

Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
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Janet Murguía

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Janet Murguía grew up in Kansas City, Kansas in a family of nine: seven children and their parents in a small house with one bathroom. Her parents came to this country with very little, in terms of education and resources, but their belief in this country and the opportunity it would have for their family guided them.

Murguía's parents have always been a source of inspiration for her. "This is an extraordinary nation when you think about it. Two people with very few means from a very small town in Mexico worked very hard, sacrificed much and dedicated themselves to the education of their family and service to their community. I am a witness to and, in many ways, evidence of their American Dream." Although Murguía's mother only had a fifth-grade education, she instilled in her children the value of a good education. Janet Murguía attended the University of Kansas, where she received bachelor's degrees in Journalism and Spanish, and later a JD from the School of Law.

She began her career as a legislative counsel to former Kansas Congressman Jim Slattery. She then worked at the White House from 1994 to 2000, where she ultimately served as deputy assistant to President Clinton, providing him with strategic and legislative advice. She also served as deputy director of legislative affairs, managing the legislative staff and acting as a senior White House liaison to Congress. Subsequent-

ly, she served as deputy campaign manager and director of constituency outreach for the 2000 Gore/Lieberman presidential campaign. In 2001, Murguía joined the University of Kansas as executive vice chancellor for University Relations, overseeing KU's internal and external relations with the public, including governmental and public affairs.

Since January 1, 2005 Murguía has served as the president and chief executive officer of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest, national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States.

I draw on my parents' story, on my heritage and on my roots when I come to work every day. It is what sustains me. The source of that strength for me has been my family—they are my inspiration—and my roots growing up in a Mexican-American neighborhood in, of all places, Kansas City, Kansas.

My father came to the United States in the late 1940s. He was born in Oklahoma but returned to his parent's small rural community of Tangancícuaro, Michoacán, Mexico, as a young boy, not even ten years old. With very limited English, he actually came back to report for military service towards the end of World War II. Like most immigrants, he was also looking for a better way of life. He worked at various jobs, a little bit at an ice plant, a little bit at the stockyards and then finally worked as a steel worker. Once he settled in, he sent for my mom and my oldest sister, and they moved to Kansas City, Kansas.

Both my parents could be described as simple, humble, modest people. When my mother and father were reunited in the United States in the 1950s, the contrast between their lives in Mexico and this country was quite dramatic. Growing up in rural Tangancícuaro in the 1920s and 1930s was like growing up in the rural United States in the late 1800s. My father talked about riding a horse to deliver goods for the shopkeeper he worked for, my mother washed clothes and dishes in a nearby stream and ironed clothing with the kind of metal irons that needed to be placed on hot plates. Neither one of my parents were able to pur-

sue an education in Mexico due to very difficult personal and family circumstances. My dad's father died when my dad was sixteen years old, and he had a family of twelve. My mom's mother died when she was fourteen, and she had a family of six. They've been moms and dads for a long time. But you know what? They were awfully good at it. They lived like pioneers during those times, even after coming to the United States.

With seven kids—my six brothers and sisters—my mom didn't work outside the home. But the nine of us lived in a very small house that had only one bathroom. I think we all knew that we had to do a lot with very little. We had basically one room where the kids slept dormitory style. I remember Mary and I would put our shoes and clothes in a box, in a closet, and that was where everybody had their things. When we went to school back then, it was rough, but we were together and my parents really provided for us. I remember Mary and I going to school and we'd have our Monday-Tuesday dress and our Wednesday-Thursday dress and then our Friday dress. We didn't get a phone in our home until I was in the eighth grade. I'm the youngest. My mom washed clothes in a ringer washer with no dryer until I was in college. We knew about going to the *lavandería* and having to dry our clothes and fold them and do all of that. My parents worked hard, and sometimes it was tough going.

Society presented its own set of challenges as well. There were times when my dad was laid off from work and we had to rely on some government assistance. You know what? It was really tough to see my dad go through that period of time, because he was a very proud man. He would take work wherever he could, but somehow, we got through it. In Kansas City, in the 1950s when my parents went to the movie theater, they had to sit in a separate section of the theater. My father and other persons of color had to use separate bathrooms early on at the steel plant. So, I know about the challenges that our community has faced over the years. My dad worked very hard, taking overtime

whenever he could. My mom pitched in by babysitting and getting some money there, but then she never made a lot of money.

By the early 1980s, though, five of their kids were in college, all at the same time, thanks to scholarships, work-study and financial opportunities and a lot of hard work. After all was said and done, six of the seven kids received postsecondary education degrees. My oldest sister, Martha, the one who didn't get to receive a postsecondary education degree, is mentally challenged. But you know what? Even though she didn't have her degree, I think that she has taught us the most of all in our family. She taught us a lot about the human spirit and character because Martha worked for more than 30 years at a downtown restaurant in Kansas City, and she took three buses to get to her work. So even Martha, who didn't have her degree, made sure she was contributing in her own way.

Interestingly enough, four of us went to law school. My brother Ramón was the first in our family and in our community to attend Harvard Law School. It was a great moment of pride for my parents. Today, Ramón is a lawyer in private practice in Kansas City and a civic leader. He's one of the founders of the Greater Kansas City Hispanic Scholarship Fund, which now has more than a million-dollar endowment. He's one of the first Latinos to serve on the board of trustees for the Kellogg Foundation, one of the largest philanthropic foundations in the country.

My brother Carlos was the first Latino to be a state court judge in Kansas. He served in that position for ten years. In 1999, he was confirmed by the U.S. Senate to be a federal judge in Kansas after being nominated by President Bill Clinton. Carlos is the first Latino to serve as a federal judge in the district of Kansas.

Then there's my twin sister, Mary. Yes, she looks a lot like me so be careful, because you can't tell us apart. I'm just a little better looking, but you have to look very closely. We'll just keep that between us. It's our little secret. Mary is a judge on the United States Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals after having served for more than a decade as a federal judge in the district of Arizona.

She was the first Latina to serve as a federal judge in Arizona. She and my brother Carlos are the first brother and sister in the U.S. history to serve on the federal bench together. I know that we're capable of contributing and making history.

As for me, I decided to go into government service instead of practicing law, and I ended up working in the west wing of the White House. Looking back, it is obvious that education was very important to my parents and to each of my siblings. Despite my parents' own lack of formal education, they recognized that education really wasn't just a goal. It was a value. I share my parents' story because I believe my parents are primarily responsible for what my brothers and sisters and I have been able to do. It is because of some very basic principles and values that they believed in and that they instilled in us: faith in God, a strong work ethic, love of family, knowing the importance of a strong community, lots of sacrifice and a clear appreciation for what we have and what is offered in the United States. I saw these values played out in so many ways. *El ejemplo y los principios que nos dieron* were lived out in front of us.

My mom, who only had a fifth-grade education, would be in the kitchen usually by the stove or with dishes in the sink, and here would come in my *madrina* Virginia, my *madrina de bautizo*. She was older and didn't know how to read or write at all. She'd carry her letter from her daughter from Mexico, and back then we didn't have all the access to telephones and everything else, and so that letter was her lifeline to her daughter. My mom would clear the table. My mom in her limited reading capacity would read this letter to my *madrina* and then would sit and write out a letter, even if it was phonetically, back to her daughter.

I think I learned compassion from my mother and about service in the simplest of ways. She'd always be the one thinking about Doña Carmen down the street, who was the elderly lady, and maybe she needed some *caldo* because she wasn't feeling good that day. She'd send us off to deliver the *caldo* for Doña Carmen, even though Doña Carmen would always kind of *regañar* us

for not wearing dresses, for playing football with my brothers and everything else. But there we were because my mom had said we needed to go there.

My dad was one of the toughest and most resilient people I knew. He worked for 37 years at the steel plant, where during the hot Kansas summer it was ten times hotter than it was outside that plant. He would cut steel wearing heavy full gear, heavy steel toe boots, the big hat and the big jacket. In those deep freezes that only Midwesterners know, he would also work just as hard and never faltered even if he was sick and should have stayed home.

This is an extraordinary nation when you think about it. Two people with very few means from a very small town in Mexico worked very hard, sacrificed much and dedicated themselves to the education of their family and service to their community. I am a witness to and, in many ways, evidence of their American Dream. I have seen it come true for my family, and for me. It is a credit to them and a credit to this country. They wanted us to know that despite the challenges, in this country no matter who you are or what color you are, there is opportunity if you are determined to find it. My dad had his own way of expressing this. He would say to us, “Remember, you’re no better than anyone else, but you’re no less than anyone else either.” He would remind us, “*El sol sale para todos.*” “The sun shines for everyone.” My mom would say, “*Con Dios por adelante todo es posible.*” “With God’s help all things are possible.”

My parents’ words and my parents’ values are what led me eventually to Capitol Hill, to the White House, and now to NCLR. I wanted to help families like mine who needed a helping hand, a leg up or just an open door. I had mentors and supporters who opened many doors for me—because no one gets where they are alone. One of those doors led to a job in the White House. I needed those doors opened, because I didn’t have the type of connections a lot of my colleagues did. At my first White House meeting—I’ll never forget—was at the Office

of Legislative Affairs. On my left was a gentleman by the name of Goody Marshall, and on my right was Paul Carey. I found out that Goody Marshall was the son of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Jr. Paul Carey was the son of three-time New York Governor Hugh Carey. I thought to myself, *how did I get here?* The doors kept opening for me during that time.

I was privileged to be able to ride on Air Force One several times across the country and across the world. One moment I'll never forget was when I was privileged to be able to fly in Marine One with President Clinton, playing cards with Bruce Lindsey. I was sitting next to Melanne Vermeer; we were flying right over the New York skyline at sunset, at eye level with the Statue of Liberty. That's the privilege that I had been given because I had a chance, and someone opened the door for me. President Clinton believed in me enough to give me this chance to work in the White House.

I know with those privileges come great responsibilities. I know that for my parents, it was always really hard for them to understand exactly what I did. I kept explaining, "I work on Capitol Hill." But they never quite got it, right? You all know. "*Eso ¿qué es? Okay, qué bien.*" "Okay," my mom would say, "*pero ya, vente.*" She'd say, "*Ya, pon todas esas cosas en una caja y ya vente.*" But I would answer, "Well, I'm in the White House now." My mom would just kind of go, "Okay, *está bien, pero, ¿cuándo vas a venir?*" But when I was able to go home and show her a picture of the president, Pope John Paul II and me, she looked at that picture and said, "*Está bien, tienes un buen trabajo.*" Now, that impressed her. But moms have an amazing way of both being your biggest fan and the one who brings you back down to earth. I remember one time, because I would call her regularly at certain times . . . I remember that time and days slipped by, and that was not good. I thought she was going to understand that I was doing work for the First Lady. I explained, "*Mamá, no te pude hablar porque estaba con la Primera Dama y no podía llamarte.*" "Mom, I couldn't call you.

I was with the First Lady, I couldn't call you." And she listened. Then she said, "*Yo soy más primera que la Primera Dama.*"

I'll be honest with you. My parents always had a way of keeping me grounded. In fact, I'll never forget when my mom and my *madrina* Sally, another *madrina*, were talking in the kitchen. Mary and I were outside. My *madrina* Sally says, "*Comadre, debes de estar muy orgullosa de tus hijas. Una es juez y la otra trabaja en la Casa Blanca.*" She would say, "*Comadre*, you should be very proud of your daughters. One of them works in the White House, and the other is a judge, a federal judge." My mom just sat there and said, "You know what? I'd be really proud if they knew how to make flour tortillas." "*Estuviera muy contenta si supieran hacer tortillas de harina.*" So, we're still working up to achieve my mom's full view of success.

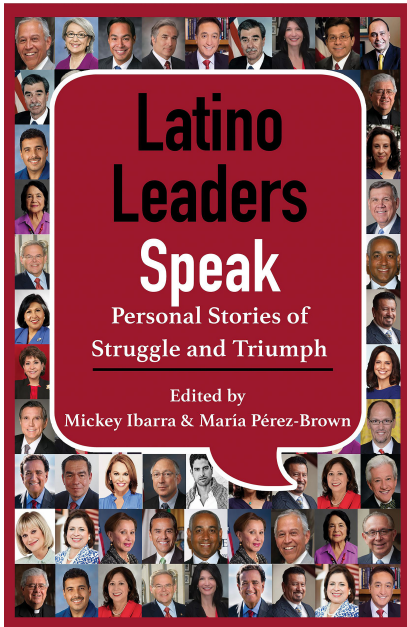
But look, I had the privilege of working in the White House when I know not everybody else got that chance. I did realize that I could compete, not in spite of, but because of my story and what I brought to the table. That was hammered into me when I had my most proud moment in the White House. That was when I was able to take my parents to see the president in the Oval Office. I know some of you have heard this story, but I want to share it with you again because to me it was a defining moment. Here my parents were, their journey had led them to come visit me here in Washington D.C. and to see the president. I remember my mom being so self-conscious about her shoes because she had to do a lot of walking in the city that day, and she said she didn't have her good shoes on. They were so nervous. But I'll never forget, when she walked through the doors of the Oval Office, tears were coming down her face. She said, "*¿Cómo llegamos hasta aquí?*" And the president welcomed them in. My dad stuck out his arm and said, "Mr. President, thank you for giving my daughter this opportunity." President Clinton put his hand on my dad's shoulder and said, "You know what, Mr. Murguía? I hired Janet. She walked you into this office, but you're the ones who got her here."

That is the story of our community. That is the story of our contributions, and each and every one of you knows and understands that story. I am proud to now be at the helm of the National Council of La Raza to work in partnership with so many other champions and with each and every one of you, because, you know what, our journey continues. There's much more work to be done. I know that we can count on all of us working together to get that immigration reform bill done and get it over to the finish line, to get Tom Pérez on the cabinet as Department of Labor secretary, and to continue to do so many other things.

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Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph

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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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