



Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



Henry Bonilla

Congressman
U.S. House of Representatives

September 2, 2008

Henry Bonilla is the founder of The Normandy Group, LLC, a well-respected, bipartisan government relations firm based in Washington, D.C. He is a former congressman who represented Texas' 23rd congressional district in the United States House of Representatives. Bonilla is the first Hispanic Republican ever elected to Congress from the 23rd Congressional District, a district that had been Democrat since its creation in 1967. Before he spent fifteen years in politics, Bonilla spent fifteen years in the television news business as an executive producer and producer of news and public affairs programming in the San Antonio, Austin, New York and Philadelphia markets. Bonilla left his career in television and ran for public office in 1992 after being inspired by then Minority Whip Newt Gingrich.

Born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, Bonilla grew up in a housing project in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood on the West Side of San Antonio. He graduated from South San Antonio High School in 1972 and received his Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Texas at Austin in 1976. Today, he uses his life experience to inspire young people to follow their dreams.

I was born in a housing project in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood on the West Side of San Antonio. Later on in life, the family struggled. My grandmother on my mother's side often had to work as a maid at the downtown Baptist Memorial Hospital in San Antonio, taking the bus to work every day for 30 years. It set an example of hard work, doing for yourself and trying to pull yourself up from your bootstraps.

My father was a great example of hard work. But my mother, who was the only one in the family who had a high school degree, understood that if the kids stayed in school, they had a shot at living the American dream. I count my blessings every day that I was so fortunate to be born in a country that allows someone with my background to be successful.

Before I spent fifteen years in federal politics, I spent fifteen years in the television news business as an executive producer and producer of news and public affairs in the television markets of San Antonio, Austin and Philadelphia. At the peak of my career in that line of work, I was responsible for the 11:00 p.m. news on WABC in New York that averaged between 2 and 13 million viewers each night. Back then, I would pinch myself some nights in my New York City apartment talking to my mother. It cost a lot of money to call long distance back to San Antonio but I missed tortillas and chorizo and all of the dishes that she made back home. I had to learn, as I was on the phone with her, how to make and roll tortillas. They didn't come out perfectly round, but at least I had them, a taste of the culture that I grew up in.

Being part of a Hispanic community is something that you always want to hold on to. There are wonderful aspects of the culture regardless of which Hispanic community you come from. But then first and foremost is waking up every day being proud to be an American and proud of what this country has to offer.

As I moved on years later to run for Congress, a lot of people said, "Hey, you can't run for congressional office." This was in 1992. "You've never even run for student council before. How

can you run in an area that is 70 percent minority, that has an incumbent congressman who's been in office for eight years, and in politics going on 25 years? You can't possibly win." All I ever had to do is have somebody tell me I couldn't do it, and then I would not be denied.

One of the greatest moments I would have when I was in office is speaking to high school and college students, giving them examples of my life and how they might relate to it so that they could be successful as well. I always walked away thinking that if I just reached one student on any given afternoon or any given night, telling him my story of struggle and, fortunately, of success, they might say, "You know, man, if that guy can do it, coming from his background, maybe I have a shot too."

We owe it to young people, those of us who have been successful, to let them know the story of struggle and success, of meeting failures and getting up again, getting knocked down and continuing to move forward. We owe it to them to provide that opportunity for them as well to be successful.

Sometimes, you never know when it's going to come back to you. I'd be in a crowd later on and a young college student would tap me on the shoulder and say, "Mr. Bonilla, I remember what you told me a couple of years ago. Now, I'm attending MIT. I never thought I had a chance to do that." Or, "I'm attending a local college. I never thought I really was college material." You walk away thinking, *wow, you've made a difference.*

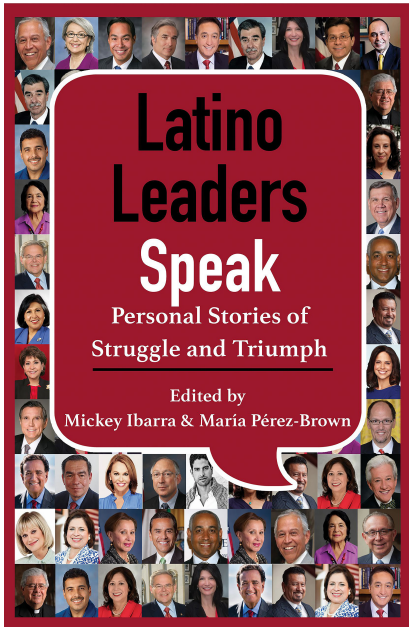
As I moved on in Congress, some days I'd say to myself, "I can't believe I'm getting to do what I do." I co-chaired the last two conventions. I got to be a chairman on the Appropriations Committee that decided funding for the entire federal government for my entire fourteen years in office. And then I think back to those days when we had to live in a little metal mobile home in my grandmother's backyard for a while, just because we didn't have a place to live in between homes growing up on the South Side of San Antonio. Then I would think of how far I had come.

I want to leave the legacy of opportunity for my children and their grandchildren in the future. I don't want them to wake up someday and say, "what happened to my country? How has it become so different from what my dad grew up in that gave him that opportunity?" So, every day while I was in office and what I do today as well, I work for those principles, and will continue until the day I die, to preserve the environment that this country has provided for many of you and me to prosper and to grow—if you're willing to work hard, stay out of trouble, continue working and apply yourself. That is what I'm committed to doing until my last day on this earth.

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.

MICKEY IBARRA, a graduate of the University of Utah, is president of the Ibarra Strategy Group, a government relations and public affairs firm in Washington, DC. He is the founder and chairman of the Latino Leaders Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing leaders together.

MARÍA PÉREZ-BROWN, a television executive with extensive experience in content development, production and programming, is the author of *Mama: Latina Daughters Celebrate Their Mothers* (HarperCollins, 2002), which was published simultaneously in English and Spanish. A graduate of Yale University and New York University Law School, she lives with her family in New York City.

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Title: *Latino Leaders Speak: Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph* • **Publication Date:** May 31, 2017

Format: Trade Paperback • **ISBN:** 978-1-55885-843-5 • **Page Count:** 272 • **Price:** \$21.95

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