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Foreword



Mickey Ibarra

Founder & Chairman
Latino Leaders Network

Our stories are powerful—and they must be told.

In 2017, *Latino Leaders Speak: Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph, Volume I* was published by Arte Público Press to capture the inspiring journeys of thirty-one Latino leaders who had shared their stories as keynote speakers at the Latino Leaders Luncheon Series. These events, hosted by the Latino Leaders Network—a federal nonprofit organization dedicated to connecting and empowering leaders since 2004—have celebrated the resilience, vision and contributions of Latinos across the nation.

Today, with nearly 8,000 copies of Volume I sold and a corresponding curriculum guide created by the California Global Education Project, the book inspires countless readers. The guide, which distills leadership lessons from fourteen extraordinary stories, is free of charge at www.latinoleadersnetwork.org, ensuring that these powerful lessons reach classrooms, libraries and communities everywhere.

Now, Volume II takes this mission further. Featuring twenty-five additional keynote speeches delivered at the Latino Leaders

Luncheon Series, this new volume continues to amplify voices that challenge stereotypes and reveal the depth of talent and determination within the Latino community. Once again, Arte Público Press, under the visionary leadership of Nicolás Kanellos, recognized the urgent need to share these stories. I am deeply grateful for his partnership and unwavering commitment to preserving the rich tapestry of Latino experiences.

I was also fortunate to work alongside María Pérez-Brown—a celebrated author, director and producer of Latino content—as my co-editor. Her relentless drive to correct the false and negative narratives often associated with Latinos in America has added invaluable depth to this project. At a time when the truth about our community's struggles and contributions is more important than ever, this book stands as a testament to the strength and triumph of the Latino spirit.

This volume is particularly meaningful to me as it includes my own story. I had the privilege of sharing it for the first time in 2017 during the 50th Latino Leaders Luncheon Series in my hometown of Salt Lake City. Standing before an audience that included my father, Francisco Nicolás Santiago Ibarra, my brother, David Ibarra, extended family and lifelong friends was an emotional and unforgettable experience.

Among the highlights of that day was introducing my father—who worked fifteen years as a laborer and demolition worker at Kennecott Copper after escaping the Utah fields as a *bracero*—to Frank Joklik, the former CEO of Kennecott Copper. Frank and I had worked together years later preparing for the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic Games while I served as an assistant to President Bill Clinton. That moment, watching my father connect with a leader of the company where he had once labored, was a profound reminder of how far we had come in a single generation.

With Ruben Alvarez now serving as the first chief executive officer of the Latino Leaders Network, our resolve to expand the reach of these stories has only strengthened. Through the support of sponsors, educators and readers, we are determined to bring this book into more classrooms, libraries and homes. These stories are not just about individual success, they are about universal lessons of perseverance, leadership and community. They are a unifying thread that ties the Latino experience to the larger American story.

When we share our stories, we illuminate paths of possibility for future generations, shatter stereotypes and build bridges of understanding. Volume II is a call to action to celebrate our heritage, honor our contributions and inspire others to achieve greatness.

Our stories must be told. And now, more than ever, they must be heard.

¡Adelante!

Introduction

Celebrating the Power of Storytelling to Inspire and Unite



María Pérez-Brown

Stories have a profound ability to unite us, inspire us and remind us of our shared humanity. For the Latino community, storytelling is more than tradition; it is survival, resistance and hope. The Latino Leaders Network was founded to ensure that these stories—our stories—are told, heard and preserved for generations to come. Through *Latino Leaders Speak: Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph, Vol. II*, Mickey Ibarra has given us a treasure trove of voices that capture the resilience, courage and compassion that define our community.

When Mickey asked me to join him in creating this book, I didn't hesitate. I understood the critical importance of documenting these journeys, not only to honor the leaders who have paved the way but to provide a roadmap for the next generation. As a child of Puerto Rican immigrants, I know firsthand the power of seeing someone who looks like you, who comes from where you come from, rise above the odds. These stories aren't just inspiring; they are necessary.

My own story is one of improbable beginnings. My mother, Juana Sánchez Grajales, boarded a plane from Puerto Rico to New York as a nineteen-year-old single mother, leaving

three of her four children behind with her own mother. She didn't speak the language. She didn't know anyone. But she was determined. "I had no choice," she told me. Working in a sweatshop, stitching belts for five cents apiece, she saved enough within a year to bring us to Brooklyn, where we lived off government cheese and powdered milk in a tenement apartment. Life wasn't easy, but it was ours, and my mother's relentless work ethic and unwavering faith laid the foundation for everything I would become.

In Hartford, Connecticut, after my mother moved us to escape the violent streets of Brooklyn during the 1970s, I found my voice. Though I struggled academically at first, one teacher recognized my potential and changed the course of my life. I discovered books through a subsidized reading program, became an avid reader and went from a second-grade reading level to an eighth-grade level. Through books, I found worlds far beyond my reality, and with them came a belief that I could do more and be more. I call it my "Helen Keller" moment—the mystery of language unlocking the mystery of possibility.

Yet, even as my world expanded, the barriers persisted. When I told my high school counselor I wanted to apply to Yale University (albeit to follow a boy I had a crush on), she told me not to waste my money because I wasn't "the kind of girl" who got into schools like Yale. She was wrong. With the unwavering belief of my grandmother, who prayed over my application and declared it my destiny, I became the first in my family to walk the halls of an Ivy League school. That experience taught me an invaluable lesson: we do not get to where we are alone. We are lifted by the sacrifices, struggles and successes of those who came before us.

As I look back on my journey, I see it reflected in the stories in this book. Each leader featured has faced challenges and risen above them. They have used their voices to advocate for

justice, their talents to open doors for others and their hearts to build bridges where walls once stood. They remind us that we are not the “firsts” and that our success is both a privilege and a responsibility.

You will meet trailblazers in education, politics, business and civil rights as you turn these pages. You will see yourself in their stories—the struggles, the triumphs and the unwavering belief that we are stronger together. These stories are more than individual accomplishments; they are collective victories, a testament to the indomitable spirit of the Latino community.

This book is more than a collection of speeches. It is a living history of resilience, representation and the transformative power of education and compassion. These narratives will inspire you to dream bigger, act bolder and believe in our community’s boundless potential.

Thank you for joining us on this journey of celebration, reflection and purpose. Together, we continue to write the story of who we are and who we can be.



Xavier Becerra

**Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services**

**The Capitol Hilton, Washington, DC
April 1, 2009**

Xavier Becerra, the 25th secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has dedicated his career to championing healthcare access and advocating for all Americans' well-being. As the first Latino to hold this position, he continues to break barriers while advancing President Joe Biden's vision of building a healthier, more equitable America. From expanding Medicare protections to defending the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Becerra has consistently fought to ensure that families have the healthcare security he cherished growing up in Sacramento, California, as the son of working-class Mexican immigrants.

With a distinguished twelve-term tenure in Congress, Becerra served as the first Latino on the influential Ways and Means Committee, where he was instrumental in shaping healthcare policies that expanded access and lowered costs for seniors. As California's Attorney General, he tackled corporate abuses, fought the opioid epidemic and safeguarded the ACA, protecting healthcare access for millions. His leadership

during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated his commitment to equity, safety and public health innovation.

A Stanford University graduate and proud family man, Becerra exemplifies resilience, service and the power of education. His groundbreaking work ensures that every American, regardless of background, has a chance to thrive.

Once you have an opportunity to accomplish things, you're always told, "Don't forget where you came from. Don't forget." And for many of us, I know those origins were humble. My father got through about the sixth grade. My mother came from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, and married my father at eighteen. And while my parents never had much to give, they always gave back to this country. But I have learned that, too often we're so busy trying to remember where we came from that we forget to leave a little room to work toward where we must go. Sometimes, we're a little too humble. Sometimes, we're a little too appreciative of what we've accomplished. Sometimes, we forget that much of it resulted from our efforts. People helped, but recognize when the force of your will and the sheer effort behind your tenacity has given you a chance to be where you are.

Not long ago, my daughter Natalia ... She plays softball, she's in the fourth grade, and was at bat. A good friend of ours, a neighbor friend who was always trying to cheer on the team, was there. He'd always get up there, by the diamond, and yell to the kids, "Be a hitter! Be a hitter!" Because most of the time, when these kids get up to pitch, they throw only balls. So all the kids just watch as they get on to the base free because there are so many balls they're throwing that they don't have to worry about strikes. So, he was always telling them, "Be a hitter! Be a hitter! Be a hitter!" When my daughter got up to bat, he said the same thing.

It struck me when he said those words that I would use the words in a future speech. I want to be a hitter. I want to remember my humble origins. I want to thank those who made it possible for me to rise. I want to help those who didn't get help. But I want to be a hitter. If I just spend my time thanking people and remembering where I came from, I won't have time to hit that ball out of the park. And I have to hit it out of the park because too many people will never go to that plate to take the bat to take one swing at that ball. So, I better be a hitter. Mickey, thank you for being a hitter and knowing the importance of bringing all of us together so we can all have our turn at the plate.

I've witnessed and experienced a lot in my sixteen-plus years in Congress. I've halted legislative activity on the floor of the House to defend legal immigrant seniors, elderly who were being told they would have to lose their supplemental security income so we could pay for the unemployment benefits of people back in 1993, when we were suffering in another recession. I captained the defeat in 1994 of a proposal on the floor of the House to bar children from attending school simply because they happened to be the children of immigrants, whether legally here or not. I stood up against the impeachment of a president of the United States. I experienced the shock and eerie silence of an abandoned capitol grounds on September 11, 2001. I challenged a president's rush to war in Iraq in 2002 as one of only 128 to vote against a resolution to authorize war in Iraq out of 435. I stood up early to help elect the United States' first president of color. I authored and helped pass the legislation that established a commission that I hope will shortly give us a chance to break ground on the Museum of the American Latino here in Washington, DC. I was offered a post in the president's cabinet, but I'm still here. And along the way, I had the chance to have three children with my beautiful wife.

There's something I remember that I was told, the first year I got to Congress in 1993, that I remember very well. It was said to me by Congressman Esteban Torres one day as we were in the rush of activity in committee. A vote was called, and we were hurrying to get on the House floor before they closed the rolls. As we were rushing up the steps of the east Capitol, I turned to Esteban and said, "You know, sometimes I forget where I'm about to go." He stopped me right there and grabbed my shoulder and said, "Xavier, never forget where you're about to go because very few people in the history of this country have had a chance to walk up these steps and enter through those doors." That has stayed with me for so long because Esteban wanted me to be a hitter.

I think to myself, "Esteban, why didn't you tell me that thirty years ago, not in 1993, but in 1963, when, as a five-year-old I saw my mom crying in front of the television, not understanding why a television would make her cry." I learned a little bit later why. However, I still did not understand why a woman who was born and raised in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, and only nine-plus years in this country, would cry for a president who had been assassinated. Had Esteban been around only a couple years later, when I started school, and all of a sudden, I went from being Xavier for all of my life until the age of five ... all of a sudden, I got a new name: Xavier (Ex-avier) ... He would have helped me understand what was happening. Esteban, had you been around while I was growing up, you would have helped me understand why people would ask, "What does your dad do?", "What does your mom do?" I would have to tell them, "My dad's a worker in construction and every day he gets up with the sun and doesn't come home until the sun's down. And every day when he comes home, he doesn't come dressed like me, he comes very dirty." Esteban, you could have helped me understand that I should not have

been embarrassed to explain to people what my father did, even though people would say, “Johnny, don’t you grow up to be like that guy on the side of the road there digging those ditches.” That was my dad digging those ditches.

Esteban, I could have used you the day I got to Stanford University, living two hours from there, being raised in Sacramento, California, but never having been there until the day I was set to enroll. I understood that I hadn’t grown up middle class, as I had thought. When I drove through Palo Alto around Stanford University, I realized, “Wow, this is middle class, huh? This isn’t bad. Thank God I’m going to college.” We could have used Esteban Torres’ words a little earlier to tell us, “Be proud of who you are. Know who got you here. Don’t ever forget where you came from.” But someone has to stop us in that moment where we’re thinking we’re on top of the world and say, “Stop. Know where you’re about to go.” It’s that *Star Trek* moment: “Go where no man has ever gone before.” So, I remember what Esteban said. I remember him fondly for having told me that.

Today, I can tell you a few stories about what it means to go forward. Today, when someone asks me “What did your father do?” I say, “He built America.” Because he really did. I don’t know about some other folks, but I know when my dad put a shovel in the ground and a pick on the hard dirt, every day he built America. One day, my father was working in a crew—I had a chance to be in that crew because I had to help pay for my college education—I had the great privilege of being able to pull the jackhammer away from my father’s hands. That was one of the proudest moments I could think of because that was the day that I was really proud of what my father did ... Because I could help him with what he was doing. But I knew he was helping me to do what I would get to do. And so, Esteban, I wished you could have said to me earlier in life what I should say about my father, not when I was

in my twenties, but when I was in my teens, how proud I was of what my father did with a sixth-grade education.

I can tell you today that on that day in 1994, when I decided to captain the opposition to an amendment on the floor of the House to deny kids access to our schools unless they could prove that their parents were here legally ... The day before I had sat with a friend who is no longer with us, may she rest in peace. Her name was Congresswoman Patsy Mink from Hawaii. She was a fighter all her life. I had gone to Patsy—we were on the Committee of Education and Labor—and I said to her, “Patsy, I’ve been told that we’re going to have an amendment on the floor that’s going to keep kids from going to school unless their parents can come in and prove that they’re here legally. I’ve been told we don’t want this amendment to go up because we’re afraid it’s going to pass, and I’ve been given an alternative that would soften it a little bit, not make it as bad an amendment.” Patsy Mink was about four-foot-nine and a power plug all the way through. She said, “Xavier, you just got here, right? Did you come here to compromise your values so soon?” You know, I’m looking down at her, thinking, “This little lady’s telling me what to do.” The next day, when I was asked by some of the members of the Democratic leadership, “Are you ready to do this alternative amendment?” I said, “No, let’s go forward. We’ll see what happens.”

That debate started with very few of us on the floor, because no one wanted to debate immigration in 1994. A few of us were there We stood there and said our piece, why we should oppose this amendment. Then something very extraordinary happened. Before you knew it, I saw a few other people trickle in. The one I remember most was a gentleman named Kweisi Mfume, then the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. He came in, was always a dynamic speaker, and said, “This isn’t about immigrant kids. This isn’t about Latino kids.