



Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
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Gloria Molina
County Supervisor
Los Angeles County

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Trailblazer Gloria Molina is the first Latina in history to be elected to the California State Legislature, the Los Angeles City Council and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. As a Los Angeles County Supervisor, Gloria Molina developed a reputation as a fiscal guardian committed to achieving good government reforms and addressing quality of life issues—particularly for the one million residents living in unincorporated areas. But her main focus has been on strengthening Los Angeles County’s public health care system, first by securing \$1 billion in federal funds from President Bill Clinton in 1995 to rescue the county’s struggling health care network; then by helping develop the county’s public-private partnership system of health care into the largest in the United States.

While at the California State Legislature, Molina lent her political muscle to many issues, but it was her lengthy but successful fight against building a state prison in the Boyle Heights neighborhood that made her a local legend.

Molina grew up as one of ten children in the Los Angeles suburb of Pico Rivera to a Mexican-American father and Mexican mother. She attended public schools in her hometown and attended Rio Hondo College, East Los Angeles College and California State University, Los Angeles.

My father used to say, “*Con un sueño, trabajo y ganas, todo se puede lograr.*” With a dream, hard work and determination, anything can be accomplished. Now, one would think with such positive inspiration that it had all been planned, that I would have known as a child that one day I would be here. But nothing could be further from the truth.

My parents are from Casas Grandes, Chihuahua. I’m first generation. Although my father was born in the United States, he was raised from the age of three in Mexico. Of course, he always longed to come back to the United States. I’m the oldest of ten children. I was raised in Los Angeles. We all lived together in a small two-bedroom house. And, of course, I was always reminded that it was my responsibility to set the example for my brothers and sisters. This is a tradition in Mexico, and I was very proud to follow through on that tradition. My parents had dreams for each and every one of us. But those dreams were really rather limited. My father aspired for me to graduate from high school and go on to be a legal secretary. That would make him so very proud. He wanted all of his children to learn English and not have an accent. That was very important to him because he didn’t want us to be discriminated. Of course, he wanted for every single one of us to graduate from high school. He’d been a construction worker all of his life and, as he said, worked with his back and his hands and did not want us to follow in that tradition.

Tradition was part and parcel of my growing up. Certainly, my brother was expected to become a lawyer or a professional. The girls were expected to become teachers, secretaries and moms. But my dreams were much larger than that. They weren’t political at all. It was my intention to become a fashion designer, believe it or not. After two art classes, I clearly decided—and I think it was decided for me that I had no talent in that area whatsoever—to start college with an interest in social work. It’s interesting that my mother was very bothered by my wanting to attend college. After all, she’d only attended the third grade. She felt that for my future, graduating from high school was more than enough. After

all, I was to become a wife and a mother. She was also bothered by the fact that my father had had an industrial accident. He had been in a cave-in, and we were living on his disability check. Another fine Mexican tradition is that the oldest has to be responsible for the wellbeing of the family, so an additional paycheck was necessary. Consequently, I had to go out and work. I attended college while working full time as a legal secretary.

I was involved in all kinds of issues in the community, and one of the things I decided to do was to volunteer at a local community center on the east side. I started working with young women, tenth graders who unfortunately couldn't read at a tenth-grade level. It bothered me tremendously. I went to go visit the teachers at the high school and was confronted by a group of teachers who said, "Don't worry about these girls. After all, they're not going to graduate from high school. They'll probably get pregnant before then. We don't expect them to graduate. So, if I were you, I wouldn't worry about them." Well, that certainly got my adrenaline going, and it hasn't stopped since.

At the same time, on the eastside, the Chicano Movement was just beginning. At college, all of us were members of MASA, the Mexican American Student Association. This was when it was okay to be a hyphenated American. And, of course, MECHA followed soon thereafter.

The Chicano Movement was so exhilarating to me. Listening to Chicano activists talk about what we needed to do about the inequities, the injustices; it was wonderful. I joined up as quickly as I could. I was a wonderful follower. Unfortunately, the women of that organization were relegated to the task of mimeographing and making menudo for all of the fundraisers. Every time we wanted to raise our issues—and we had many, such as employment training, child care, higher education—we, of course, were quickly castigated and put in our place. I participated in various events, but anytime we would raise our issues, we were accused of trying to divide the movement.

Well, at the same time, I attended various consciousness-raising meetings. That's what they were called back then in the infancy of our present feminist movement. I listened to all of these white women talk about these macho men who were discriminating against them, who were relegating them to subservient roles. It was a real problem for me to listen to that because, growing up, my father was very proud to be a macho. Machismo in Mexico is a proud tradition. A macho is someone who is a responsible, respected man, someone who takes responsibility for his family, and it's a very honorable role. So, them using that word was a real problem for me. I certainly was a victim of the racism that was going on in the community, but I was also a victim of the sexism that was going on in the community.

The war in Vietnam and the fact that our Chicanos were going to the frontlines, and we were losing many, many more than we represented in this country as far as population, led me to decide very quickly that this was going to be my focus. I got involved in the Chicano Movement and I was working every day on those issues while I working full time. At the same time, I quietly—I wasn't a very engaging person at that time, a leader of any sort—participated in various discussions with other Latinas and other Chicanas in the community. We certainly felt the discrimination. We certainly felt the barriers to our moving forward. We started talking about putting together an organization, a network where we could become advocates.

I came across the opening of the Chicana Service Action Center by a group of very, very assertive women, including Francisca Flores, who was an activist in the labor Movement in the 1940s and '50s, Lilia Aceves and various other women who had decided to open up an employment training and counseling facility. I was very glad to finally find this network of women. They convinced me, and we joined up with them. They said that we should form a chapter of an organization known as Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, a national Chicana advocacy group. We thought, *absolutely*. We developed a chapter as quickly as we

could in Los Angeles, later to only find out that the organization only existed on paper. There was no such organization. But our very first meeting attracted more than 200 Chicanas. We clearly understood the importance that the dialogue we were having with ourselves was going on everywhere, and that Chicanas needed to have a network, an organization and someone to advocate on their behalf.

We took action as quickly as possible. We started building our leadership skills by speaking in front of people, many times certainly not prepared, but we were learning our way through. We were writing proposals to develop various programs for women. We were writing articles about many of the issues in our community. We were moving forward with a very strong action plan. We developed more employment training programs. We developed supportive services for Latinas and Chicanas and their families. Because a woman can't go to work if she doesn't have good childcare services, we developed the very first bilingual, bicultural childcare center. We also went as far as suing L.A. County—for which I now serve on that Board of Supervisors—to stop the forced sterilization of Mexican women at the county general hospital.

We had a very, very active plan, and we were very excited about the work that we were doing. Of course, that led to getting involved in the political process. Certainly, it wasn't what we were planning on doing, but by nature of getting involved in many of those issues, you become part of the political process.

I became very adept and developed an army of what I call "the lickens and the stickers." We were a very valuable commodity to most of the grassroots campaign for the Chicanos that were running for office. Every time one of them decided to run, they'd call on me and I'd put together a whole group of people. We became a very, very valuable commodity, as I said, to any of those campaigns. I was a regular.

Eventually, I got an opportunity to work for the newly elected assemblyman, Art Torres. He, at that time, was called an admi-

nistrative assistant. I really welcomed the opportunity to work with him in the community on many of the issues. It was just exhilarating to be a part of not only his campaign but eventually his staff.

I wanted to learn much more about political organizing, so I asked for an opportunity to work on the Carter-Mondale campaign that was coming through the eastside of L.A. Instead I became the “Chicana” in the California campaign—you know, you only have one at a time, you can’t have too many. I was sent up and down the state to organize for Carter-Mondale. Unfortunately, most of the Chicanos didn’t know who Jimmy Carter was and, in many instances, didn’t have the interest. But luckily, while we didn’t win the state of California, we did win the White House. At that time, I was called by a very dear friend of mine, Rick Hernández. He had been the western region desk and later became a muckety muck at the Small Business Administration. He called me and said, “Why don’t you apply for this job at the White House?” I thought, *Wow, what an exciting opportunity to go to the White House and be with all of these White House politicians that know what’s going on and how to do it. I could learn so very much.* I certainly was excited. It was so very impressive, and I was so fortunate.

Well, my very first day on the job, I received an envelope on my desk. It had two little flags on it: the American flag and the flag of Iran. We were invited to join Jimmy Carter on the White House lawn to welcome the Shah of Iran. I was very excited, my first time on the White House lawn. Now, I had been involved in the Chicano Moratorium in East L.A., and in the school walkouts on the eastside, I had been part of anti-war protests throughout L.A., and I had been involved in feminist protests, but I never expected to be gassed on the lawn of the White House, which is exactly what happened that day. It seems that many of the people who were against the Shah were creating quite a stir right outside of the White House. That’s what happened to me on my first day.

That evening, as I walked out, the White House police said, “We need to walk all Persians to their car.” I said, “Persian? I’m not a Persian. I’m a Mexican.” They said, “Oh, from Mexico?” I said, “No, from East L.A.” Of course, it was very clear that we were non-existent to many of the people here in D.C.

Well, at that time, we were fortunate to have a few members of Congress, such as Congressman Ed Roybal and our very own Congressman Robert García. Very few people who were there were not able to really fight all of the inequities that so many of us knew existed in our community and that I knew that at that time. I needed to go back home and find a way that we could get more Latinos elected to the U.S. Congress. It was interesting because I was working in the Office of Presidential Personnel and my responsibility was to, again, “get Hispanics appointed to commissions.” Not the top commissions, by the way, those little smaller commissions. “Make sure you only put one on, okay?” That was my role at that time. I enjoyed the work, it was wonderful work, but clearly, I needed to go home. We needed to go home and be part of organizing in our own community to make sure that we had a stronger and better presence in the beltway, and that was very important.

When I returned to Los Angeles, I started working full time for then Speaker Willie Brown. And then, again, I also volunteered—I was a volunteer for everything—for a group called Californios, a reapportionment committee that was operating in Los Angeles. We knew that because of the growth of the Chicano population throughout California, we were entitled to two additional congressional seats. We’re very excited. Many of my feminist friends thought, *why not?* One should go to a Chicano and one should go to a Chicana, if we’re going to be fair about this whole process. We approached many of those Chicano-elected officials that we had supported all of this time, walked in and made our request that we thought we should have one of the seats in Congress. Well, we were laughed right out of the room. What was interesting about it is that we had approached various

Chicana lawyers because we thought that they would be the most qualified to run. They laughed at us as well. They said it was tough enough to get a Chicano elected, let alone a Chicana.

We went away, licked our wounds and, luckily for us, there was an opportunity that turned up in my own backyard. Assemblyman Torres decided to challenge one of his senate colleagues, and that vacated that assembly seat. Again, we went to the various Chicana lawyers, but they said, “Uh-uh, we don’t have a chance of winning. We’re not going to run for that seat.” At the end of the day, it was very clearly decided that I had to be the candidate. I knew the district. I had worked the district. I knew enough about politics. I decided to do it. We had to move forward and take the risk. We weren’t sure we were going to win but we were going to do all that we could.

I was very fortunate. We were able to raise money. We got into an action plan. We had a campaign going. It was very fortunate for me to be the oldest of ten because when you’re walking the district, having nine brothers and sisters with you is a help. We walked that district one and a half times. In 1982, I was the first Chicana ever elected to the California State Legislature. I’m very proud of that. I’m very proud to say that what my mother said to me many, many years before, about setting the example for others served me well. Since then, I have been followed into the California legislature by some of the most talented and wonderful women that you will ever meet. I’m very proud to have been the very first one. But many others followed, such as our wonderful Congresswoman Hilda Solís.

In 1987, I decided to run for the city council. I should mention, by the way, when I first decided to run for that assembly seat, the politicians said, “No.” They already had a candidate in mind. We had to run against them, despite they’re believing that we could not win. Would you believe that after winning the state legislative seat and deciding to run for the city council, I went back to those politicians and said, “Look, I want to run for the city council,” and they said, “Oh, no. We’ve got our own candidate.”

They didn't support me back then either, and I had to beat them again.

In 1987, I became the first Chicana on the Los Angeles City Council, which was very important to us. The next battle was for the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors. Five white men represented the County of Los Angeles, a very powerful board from the standpoint of what it does and what it's responsible for. Five people represent ten million people (Its budget this year is over \$22 billion.) It has a tremendous amount of responsibility. But the way the district lines were drawn was very clever and certainly didn't allow for any minority to serve, even though we had a large Latino population and a very, very large African American population.

As a result of a case MALDEF brought to the Supreme Court to challenge reapportionment, a seat in the first district was carved out to be a Latino district. I ran with ten other candidates, including unfortunately my former boss, Art Torres. I was elected as the first Chicana to the County Board of Supervisors, a position that I serve in today. I'm very proud to carry out that work.

When Congressman Roybal was ready to retire, he came to me and said, "I'd like you to run for my seat." Frankly, I was very happy doing the work that I was doing. By that time, I was married and had a child. We were very fortunate to have Lucille Roybal-Allard, who had followed me into the California legislature, ready to go. She was able to follow through, serve and follow in the footsteps of her father. Lucille is a wonderful congresswoman. I love her dearly. She's one of our great leaders. I'm so proud that she has been one of the Latinas that has been motivated to get involved in the political process. We had wanted, from day one, to get a Chicana in the U.S. Congress. By the time that Lucille got there, there were others, but unfortunately still not enough. We have to do much more work, elect many more Latinas to the U.S. Congress.

Nevertheless, I'm elated at the number of women that I see in positions of power, in advocacy organizations and in corporate

positions or on major foundation boards. I'm very proud to see so many Chicanas in position of power. It's wonderful. I am glad that I am but one of many who continue to struggle and take on risk to carry on these kinds of roles.

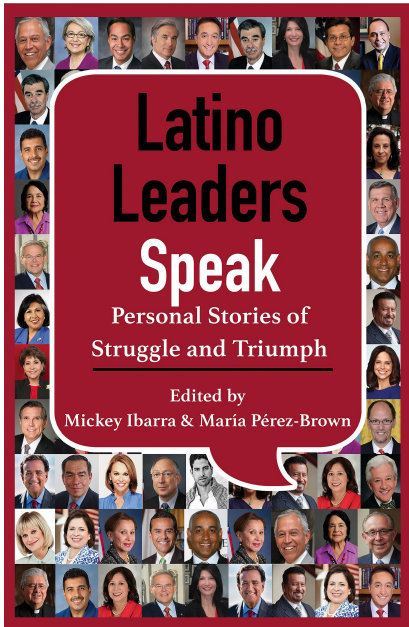
By the way, I want you to know that while my mother had a real problem in my attending college, she saved money most of her life so that her youngest, the ninth and tenth—they're twins—would be able to go to college without ever having to work. She was so proud that day when they graduated with their degrees. I'm so glad that my mother realized how important it was for all of us to go to college. I was very proud of her that day as well.

The reality is we have so much more to do. We need to realize that it requires both men and women to be at the table when it comes to public policy. It can't be one or the other. We need to continue to have that kind of unity when it comes to the issues of public policy. I'm looking forward, like everyone else, to a new administration. I wore a pantsuit in honor of my candidate. I look forward to being a part of the Democratic campaign to win the White House back. I do know that whoever goes into the White House will have to go through the Latino community to get there. Hopefully, they will recognize and understand the unbelievable talent we have in our community and will appoint Chicanas and Latinas to positions, such as Secretary of State, Supreme Court justices, even vice presidents, making our community better and stronger every single day. It is wonderful to be a first, but it would mean nothing if you did not have the following of so many people like you.

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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