



Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



Henry G. Cisneros

U.S. Secretary of Housing &
Urban Development

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Henry Gabriel Cisneros has devoted his life to public service on the local and national levels. He served as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in President Bill Clinton's administration from 1993 to 1997. Previously, he was the first Latino to serve as mayor of San Antonio, Texas in contemporary times for four terms, from 1981 to 1989. To Mayor Cisneros' credit is his having increased the city's economic base, attracting high tech industries, developing tourism, all of which created many more jobs for San Antonio citizens. At HUD, Cisneros worked on revitalizing and increasing public housing as well as furthering policies that were successful in achieving the nation's highest ever rate of home ownership. After serving in the presidential cabinet, Cisneros became the president and COO for the Univision network from 1997 to 2000. He later founded American City Vista (later named CityView), a corporation dedicated to building homes for low and moderate income families. Cisneros remains actively involved in politics, especially as a Democrat and in support of minority candidates to hold office.

Mickey, thank you for this honor. Mickey Ibarra has done many noteworthy things in his life, such as creating the Latino Leaders Network and bringing it to Los Angeles. What a wonderful assemblage of friends and associates and acquaintances from

across many years. Thank for being here. And Mickey, thank you for pulling us all together.

Mickey asked me to share some personal insights today. I promise to do that. But first, let me say that Mickey's personal story is inspiring. He and his brother grew up in Utah in foster homes. Mickey was the older brother by eleven months. They struggled rough through life and worked their way through high school and football and college. In time, Mickey became Assistant to the President of the United States when Bill Clinton named him to that position in the White House. His brother has been very successful in business. They never quit. So, ladies and gentlemen, let us recognize Mickey Ibarra for all that he has done in his time.

Mickey was an assistant to the president at the same time that Janet Murguía was in the White House, and when María Echaveste was the Deputy Chief of Staff. President Clinton did a good job of naming some very capable people to staff the White House. I want to recognize Gloria Molina. Gloria, thank you so much for your years of service. Gloria is an exemplar of honesty and conviction and determination. She has made special contributions in every position she has held: the California State Assembly, the Los Angeles City Council and as a path-breaking County Supervisor. No one will be able to match what she has done over these years. I speak literally the truth. No one will be able to match her because all future supervisors will have term limits, and Gloria has served for almost twenty years and will leave a tremendous legacy.

I want to recognize Mayor Villaraigosa, who could not be here. One of my memories of public life in Los Angeles involves Mayor Villaraigosa and Gloria Molina. When Mayor Villaraigosa and Xavier Becerra were coming up together, it looked like they were on a collision course, because both intended to run for mayor of Los Angeles. We met at Gloria's home in an effort to try, as friends, to explore how a damaging fight could be averted. Gloria brought me into that discussion. We met on Sunday mornings, around 7:30 a.m. over *pan dulce* in her home. And it is

amazing the way things sorted out. Today, as we speak, that Super Committee is meeting in Washington composed of six senators and six congress persons, working together to address a question that is right at the heart of the future of our country: “How are we going to deal with the scale of national debt and deficit?” And, tonight in Washington, in the audience for President Obama’s address on the deficit and debt, on the economy and jobs, is Mayor of Los Angeles Antonio Villaraigosa, who is the president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and who was invited tonight as a guest of the President of the United States. So it’s an uplifting thing, Gloria, that all those years ago we were working to avoid a destructive political collision and both of you made major contributions, a story of our community and our progress.

I want to thank, in a very sincere way for her years of help and partnership, my wife, Mary Alice, who for the last four years has served on the City Council in San Antonio. She has held the same seat that I held from 1975 to 1981 and has done a great job of providing constituency services and improving our community. She is now president of a nonprofit we created in our home neighborhood about ten years ago—American Sunrise.

We live in the home that my grandparents owned. Our West Side barrio in San Antonio is the equivalent of East Los Angeles. We wanted to do something about the fact that the children in our neighborhood have fewer chances in life. We bought an adjacent house and set it up as an afterschool learning center. It has become the base for a nonprofit that operates in a one square mile area of the West Side of San Antonio. We have children come every afternoon after school for additional instruction in math, science and reading. And we’re going on from there to middle school children and high school kids, offering SAT prep that they can’t get elsewhere. We can improve their SAT scores to get them into college as well as involve their parents in literacy and citizenship. We call our program American Sunrise, and the driving force is Mary Alice Cisneros. I want to recognize her and thank her for her work.

Also here today is my daughter, Teresa, and her husband, Sean Burton. Friends, please meet my daughter Teresa and Sean Burton, who live here in L.A. Teresa is a lawyer who has worked in the city attorney's office and the mother of two of our four grandchildren. Sean is the president of CityView, the company of which I am the chairman, and where Sean is doing a great job.

I will try to be succinct in my remarks, but I do want to comply with Mickey's admonition to offer a few words of personal reflection which fit into the larger picture of the progress of our people, of our community.

I grew up in San Antonio. My grandfather was exiled among the shifting factions of Mexico. He arrived in San Antonio in 1926, under threat of execution in Mexico. He set up a business, a very successful printing shop. My mother was one of seven children. My father was a soldier who went to World War II from New Mexico and spent four years in New Guinea in the Pacific combat zone. There, he contracted malaria and was sent to San Antonio to recover. He roomed with a soldier who had a sister and that sister became my mother; the rest is history. My grandfather, who was an old Mexican-style patriarch, said to my dad, "You can marry her, but you can't take her out of San Antonio." That is why we're from San Antonio and not from some other place in the country. My dad made a commitment.

We grew up in a neighborhood in which all of the people were *mejicanos*. As I said, envision East L.A.'s Boyle Heights. Most of the men were World War II veterans. We lived in an idyllic lower-middle-class setting. I have sometimes said it was like a Norman Rockwell painting, except all the faces were brown. I went outside the house and whistled and sixteen guys, roughly between my age and my brother's age, five years younger, would come out and we'd start football games and baseball games in the street at any hour of the day. We grew up in a cocoon of family and friends. We were protected from the discrimination and the segregation that continued to plague Texas in that era.

San Antonio was insulated more than most Texas cities from the type of virulent segregation and discrimination against *mejicanos*. We lived among people who were proud of their heritage and they were not going to be kept down. They were very hard-working, and combined ethnic pride with a sense of social justice.

Among the people who came out of our neighborhood was one of the founders of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), Gregory Luna, and the founder of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, Willie Velásquez. The first Spanish radio station in the United States, KCOR, was established by San Antonio's Cortez family. KWX television, the building block of Univision, was founded in San Antonio. The Association of Hispanic Colleges and Universities and Avance were established there. Here today is Sonia Rodríguez, who was the president of a seminal organization named Communities Organized for Public Service, a predecessor of UNO in Los Angeles, both created by Ernie Cortés, himself from a Latino neighborhood of San Antonio.

I grew up with a mother who had a keen social conscience. I remember going to the doctor with her as a small boy, maybe seven, in 1955, on a bus with no air conditioning. In those days, the politicians in Texas all wore white suits. The first time I saw the mayor, we were on a bus and my mother said, "Look out the window. That's the mayor over in the plaza." She said that he should be ashamed that on that same plaza were water fountains that were identified as white and colored. And the Woolworth store beside the plaza had bathrooms that said white and colored. African Americans couldn't use the counter there.

So under my mother's tutelage it has been impossible for me over my life not to relate to people who are marginalized, who haven't had opportunities. My mother imbued a deep sense of what's fair and what's unfair. I share that with you because I think it is also true of many of you in this room and many of our people. I believe that our community is unusually attuned to fairness for a variety of reasons. Perhaps it's our religion. Perhaps it's

the remembrance of family, extended family. I know this: that no matter what other successes we achieve, we remember our roots. So I want not only to highlight that attribute, but also encourage it. You see, our community needs that sense of connection from its leaders and from those who've been fortunate. We need that sense of remembrance in order for all of us to progress.

The year 1968, when I graduated from college, was one of the most tumultuous years in American history. In March, President Johnson decided not to run for reelection because of the national divisions over the Vietnam War. In April, Dr. King was assassinated. I remember the night. In June, Senator Kennedy was killed here in Los Angeles at the Ambassador Hotel. By that summer, America's cities were burning, including Chicago during the Democratic Convention which became a police riot.

It was in that year that I concluded that what I wanted to do with my life was in the realm of public service—to try to make the country better. I knew I wanted to serve but I didn't know in what capacity. And then the prospect of improving the nation's cities was opened to me. I had the opportunity as a college student to travel to the East Coast as a delegate to a conference at West Point. I saw that New York City had Mayor John Lindsay trying to make the city work for all of its residents, black, white and brown, so that New York wouldn't burn like Cleveland, Detroit, Washington and so many other cities had.

I came back to Texas and listened like never before to the messages of Julian Bond and Andrew Young. And in our community, to the ideas of Raúl Yzaguirre, who was just starting out at that time, and César Chávez, of course. I concluded what I wanted to do was in the realm of community building, of city building. So that's what I studied. I went home and was elected to the city council and served on an at-large city council, citywide, for two terms. When the MALDEF brought a suit, the Justice Department intervened to change the election system. There were two Latinos out of nine in a city that was 60 percent Latino. The seven people who were not

Latino lived within a mile of each other in the wealthiest part of town.

MALDEF sued to create single-member districts. We had a referendum to change the system and barely won it, the equivalent of ten votes per precinct citywide. But we won it. And in the next election we had an eleven-member city council in which six were minorities. The city thought a revolution had occurred. Civic leaders thought the city was going to melt down with six minorities: five Latinos and an African-American on the city council. All of us were young and under 35 years of age. I was a college professor. Another council member was a social worker. We had a junior college professor. We were a very different group from the traditional chamber of commerce: sixty-year-old business people who had served on the city council. The city began to take a different path.

I must say that I think that the intervening years have been the most progressive San Antonio has ever had. I use that word “progressive” not just in the way we think of center-left politics, but in terms of job creation and inclusion of all San Antonians in the resulting prosperity. The organization that Sonia was president of, COPS, was very much a part of that process.

I developed a mindset which has served me well through the rest of my life, including the time I spent with President Clinton in his cabinet, which is a formulation of how cities work. To put it as simply as possible, I used to say to the people of San Antonio, “a good boxer has to have two punches. You can’t just have a right hand; you’ve got to have a left as well.” In my formulation, a city has to have two punches. First, we have to grow jobs. We have to raise incomes. We have to support the practical things to create economic momentum.

The second punch is we have to harness that economic momentum and make it work for the people who are at the margins. That means everything from job training and community college and universities made accessible, with the help of COPS-type community organizations to corporate jobs programs and striving

for major public infrastructure projects. That's what it takes to create the jobs. That's what it takes to expand economic opportunity. That's been the model that has served San Antonio well.

It's also what I shared to President Clinton while I was Secretary of HUD. I'm very proud to have been part of the administration that produced the longest economic expansion in American history, generated the lowest unemployment rates, resulted in the lowest poverty rates and fueled the highest formation of jobs and small businesses. We made it work for people.

I remember the morning we were in the Rose Garden at the White House when we were to have an announcement on another subject. As I left HUD to go to the White House, my staff handed me a piece of paper that showed, for the first time since records on the distribution of incomes were kept, that income distribution was narrowing. One of the hardest challenges in American economics is to move the actual distribution of income and wealth. It is always the top percent that has the vast bulk of the resources and the people in the bottom quintile have one or two percent of the total wealth. On President Clinton's watch, we actually were beginning to move that hardest of hardest of economic metrics. I showed the data that had been given to me to President Clinton, and he was elated.

That has been motivation. It has also been the practical goal of my public work. And it has been for me a philosophy of life. That is why the present economic setback we are enduring is so disheartening, because we have seen the squandering of the surplus that was amassed. We have seen world forces on a collision course with unwise responses. We have seen new forms of implacable opposition, including the present Tea Party rhetoric. It's hard for me to understand. We are seeing programs that work to help people being dismantled. Unfortunately, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that a good measure of the motivation is anti-minority, including the anti-immigrant sentiment that we saw last summer in Arizona, and that we see today in communities in Pennsylvania, in Nebraska, in too many places all across

our country. Thank God for MALDEF and the other advocates among us who fight the battle.

But what it says to me is that we have to continue to fight with the tools we have, and that includes pride in our community and in our people and belief in what we can contribute in our country. We will be an integral part of a better American future. That is the task that lies ahead.

So let me close by saying that as I think about that future, I am personally committed to three things. The first is to act on my belief that the places where we live, our communities, our cities, are the platforms by which we are going to create a better life for people. That's why I am in the housing business. At CityView we are building homes, taking institutional capital and building homes for working families across the nation. However, we must go beyond that. We must build green. We must build affordable. We must build for emerging communities of striving new Americans. We must utilize capital in new ways. We must make our community stronger.

Secondly, I believe that my best expenditure of time in the years that remain to me—I'm 64 years old now and, though God willing, I hope to work until at least 90, a short 26 years from now—is in helping our people, our community, the largest minority in the country, integrate successfully into the American mainstream. If there's going to be a durable American middle class, it's going to be the passage of people who are poor into the middle class.

The numbers say it clearly. If we're going to have academic excellence in America, it's going to be children who are presently dropping out who become the workforce talent that the country is going to need. If we're going to compete economically with China and India, it's going to be people like those in Los Angeles and San Antonio, minorities of all heritages who will shoulder the load.

We must take our best practices in education and economic empowerment to scale. This is an effort which cannot fail. As the NASA flight director said in the movie *Apollo 13*, "Failure is not an

option.” Because we love our country, we must not fail. This is not a matter only for the people left behind; compassion is not a matter only of humanitarian instincts; this is a matter of the future of the country we are preparing for our children. Thank God we are a people who are hungry, who are hungry to advance, who are committed to work, who understand sacrifice today to do better for their families tomorrow. America is fortunate to have our Latino brothers and sisters to help build its future. And the best is yet to come.

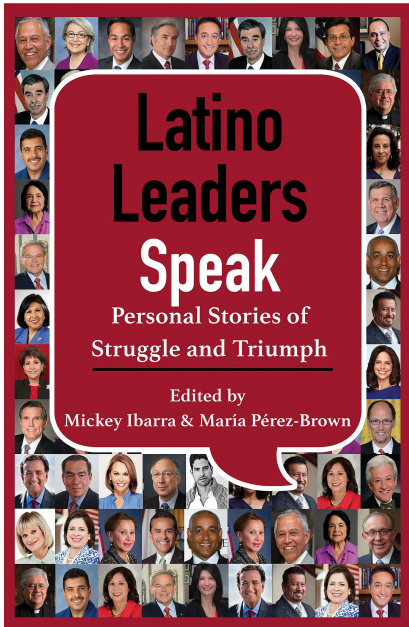
The final personal commitment I make is to family. In the immediate sense, of course, it’s my immediate family—my wife, my daughters and son, to their husbands, to my grandchildren. But I’m doubly blessed. I am blessed to have a broad extended family. That is you. Antonio Villaraigosa is like a younger brother to me. He is a better-looking younger brother. The other day, I was walking by a newsstand at the airport and I spotted a magazine cover. I said, “Whoa, that’s a good picture of Antonio.” But it was Mark Sánchez, the quarterback of the New York Jets. Don’t tell Antonio I told you that. He is good-looking, but not that good-looking.

I have had the good fortune of interfacing with a lot of young talent. Councilman Cárdenas, who is over here, running for Congress—what a great thing that is. I have watched him since he started in elective office. I have watched Julián Castro, the present mayor of San Antonio, blossom into a national figure. So at this point in my life, I cherish a rich extended family: men and women, people in business, people in politics, younger and older. My heart overflows with good will and hopes as I watch our Latino community earn its place of honor in this blessed land, the United States of America.

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.”
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“‘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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