

# Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of  
Struggle and Triumph

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Edited by  
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



## Federico Peña

Mayor  
City of Denver

**August 26, 2008**

*Federico Peña is a senior advisor in the Denver office of Vestar Capital Partners, a private equity firm that he joined in 1998. He was formerly the U.S. Secretary of Energy and the U.S. Secretary of Transportation in the Clinton Administration. Prior to serving in the cabinet, Peña defeated a fourteen-year incumbent, William H. McNichols Jr., to become the first Hispanic mayor of Denver from 1983 to 1991. Born in Laredo, Texas, Peña earned a B.A. (1969) and a J.D. (1972) from the University of Texas at Austin and The University of Texas School of Law, respectively. He currently serves on corporate boards and is a Trustee of the University of Denver.*

*Peña traces his mother's roots back 240 years, where the founder of Laredo, Texas, Colonel Tomás Sánchez was his fifth great-grandfather. Peña credits his parents' emphasis on education and being proud of their heritage as the reasons why he has been successful. He believes that what he has been able to accomplish in his life comes from, "that self-centeredness, that confidence, that feeling that you're standing on a rock because you've been here for a long, long time."*

*I think my story is very similar to the stories of everyone else in this room. We, in our own ways, have faced obstacles from wherever we have come from and in whatever we have done. In*

some way, we have persevered and overcome those obstacles. Sometimes we've been knocked down, but we've always picked ourselves up. That's why so many of you are here today. There are millions of Latinos and Latinas all across our country who have done what you have done and what I have done, in the sense that they have gone far beyond what their parents had accomplished and what they ever thought was achievable. Because of that, our nation is great.

Our nation will be greater in the future because, as we know, this nation has always been a nation of immigrants. With the new wave of immigrants whose sons and daughters are winning gold medals at the Olympics, whose sons and daughters are the valedictorians of their high school classes but whose families are then threatened with deportation, we are nevertheless one America. We are America. On Thursday, I will once again be with the immigrants who are going to be marching in the north side of the city as I did three years ago, when 80,000 came here to Denver and marched to the state capitol.

I was born in South Texas. My mother and father had six children. I was the third oldest in the family. My brother, Oscar, was two years older than I was. Then his older brother, Gustavo, was two years older than he was. My mother had triplets in 1948, fifteen months after I was born. As the story goes, nobody had a clue, particularly not the doctor. Please don't quote me, as I might get letters from doctors in Brownsville. As the story goes, my dad was in the waiting room and the doctor came out and said, "Mr. Peña, congratulations." Then he came back five minutes later and said, "Mr. Peña, congratulations again." And you know the last line, right, "Mr. Peña, congratulations again." So, my father and mother had six children in the course of seven and a half years.

The point that I want to make is, like so many mothers and fathers, their main commitment was to us, their children. They sacrificed everything for us. From day one, it was always understood and expected that we were going to excel in school and that we were all going to go to college—which we all have done.

Unfortunately, three of us became lawyers. It was because of our parents who understood their roots, which went back 240 years in Laredo where the founder of Laredo, Texas—Colonel *Tomás Sánchez*, was my fifth great-grandfather. He had ancestors who fought, on my mother's lineage, during the Civil War, one of whom, Santos Benavides, used to ride his horse from Laredo to Austin, Texas, as a member of the first territorial legislature. Because Santos could only speak Spanish, he needed a translator, which offended some people in the legislature back then. In some ways, some things have not changed.

That's the story of how I was raised. I was raised with the understanding that I should always be proud of my heritage, my family and my roots. Whatever I have been able to accomplish in my life, it has come from that self-centeredness, that confidence, that feeling that you're standing on a rock because you've been here for a long, long time. Many of you have been here for a long, long time, particularly those of you from New Mexico who have helped guide me in my life.

After high school graduation, I moved to Austin, Texas, which I thought was a foreign country located 300 miles from Brownsville, Texas, and I entered the University of Texas. It had 35,000 students—a student population larger than my hometown population. When I set foot on that campus, I realized that less than one percent of the entire student body was minority, including African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans. Less than one percent of the campus was minority. I can recall walking through the campus from one end to the other and not being able to say hello to one person because I didn't know anyone. But I was there for four years and somehow, I persevered.

When I applied to the University of Texas School of Law, I took the law school standard admissions test. For those of you who are lawyers, you take the LSAT. I am a terrible test taker and I did poorly, very poorly. I won't tell you how poorly. I don't want to discourage any of the young people here. But I wanted to go to

the University of Texas School of Law, so I applied. I remember the assistant dean—God bless his heart, he is no longer with us—said, “Federico, you can’t be admitted. Your scores are too low. Based on statistical analysis, we predict that you cannot succeed in the University of Texas School of Law. If for some good fortune, with some luck you are able to graduate, you won’t pass the bar exam. And so, you’re taking a seat in the school that ought to go to somebody else, whom we know, based on their test scores, will absolutely succeed and go on to become a great and brilliant lawyer.”

I didn’t accept “No.” It wasn’t the first time that I had not accepted no. I kept bothering him. Every two or three weeks I’d go back and see him, “Come on, Dean. You’ve got to let me in.” There has never been a lawyer in my entire extended family, and I want to be the first. He said, “No. Your scores are too low.” I continued to press my case and, finally, a few weeks before school started, when they had I think five slots left for other people, he said, “Well, you’ve been so persistent and you apparently want to be a lawyer . . . We’ll, finally, let you enter the law school.”

Fast forward. Irony of ironies, years later I was invited back to give the commencement address at the University of Texas School of Law. I was made an honorary member of the Order of the Coif, and now I’m a distinguished alumnus of the entire University of Texas System. I have a feeling that a lot of you in this room can relate to that story.

I moved to Denver after I graduated from law school. I had earlier passed the bar exam in Texas as I did later in Denver. My brother, Alfredo, was going to law school in Denver. I don’t think I knew anybody else. I was on my way to California to continue my civil rights work in affiliation with California Rural Legal Aid. It would have been interesting had that happened, but I stayed in Denver and went to work for MALDEF.

I made the decision not to become a corporate lawyer, but to become a civil rights lawyer because I believed that was the right thing to do. It was in my heart. I was involved in the first tri-

ethnic, school desegregation lawsuit in the United States: *Keyes v. the Denver Public School System*. That case went all the way to the Supreme Court and back, and back up again, and back. My responsibility was to represent the Latino students and teachers who were not originally represented in that case, and we were able to do that.

It was an interesting time because that's when somebody named Corky Gonzales was in this city, and he was marching everywhere. He created a lot of excitement in this city and a lot of challenges. When you're a civil rights lawyer doing the kind of work I was doing back then in that tumultuous time—my work was quite challenging. But somehow, I persevered. And we thank Corky for his contributions.

When I decided to run for the state legislature, someone told me I couldn't do that because I was not from Denver. When I moved into my district, there was a gentleman there who had been a community activist for 25 years who was running. I was the outside shot. I walked for five-and-a-half months door-to-door, and I was elected to my first term. At the end of my second year in the legislature, I was elected the minority leader, which is very unusual for a thirty-two-year-old freshman legislature. The election was so tumultuous that the person I beat for that position, who was a great Democrat for many years, left the party and became a Republican. But we did what we could in the state legislature as the minority party.

I left the legislature, and friends came to me and said, "Why don't you run for mayor of Denver?" My response: "Why should I do that? There's an incumbent who's been here for fourteen years. He's got lots of money in his war chest. He has 99 percent name recognition. I have one percent name recognition. My first name is Federico. My last name is Peña, why would . . ." People encouraged me to run, and so I ran. There were so many naysayers. People would say, "Denver's not ready for a Hispanic mayor. You're from Texas. You're too short. You're not very well known and you don't have any money." But I sensed in this city back

then what I feel in this country today: this undercurrent of discontent, the sense of thousands of people in this city who wanted to contribute, who wanted to participate and felt they weren't being given an opportunity. I was one of them. I said we are going to bring a coalition together of African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, environmentalists, labor and neighborhood people and gays who had never participated in a mayoral election in this city. We brought everybody together. My theme was, "Imagine a Great City."

The night before the primary election, I got a call from a reporter, whom I will not identify. He said, "I'm required to call you because I'm calling all the candidates running for mayor. How do you think you're going to do tomorrow morning in the primary?" There were seven people running for mayor. I said, "You know, I have this strange feeling. I think we're going to come in first." There wasn't laughter, but there was this silence on the phone for about ten seconds. He said, "But we have you coming in fifth." So, the next day, as it snowed in the middle of May in Denver, we had record voter turnout in the history of Denver for any mayoral race. I came in first.

The next day, after the election, that reporter came back into my campaign office. He took out his little note pad. For those of you who are reporters, you know those little pads you have. He closed it up and he put it in the back of his pants. He folded his arms and he said, "Okay, tell me what's happened to my city." I had to explain to him what had happened to our city. And so, as they say, the rest is history.

We went through a tough time in rebuilding this city. But most of all, I want to echo the comments that others have said. When I decided to finally run for mayor of Denver, I also looked to somebody else. His name is Henry Cisneros, and he was the mayor of San Antonio before I was mayor of Denver. He came here one day to speak to a crowd and, of course, Henry's an extraordinary and gifted orator. I listened to him and I thought,

*Maybe there is some way I can possibly run.* All of us, in our own way, have been inspired by others.

When I went to Washington, there were some people who said that people with a last name like Peña would not be appointed to the Department of Transportation, because that's sort of a different kind of nontraditional appointment, or whatever people refer to it as. But we were very proud of the work that we did there. I was very proud of serving two departments—the Department of Transportation and later the Department of Energy—and I came back home and started a business. I'm a businessman now.

When I talk to young kids and they ask me, "What should I think about? I want to become an astronaut. I want to become a doctor. But I'm not sure I can do it." I say three things. Number one, believe in you. Believe in yourself, what's in your heart. If you truly believe you can become an astronaut and if you want it badly enough, go do it. I don't say, "It's too hard. You're too short. You're from another planet." Go do it.

The second thing I say to them is, believe in where you have come from. You have a proud history, a proud tradition. It is deep. It is rich. It will give you strength. Remember it and stick by it. And the third thing that I say to young people is, don't forget to seek some guidance from the one above, because there will be in your journey some ups and there will be some downs. There will be some highs, and there will be some lows. And you always need to have that guiding force in you to keep you focused straight ahead.

We have come a long, long way. Each of you in your own way has gone through your struggles and accomplished much to be here today. We're all thankful for the guidance we got from our families, or relatives, or someone who inspired us, who encouraged us and who had confidence in us. Our responsibility with the extraordinary political power that we now have in this country—people like Antonio Villaraigosa and others who fully real-



ize this when they live in a city like Los Angeles—is just starting. It's just emerging.

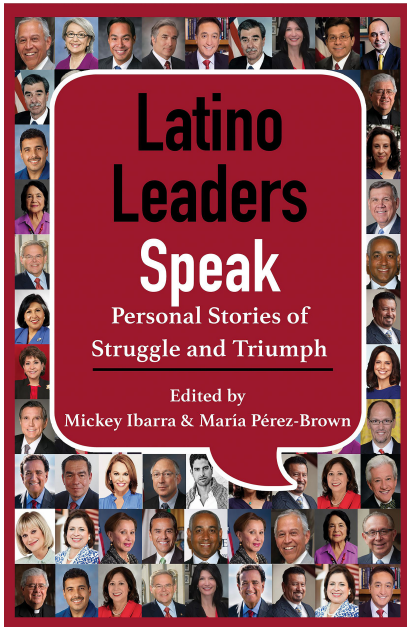
We already know that the census has advanced the time before 2050 when our country is half minority and *we* will be almost 35 percent of the United States population. With that potential, with that opportunity comes responsibility. All of us have the responsibility to make sure that as our communities grow, as we contribute to our country, that we find a way to do what we can to eliminate the extraordinary dropout rate in our school systems. We cannot advance with 50 percent of our children dropping out of school. It will make no difference if we are the largest population, if we're dropping out of school. It will make no difference if we are the largest population, if our kids are still in our jails. It will do no difference if our kids don't have good jobs.

We are America. Our responsibility, our obligation is not simply to celebrate what we do in this city this week. It's not simply to recognize the great achievements that so many people have made for many, many decades in our country so that we could be here today. Our responsibility is to look to the future and say we have to do whatever we need to do now to make sure that all these young kids do better than we have done and move this country forward; so that they can become the next presidents, become the next CEOs, become the next chairman of boards, become the next astronauts and scientists and Nobel Prize winners. In the year 2050 all of us can say—if we're still around—that we were proud of what we did in the year 2008 because we made sure our community continued to be great in this country. That is our responsibility. That is our obligation.

# 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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