've got to get young people and us older folk to do the same thing and go out there to some of these Congressional places because we've got to educate the public. We've got to make them understand that what we're asking for the people who are here, the undocumented people that are here, it's not anything different from what has always been in our country. Because every single person that is in this country, their people came from somewhere; their people were legalized at some point. This has always been the policy of the United States of America. We're not asking for anything different from what has always been done.

In fact, if we go back to the 1920s, there were more immigrants in the United States at that point in time than there were

citizens. There were many immigrants who had the right to vote. They had the right to vote in this country even though they were not U.S. citizens. Sometimes we forget that history.

Another thing that we have to educate the American public on is where this anti-immigrant hysteria is coming from. It's coming from the same white supremacist organizations that were supporting Jim Crow and segregation, the ones that kept African Americans from voting in the South. This is who these people are. If you look at the family tree of the FAIR Immigration Reform people, you'll see this is who these people are. They have been very successful because they've gone all around the country and promoted all of these laws to stop any kind of justice for immigrants.

We have got to do the same thing. We've got to go out there and educate the American public. Let them know that these undocumented people that are here what they are doing. They are taking care of our children, taking care of our elderly, our disabled, cooking our food, picking our food. The food that we just ate right now came from some hands of undocumented workers somewhere. They're cleaning our buildings and building our buildings. They are contributing to the economy with their taxes, their social security. They're never going to see that money that they've contributed. We've got to educate the public about who these people are so that they can understand that they are not criminals, that they are workers. We need to get that sympathy. We need to let them know who the opponents are.

As we continue doing our work on immigration, we've also got to look at the other issues that are going to be affecting our community. Some of those issues are the same for the rest of the American public: health issues, national health care and education. Instead of our money going to prisons, let's put some of that money into education. In the San Joaquín Valley of California, they have only built one university since 1965, the University of California, Merced. They have built seventeen prisons. These are our tax dollars!

We also need to talk about some of the issues that affect other people, such as the women's organizations. I'm a feminist. Although I have eleven children, I am very strongly for choice. I like to tell people when we think about who's attacking the immigrants, it's the same people who are attacking the feminists. It's the same people who are attacking our gay and lesbian communities.

I'm going to say to all of you out there who are leaders: this is an issue that we have to stand up on. We have got to take the lead on this issue. We have got to go out there and say we are for human rights. That includes the human rights of people that are homosexuals. We've got to stand up. We've got to be counted on for these issues.

To help us to be able to do that, share these words with the folks that you're arguing with. This is what I tell people: the right of a woman to choose how many children she wants to have, it's her right of privacy, her constitutional right. Who you want to live with, fall in love with and, yes, have the right to marry, it's your constitutional right and your right of privacy and nobody should interfere with that right. We can quote the great Mexican President Benito Juárez, who was the first indigenous president of the Americas: "*El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz.*" Respecting other people's rights is peace.

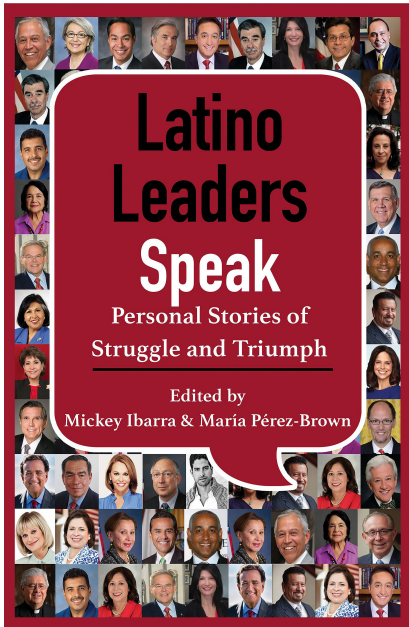
In California, they're blaming the African American community and they're blaming the Latino community because a lot of people didn't vote. We know that the priests and the ministers were out there saying to vote against this Marriage Equality Act. But don't blame us too much, because the problem is the campaign could have done a lot more. I was out in California, and they could've done a lot more. This struggle is not going to end soon; it's going to continue. We have to be there as Latino leaders in the forefront of this struggle, because it is a struggle for human rights. Can we go out there and do the work that needs to be done to really show our presence as we did in the last election, to bring justice to our country? We are the leaders. We need to take the risks, and we need to do the work. ¡*Sí se puede!*



# Latino Leaders Speak

## Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph

Edited by Mickey Ibarra and María Pérez-Brown



Originally presented at the Latino Leaders Luncheon Series in Washington, DC, and other major cities, the personal stories included in this book are all by successful Latinos involved in a variety of occupations, from politics and sports to education and activism. Their words will inspire readers of all ages to follow their dreams and help those less fortunate.

“The resonant message adheres to the quintessentially American formula of hard work and persistence in the land of opportunity.”  
— *Booklist*

“‘Our stories are powerful and need to be told.’ That simple yet seminal statement in *Latino Leaders Speak* is precisely what makes this book required reading.”

— Patricia Guadalupe,  
Contributing Writer, *NBC Latino*  
Washington Editor, *Latino Magazine*

Contributors include former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa; former general manager of the New York Mets Omar Minaya; Chancellor of the University of Texas System Dr. Francisco G. Cigarroa; former U.S. Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales; news anchor Maria Elena Salina; and many others.

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