

Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



Maria Hinojosa

Producer, Author & Journalist

November 6, 2007

Maria Hinojosa is an award-winning news anchor and reporter who covers America's untold stories and highlights today's critical issues. In 2010, Hinojosa created the Futuro Media Group, an independent, nonprofit organization producing multimedia journalism that explores and gives a critical voice to the diversity of the American experience. As the anchor and executive producer of the Peabody Award-winning show Latino USA, which is distributed by NPR, and anchor and executive producer of the PBS show America by the Numbers with Maria Hinojosa, both produced by Futuro Media, she has informed millions about the changing cultural and political landscape in the United States and abroad.

Hinojosa's twenty-eight-year history as an award-winning journalist includes reporting for PBS, CBS, WNBC, CNN, NPR and CBS Radio and anchoring the Emmy Award-winning talk show Maria Hinojosa: One-on-One. She is the author of two books and has won dozens of awards, including four Emmys, the John Chancellor Award, the Studs Terkel Community Media Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Award and the Edward R. Murrow Award.

Hinojosa's life story, as well as her parents' experience coming to America, have served to inspire her mission as a journalist—"you must own the power of your own voice."

As a journalist, we have a responsibility. That's why I'm going to share some stories of what I've seen on the frontline. The first story I'm going to tell is about crossing the border for the very first time. My dad is a medical doctor, a research doctor in otolaryngology. He was in Mexico. I was the kind of surprise fourth kid. My dad had been promised a job at a hospital that was being built by the Mexican government. It was going to be a research hospital. But there was a change of government and the hospital never got built. My father essentially was a man who needed a job. The University of Chicago knew about my father and, so, asked him to please come and work at the University of Chicago. My dad left six months later.

Then, my mom got on an airplane from Mexico City to Dallas, because there were no direct flights at that time. Just the thought of my mother getting on an airplane with four kids under the age of seven and not speaking perfect English . . . I was about a year and a half old in the early 1960s and had some kind of a rash on my body. When we got to the immigration point at Dallas airport, a very large immigration official said to my mother, "Well, you know what? Everybody else can go, but this little baby's got to go into quarantine." My mother was like, "I don't understand. Say that again?" He said, "You all are fine, but the little baby has got to go into quarantine." My mother, who's five-feet flat, somehow at that moment found the strength to own her voice as a mother and new immigrant to this country, and said to him, "Well, that's not going to happen. My daughter is not staying here. She's coming with me, and we're all taking our flight to Chicago together." The official pushed back and said, "No, no, no. You don't understand. It's a quarantine." My mother said, "You don't understand who my husband is. My husband is Dr. Raúl Hinojosa at the University of Chicago, and we're going to have to call the president of the University of Chicago, blah, blah, and blah." Somehow, I was let in.

I love that story. It teaches me one of the essences of my work and what I try to tell young people, which is to own your own voice and learn to own the power of your own voice.

I also attribute my understanding of what American democracy is, again, to my mother. It wasn't like my mom was reading all the books about what a democracy looks like, but it was Chicago on the South Side in the 1960s. I was being raised there as a Mexican immigrant. There was an organic understanding that the Civil Rights Movement existed and was involving predominantly our African-American neighbors. My mother understood profoundly that this was part of who she was as a new American.

So, when I was in third grade, my mom wrote a letter to my teacher and for all of my brothers and sisters saying, "My kids will not be in school today because we are going to see Martin Luther King speak." There were other mothers in the classroom in the school that had done the same thing, but it was somewhat controversial. When I remember that moment of being in a rally on the street in Chicago, seeing Martin Luther King, Jr., what it spoke to me about was what democracy looks like, the essence of what democracy looks like. Something that my mother and father growing up in Mexico didn't see where you never voted because there was no democratic participation. My mother understood that this was what the essence of being a citizen was. Even though, at that time, the only person who was a citizen was my father.

I moved to New York to become an actress and a dancer. But something happened when I went to my very first professional audition. I was eighteen or nineteen years old. There was not a lot of Latino theater going on. I did this audition for a movie and I did a great audition, but the director kind of looked at me and said, "Great audition. But you know, I don't know. You're not tall enough. You're not short enough. You're not white enough. You're not dark enough. You're not street enough. You're not sophisticated enough. You're not Latina enough. You're not

American enough. It's like, I just don't get you." Something in me kind of died at that moment. I gave him the power to take away the dream of me actually becoming an actress. Although Broadway is still there . . . It could happen. You never know.

I moved to New York in 1979 from Chicago, which was a relatively Mexican city. We were going to El Barrio Mexicano every weekend. I was crossing borders my whole life, whether it was from Hyde Park, the community where I was being raised to El Barrio Mexicano to leaving Chicago and going to Mexico every year by car from Chicago, all six of us in a station wagon. It's true. Because I had been crossing from the north to the south, I knew immediately that things in this country were going to change profoundly when I saw Mexicanos in the American South. It was a huge, huge moment for this country, and a big change in something that, of course, has set off many, many repercussions.

When I got to New York, there were not many Mexicanos in 1979. There were like three, and I was one of them. I had to pack up my tortillas in boxes from Chicago and freeze them for six months. I would bring my salsa and freeze it and also stock it on the shelf. Something else happened that I'm sure may sound controversial, but for me was very liberating. I grew up having a lot of issues around identity and I absolutely went through a self-hatred moment, just never fitting in, never feeling quite American enough or quite Latina enough. By the time I got to New York, I had reached a point of really loving who I was as a young Mexican immigrant growing up in Chicago. In New York, I said to myself, "there are no Mexicans here, so what am I going to do?" It was a learning moment, because what it taught me was the ability to also let go of our nationalism. While nationalism can be something profoundly empowering, it can also separate us.

In New York, I became a Pan-Latin-Americanist. I understood that I was no longer just from Mexico; I was part of a continent. I became friends with people from Puerto Rico, Colombia, Argentina, Cuba and Chile. It was an incredibly liberating experience to not be tied to just one country, but to understand

that I was part of a universe. While living in a city like New York, I believe, I did become a citizen of the world.

I never really thought that I could be a journalist. Although I went to Barnard College and studied Latin-American Studies, Political Economy and Women Studies, there was no one out there like me, except for Geraldo Rivera, who was doing really good work back then. There was certainly no one like me in public television or radio.

I first got involved in radio at WKZR, the Colombia University radio station. Then, at the urging of someone from Barnard, I applied for an internship at NPR. But, I still doubted that I could do it. Anyway, I got hired for the internship at NPR. I was the first Latina at the NPR headquarters in Washington, D.C. While I loved producing for Scott Simon, I understood immediately that I wanted to be on the air. I wanted to tell my own stories. I embarked on a project to make this happen. I moved to San Diego and then moved to Tijuana, but actually worked at KPBS in San Diego; I was crossing the border every single day. I eventually made my way back to New York and got hired by NPR.

In my first couple of years as a reporter, I was spending a lot of time in the Bronx. Everywhere I've been, they've always named me the Bronx bureau chief because I care deeply about the Bronx, because it's been so maligned. I was doing stories with young people, crime and violence. I had done a story about some very bad heroin. It was called, "Good Fellows and Tango and Cash." It was very potent heroin. People were dying. People were dying in all areas around New York City, not just the Bronx. People were dying in Westchester, in the suburbs in Long Island, New Jersey, Connecticut. Reporting the story, I understood that the South Bronx had been chosen as a market point for the sale of drugs because you can get in and out easily.

Anyway, the point of this is that I did these stories about the South Bronx and I ended up at NPR in Washington visiting a few days later. An NPR personality, who shall remain nameless, came up to me and said, "Oh my God, María, those stories that you did

about the South Bronx, they were so moving. But I have to ask you a question. Weren't you terrified to be in those neighborhoods?" I said, "No. I've lived in those neighborhoods in the past." The interesting situation was that she probably never would have thought to ask me if I was terrified the first day that I set foot into National Public Radio headquarters in Washington, where I was actually terrified about.

I tell this story because I always like to remember that we don't all see the world through the same perspective. It doesn't mean that one perspective is right and the other one is wrong, but that is the essence of what America is. It's a diversity of perspectives and experiences. That's why we in the media have such a huge task in making our newsrooms diverse, because we represent everyone in this country.

I use teaching moments with my children every single day that I can. That's the way to incorporate lessons into one's life. One of the teaching moments stems from the fact that I became a pan-Latin-Americanist and married a man from the Dominican Republic. I hope people respect this, but one thing I do is talk about some of our internal issues: racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism. I believe that we as Latinos must be self-critical on these issues.

When Germán was my fiancée, I took him to a wedding in Mexico. Germán is a mulatto with a ponytail and an earring. He's an artist, vegetarian, etc., etc. My family made comments like, "They don't even speak Spanish there." Even within my own family there was prejudice. Once I told my family that Germán had grown up with Juan Luis Guerra and designed Guerra's latest album cover. Then it was, "Juan Luis? We love you, Germán." It's funny that I should be telling this story, because Juan Luis is getting a Grammy award tonight. Germán, in fact, was really an old friend of Juan Luis'.

Germán and I are raising two children in Harlem. My relationship with the African-American community is one that I feel very, very strongly about. I believe it is a responsibility of all of us

here to step up to the plate, because apart from the issue of immigration, which of course is huge, the issue of African-American-Latino relations, I believe, is central to what's going to happen in the future in this country.

Regarding my moments of self-hatred, I was María de Lourdes Hinojosa-Ojeda, but who I really wanted to be when I was growing up was Randy Kalish, Susie Golfer or Lisa Tim. But no, I was María de Lourdes Hinojosa-Ojeda. I hated my name. Now of course, I love it, even though I get hate mail. People write to say, "Why do you say your name like that? Can't you Americanize it?" This example is probably one of the high points of hate mail that I receive. It's part of the times that we're living in.

What do we do with our kids? Well, you take a tradition that maybe you disliked, maybe you had a problem with, maybe you wanted to be far from, and as you get older, you change your mind: "You know, I love this." My son is Raúl Ariel Jesús de Todos los Santos Pérez-Hinojosa. My daughter is María Yurema Guadalupe de los Indios Pérez-Hinojosa. You're going to be tested on that before you leave. But, with my kids, it's real life. So that, when the *paisano* knocks on the door to deliver the Chinese food, there is recognition: "¿Qué pasó, paisano? ¿De dónde eres? Where are you from, paisano? Come in." Usually the *paisano* is like, "Wow, somebody is recognizing me. Somebody is talking to me." Yeah. I do that.

When I see a woman who stands on 72nd and Columbus with beautiful earrings that I know are from Oaxaca, and I'm with my kids, I start talking to her. I say, "Señora, . . . Oh really? And how many languages do you speak?" "Oh, I speak Spanish, Zapotec, Mixtec. . . ." I would say to my kids, "Look at this. Here is somebody who is speaking languages that are hundreds upon hundreds of years old, existed before English existed. She's standing right here." I say to my kids, "Your responsibility to remain bilingual is because you do have a responsibility to help those who are quadrilingual in other languages, but who do not speak English. Learning Spanish is something you should feel proud of, but you

also know that it's something that you can use to help those less fortunate than you."

Finally, let me talk about my feelings of where we stand in America today. When I was writing my speech, I said to myself, "I just could not spend all this time talking about myself." I believe so strongly that the moment we are living in right now in history is crucial. I have felt an urgency to tell stories in the past, but there is an urgency that I feel now that is like a fire that is moving me forward.

Something happened to me a year and a half ago, when I was in Indiana covering a story about how immigration was playing out in the mid-term elections. Now, you're thinking *immigration, big story, and mid-term elections. She must have gone to some place in the Southwest, maybe some place in the South. Indiana, hotbed of immigration. Indiana?* No, I know it's not. There's a 4 percent Latino population in the State of Indiana, but immigration was *the* issue that Republicans and Democrats were running on—Democrats, even more stridently than Republicans.

We had been warned that an area of Indianapolis called Little Mexico was dangerous. However, we discovered in our investigation that the crime rate was non-existent. We did an interview with a woman there, a *madrina* who kind of helped new immigrants, who came undocumented 35 years ago to Chicago. She and her sister both became citizens. Her sister is Republican and she's a Democrat. Fascinating. As we were leaving, she ran out to show me something she had forgotten to tell me about: it was a piece of paper that all the storeowners in Little Mexico had found plastered to their windows. It was a leaflet written by hand with magic marker that said, "Wanted: Armed American Citizens to hunt down illegal aliens that the government won't catch." In Indianapolis. That's horrific. The fact that we report about news of racial violence, which is horrific, but we don't seem to take these threats seriously is a problem. I do believe that what is operating right now is a culture of fear. It is the fear of the Other.

In fact, if Samuel Huntington of Harvard had his way, I am the most feared person here because I maintained contact with my Mexican roots, because I'm Mexican first. Samuel Huntington is an attack against Mexicanos. I'm Mexican. I stayed in contact with my roots. I'm bilingual. I travel back and forth. I remain culturally aware of my own experience. All of these, according to Samuel Huntington, are going to destroy America. Destroy it.

I was at CNN and interviewed Samuel Huntington. I asked, "Professor Huntington, do you have a lot of Latino immigrant friends? Do you hang out with a lot of them? Do you speak with them?" He had just written a whole book about Latino immigrants, so I wanted to know how he got his information. He said, "Well, not really. I don't hang out with a lot of Latinos." So, I said, "In all of my years covering immigration, not once has an immigrant said to me, 'Learn English? Who wants to learn English? I hate English. I want everybody to speak Spanish.'" I have heard people say, "I want to learn English but . . ." Okay, if you've seen how hard it is to learn a new language when you're working six days a week, twelve hours a day, and then Sunday is the only day that you have to recuperate, it's hard. I said to him, "You know, I have also never heard any immigrants say, 'Oh yeah, I crossed that border to reconquer my land, you know, the *Reconquista*.'" Because I've been on the border. I've interviewed hundreds of immigrants, and not one has ever told me, "Oh yeah, I'm here for the *Reconquista*."

I do not understand how we can have a country where the Other is so feared.

When I think about what's happening now, this is not just an anti-illegal alien movement; this is an anti-immigrant movement and it is an anti-Latino movement that we must confront head on. Because, at the same time that the media makes decisions to go for the divisive, ironically it gives us other options. Do you know who the children's character with the largest audience in the history of television is? Dora the Explorer. Ten billion dollars. Probably that was yesterday, so today it's probably \$11 billion on

Dora the Explorer, a bilingual Latina character. ¡*Qué miedo!* Right? A lot to be afraid of from *Dora the Explorer*. What is the hottest—I'm sorry, I love it—the hottest new television show out there? *Ugly Betty*. *Ugly Betty* opened the door, and they're walking through it. Fascinating.

I don't know how many of you saw the episode where they had the two Cubano actors talking. Of course, *ni un* Mexicano understood what they were saying because they were speaking Cuban Spanish, which I think is even cooler because they're really going for it. I swear. *Ugly Betty* is great with the kids. But the sex change operation—having that conversation with my daughter at nine, a little difficult. A little difficult.

I make fun, but I cannot ignore the fact that we are living in an America where people are fearful of a knock on the door without a warrant, where they can come and arrest you and deport you within twenty-four hours. You are leaving behind American-born children. This is not just anti-immigrant and anti-Latino; this is against basic civil rights and human rights, a situation that has been created at this moment. At the same time, when I was interviewing Paul Cuadros, a journalist who's living in Siler City in North Carolina, he said, "Everybody talks about the invasion." There were labor recruiters from the South going into Mexico to find cheap labor. It was not a massive surprise invasion. There was a coordination. You're exactly right, Paul. I was the first reporter to get inside the Smithfield Foods Corporation, the largest pork processing plant in the world, where many undocumented Latinos work and where they kill 30,000 hogs a day. That's one every eight seconds. They want those workers there, because they are cheap.

I cannot as a journalist sit with my hands folded and not be telling these stories. That is the urgency that I feel. I want to know what the presidential candidates, who espouse family values, have to say about separating families—separating children, American-born children from their parents. I plan on asking that. When I interviewed Hillary Clinton after she had done the

Spanish-language debate, I asked her, “As a lawyer, do you believe there is such a thing as an illegal human being? If you don’t, then will you be prepared to not use that term in your campaign?” She kind of fuddled around the answer, but then of course it came up during the debate.

I’m going to leave you with two thoughts. I stopped using the term illegal immigrant or illegal alien, but not because I met some radical Latino professor. It was from somebody who looked entirely different from me and who had the most different experience from mine: Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner. He said, “There is no such thing as an illegal human being. They may have committed a crime but,” he said, “once you label them illegal, that’s exactly how the Holocaust started.”

I’m going to leave you with this final story that I tell at almost every speech, because it is uplifting. After September 11th, which was the most difficult story for me to ever report and changed me as a mom and as a journalist, I knew immediately within hours that there were undocumented immigrants who had been victimized in the twin Towers. Within two days, I had the story about Julia Hernández, whose husband Antonio Meléndez had died there. He worked at the Windows on the World restaurant. We did a story in the Bronx two days after 9/11, and everybody was crying; it’s a very rare thing for a CNN crew to have the cameraman, the soundman, myself, my producer, the whole family, all of us crying. We put this story on the air and got a response. Julia was sent letters and cards, and it was very uplifting to know that, yes, the rest of the country identified with us as New Yorkers.

A couple of months later, in December of 2001, the phone rang in my office. On the other end of the line there was a man who said, “Hello. Is this María Hi-nojowsa?” I said, “Hinojosa. Yes.” “Hi, Ms. Hi-nojowsa. My name is A. J. Dinkins and I’m a hairdresser originally from South Carolina, but I live now in Augusta, Maine. I live here. I’m a hairdresser and my partner,

Rudy, is a farmer. We have just raised several thousand dollars for the Julia Hernández family in our church. I want to come and deliver this money and these gifts to Ms. Hernández, but Ms. María,” he said, “I have never been to New York and I have never been to the Bronx. Would you please meet me at the airport and take me to see Julia Hernández?” I said, “A. J. Dinkins, I’ll be there, but I’m coming with a camera crew because I’m going to do this story.”

We did this story of A. J., gay hairdresser that he is, with his hair dyed red for Christmas, and we go off to the Bronx. A. J. had never met any Mexicans, and Julia had never met a White gay man that she didn’t work for. There we were in the Bronx, my beloved Bronx, and it was a love fest. I mean, who would have thought that these people, who had nothing in common, would find this love? And they did. It was just beautiful. As A. J. was leaving, he said, “Oh my gosh, I want to invite the whole Hernández family to come to my farm in Augusta.” I said, “That’s a wonderful thing, and we’ll see if it happens.”

Six months later, the phone rang, and it was A. J. “Hi María, can you bring your husband and kids up to Augusta, Maine, because I just invited Julia Hernández, the four kids plus a cousin, to come up and spend a week at my farm in Augusta.” I said, “A. J., I’m not bringing my husband and my kids, but I’ll be there with a camera because I’m going to tell your story.”

Now, I have never been to Maine in the summer, but I know why the Bushes like it. It’s beautiful. Stunning. Back in 2002, it was still pretty homogenous White. I think that’s changed in the past few years. I don’t know if you can imagine, here we were, this motley crew: Julia; four Mexican kids and the cousin; A. J., who had dyed his hair blonde; Rudy, the 6’4 farmer in his overalls; me; my cameraman, who is a hippy with a ponytail; and my African-American sound technician. Everybody was looking at us in Augusta, Maine. They’re like, “Who are these people and why are they so happy?” Because all we were there to do was to help these Mexican-American kids, all four of them citizens, to

forget about the fact that their father had been killed a year ago. When I get into my moments of sadness—it happens often—my husband says, “You know, there are people who want to tell these stories, but you will always tell these stories of sadness.” It may be true, but it moves me because I do want to find the humanity in all of them.

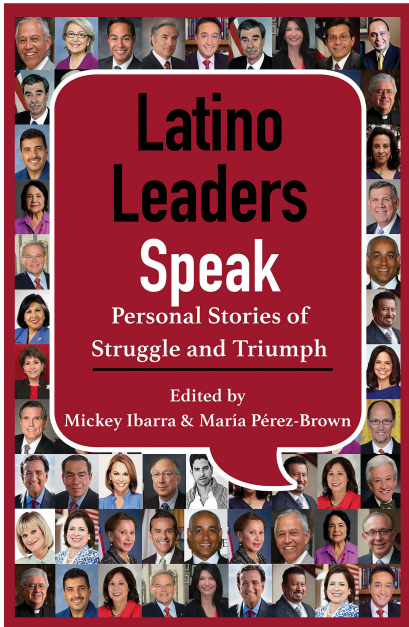
I have this picture of me with A. J. and Julia Hernández, and a beautiful, pristine lake in Maine behind us. What this symbolizes to me is that there are people who are prepared to get outside of their comfort zones to extend a hand to the Other, the one who is so feared. They are people who are prepared to cross borders within their own country, within their own homeland, within their own communities. Julia crossing the border, to take her family to a gay couple’s house for a week. A. J. prepared to open his house up to a family of strangers, essentially, and us to tell the story.

We do have a responsibility to not be silent anymore and work on these issues, to not be afraid to push back. This is a decisive moment in history. All of us here, not just those of us who are in the media, all of us, you are all leaders and you must, I believe, all engage in this dialogue.

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.

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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