

Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



Lily Eskelsen-García
President
National Education Association

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Lily Eskelsen-García is president of the National Education Association, the nation's largest labor union. Eskelsen-García began her career in education as a school lunch lady and now leads a professional association of three million educators. She is the first Latina to lead the NEA and one of the country's most influential Hispanic educators. Her passion for and dedication to children's education has been the driving force that has propelled her throughout her career and her life. Eskelsen-García believes in the sacred duty of all educators to be professionals and to care for the whole student—mind, body and character—no matter how students arrive and no matter their learning conditions, their home conditions or their health conditions. She also believes that professionalism carries the responsibility to take action, individually and collectively, toward making the promise of public education a reality and preparing the whole and happy child to succeed in becoming a whole and happy adult.

Eskelsen-García graduated magna cum laude in elementary education from the University of Utah and later earned a Master's degree in instructional technology.

My grandfather was born in Nicaragua. He never spoke a word of English. My mother grew up in Colón, Panama. She met my father when he was a soldier in the Canal Zone. They raised

six noisy kids and moved every two or three years, the way military families do. I was born in Fort Hood, Texas, and lived in El Paso; Robins Air Base in Warner Robins, Georgia; Fort Wainwright, Alaska; and Ft. Lawton in Seattle. Then, my parents decided, when they retired, to take their little Catholic family and move, of course, to Brigham City, Utah, where diversity means you found a Presbyterian. I was seventeen years old and in high school when my husband asked me to marry him. He was much, much older; he was eighteen. We got married a week after I graduated from high school.

Of course, I had to work. All I knew was I wanted to work around children. And so, I applied to be a teacher's aide at all these schools and daycare centers. Finally I got to a Head Start Program. They said, "Well, we only have an opening in the cafeteria, in the kitchen." "A job's a job. I'll take it."

I have to tell you, I was an incredible lunch lady. But I will admit that calling myself 'The Lunch Lady' is actually padding my résumé. I was the 'Salad Girl.' I was not up to hot food yet, but I loved being around the kids. I would just make up names when they came through my line, like, "Hey, boyfriend, you're going to eat those peas"; "All right, cutie-poo, let's finish that milk." They'd laugh and they liked going through my line. And when there was an opening as a teacher's aide in the kindergarten, the principal asked me if I wanted it.

I have got to tell you, I was an incredible teacher's aide. I would bring my guitar. I taught five year olds how to sing all the words to the classic, "Don't stick your finger up your nose because your nose knows it's not the place it goes," and we sang it with dignity. After I did that for a year, the kindergarten teacher said, "Lily, you're really good with kids. Have you ever thought about going to college and maybe becoming a teacher?" I was almost twenty years old. That was the first time in my life anyone had suggested that I might want to go to college. So, there was this little seed planted and a Redwood forest grew out of my head. I said to myself, "I would be an incredible teacher.

I'm going to college! I wonder how you do that. How do you actually go to college?" No one had talked to me about it because it wasn't in my parents' experience. They weren't against me going to college but my mother hadn't gone to college; my father never finished eighth grade. When I told them that I was going to go to college, they were so excited, but I was on my own to figure out how to do it.

By that time, my husband and I had a six-month-old baby, and we figured we could do this college thing with his G.I. Bill and folk singing on weekends in every bar in Salt Lake City: both of them. I'd have Jeremy in his stroller and be pushing him around the campus of the University of Utah while Ruel was in his biology class. Then I'd shove the stroller over there and I'd run to my political science class. We just went back and forth for four years. So, we both went to college. And actually, our little baby at the end of four years had gone through four years of college—what a gifted child.

I started teaching at Orchard Elementary fourth grade and, I've got to tell you, I was an incredible teacher. I truly was. I believed in project-based learning. I had my kids do all the work, which was the secret to my success. They set up the science fair. They organized the blood drive. They wrote the pen pal letters to the Golden Living Center residents asking them for their memories of World War II.

And they solved real problems. The closest I ever came to violating that church-state thing was my bulletin board that read, "Though shalt not whine." All right? In my class, if you were going to complain about something, the next words out of your mouth had to be: "... and here is what I'm going to do about it."

Once, when one of my friends, Miss Trautmann who taught next door, told me about how hard it was for her husband, Dave, who used a wheel chair to compete with able-bodied shoppers for the handicapped parking spaces, my kids decided to do something about it.

We held a class meeting. After some debate, they voted unanimously to form little vigilante committees and systematically egg the illegally parked cars. Well, as a point of information, I threw in some new vocabulary words, like “bail,” and they voted, I think wisely, to reconsider. They instead decided to make the public more aware of why they should leave those parking spaces for the folks they were meant for. They wrote a public service announcement in the form of a handicap rap from Dave’s point of view (Park in my Space/ If you dare /And I’ll run you over/ With my wheelchair). We got it published in newspapers; we sent it to radio stations and they played it; the local TV station had it produced as a public service announcement starring Dave and with all my kids making a citizen’s arrest of the villain (played by our school custodian) who parks in the handicap space. High art.

I taught at Orchard for twelve years and decided that I wanted a change. I asked for a special assignment at the Salt Lake Homeless Shelter, which ran a one-room school for students whose parents would not let them leave the shelter for security reasons. It was the best gig in the whole wide world, because it was an entire loving community that cared about that whole child: healthcare, counselors, people working with parents, a dentist, a doctor who would come in. The world of a teacher can be a very isolated world. At the shelter, we were a big family of professionals caring for families who needed us.

It was at this shelter school that I began to truly understand the gift of a second language. Many of my students and their parents spoke only Spanish. My mother had not raised us speaking Spanish. *Mi español es muy malo, pero la culpa de mi madre*. Once, I scolded her, “Ma, how could you not teach me Spanish when my brain worked?” She said something I didn’t understand. She said, “I didn’t think it would be good for you.” And I pressed her, “What are you talking about? The principal would be waxing my car if I were bilingual! Bilingual teachers are gold! How could that not be good for me?” She started to cry. “You don’t know

what it was like. When I came here and people heard you speaking Spanish, they didn't like it. They would stare at you. I didn't want people to stare at my children like that, so I decided not to teach you. I know it was a mistake." Then she scolded me, "But you know that you can learn! You can take lessons. You should take classes at night."

I am not an incredible student. I'm really bad at doing my homework. I blame the teacher for not motivating me, of course. But I signed up for classes. I shamelessly used all of my students at the homeless shelter to practice my Spanish. I used Julio. Julio was eight years old, one of my older students. He was the angriest human being I've ever met in my life. He hated his parents for their poverty. He hated that they were making him live in a homeless shelter. He hated the other kids for being younger than he was. He hated me for making him pretend this was a real school.

One day I was sitting in the playground at recess, pretending to watch the kids, but I was actually doing my Spanish homework that was due that night. Then I heard Julio yell something across the playground in Spanish. Right then, I got the best teacher idea I've ever had in my life. I said, "*Julio, ven, te necesito ayudarme,*" which I really hope means, "Come over here, I need you to help me." He was intrigued. "Julio, my mom is going to be so mad at me if I can't pass this class. You have to help me do my homework." He sat down next to me. I started reading my work. He started correcting me. He kept saying helpful, encouraging things like, "*Estúpida maestra loca,*" which he told me means, "Good job."

So, I started calling him, "Maestro." I said, "Maestro, recess is over. Get the kids lined up." He got the kids lined up. I said, "Maestro, I'm going to get the second-graders on the computer. You take the kindergarteners over to the reading rug and start the story." And he'd take the kindergarteners over to the reading rug and start the story. By the end of the week, he would pop into the room and he wouldn't even ask if I needed help. He'd just come

in and he'd go, "Okay, I'm here." And I'd say, "Oh, *buenos días, maestro*. Can you do the color flashcards with Chester?" He'd grab the cards and he'd say, "Man, she can't do nothing without me." Then, he'd do the color flash cards with Chester.

I said, "Oh, *maestro*, you're such a good teacher. You should go to college, come back here and be a teacher with me." He laughed and said, "I ain't going to be no teacher." He said, "When I go to college, I'm going to be a wrestler with the World Wrestling Federation. ¡*Lucha Libre!*"

He said, "When."

"When I go to college." This is my seed. Maybe a little Redwood forest will pop out of his head. Maybe not, *pero creo que sí*.

My work has been a big part of my life, but so is my family. My family is a very big part of my story. It's a made-for-TV *Lifetime* original movie waiting to be. My sons, my two boys, they are incredible human beings. They are young men who won their struggle with drugs and who are today strong and healthy and happy with families of their own. I was married to that eighteen-year-old boy for 36 years until he died last year. He lost his life-long struggle with depression and took his life.

Mickey did a very dangerous thing asking me to come and tell my story, because it's a very long story. It's a story within other stories. But it's an incredible story, like your incredible story. I have never met another human being that doesn't have an incredible story inside of them. Our stories are just the funny, touching, tragic things that happen to us while we go about the business of living. My story is no more important than your story, really.

The most boring things about people's stories are usually their résumés and their titles. You could have read my bio, but then you wouldn't have known anything about me. You wouldn't have known what's in my heart and makes me get up in the morning. My life is full of the stories of children—my children, other people's children—and caring about their lives is more than my job. Children are my cause.

A big part of my story is my union, my National Education Association. My beloved NEA. My NEA is the best chance I have to fight for something better for students, for the children I have loved, *para todos los niños, todos nuestros niños*, for all our children. Education is *el camino*. It is that path that will lead them to their own incredible lives.

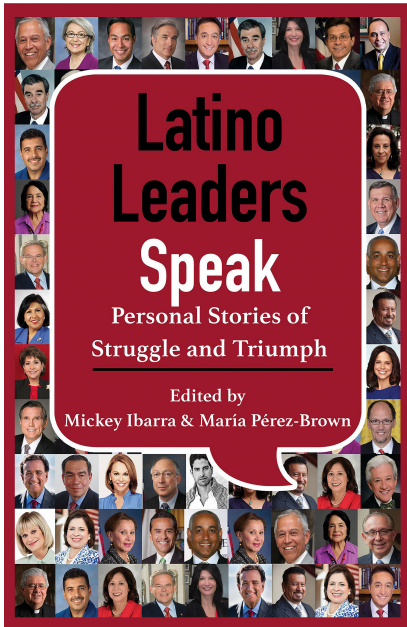
For me and for my colleagues, over three million educators in this country working in America, pre-school to graduate school, it's a mission that we live. It's not a mission on our website. It's a mission that's written across our hearts, like it's written in my favorite poem, "Give me your hungry children, your sick children, your homeless, your abused children. Give me your children who need love as badly as they need learning. Give me your children who have talents and gifts and skills. And give me those that have none. Give them all to me, in whatever shape they come, whatever color their skin, whatever language they speak, wherever they find God, give them all to me. Because this is a public school. We will give you the doctors and the scientists and the carpenters. We'll give you the lawyers and the ministers and the teachers of tomorrow. We will give you the mothers and the fathers and the thinkers and the builders and the artists and the dreamers. We will give you the American dream. We will give you the future."

And that future is that every blessed child will have an incredible story to tell every day of their lives.

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.

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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