

Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



María Elena Salinas

News Anchor
Univision

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One of the most recognized and influential journalists in the United States, María Elena Salinas describes herself as an advocate journalist whose mission it is to empower Latinos. But despite all their gains, many Latinos remain disenfranchised from mainstream America. Salinas began her journalistic career as a reporter, anchor and public affairs host for KMEX-34 in 1981. Her insightful reporting on the impact of daily news to the increasingly growing Hispanic community in Southern California quickly earned her the credibility that would lead her to the anchor chair of the national Spanish language news program, “Noticiero Univision” in 1987.

Her reputation as a serious, objective and highly trustworthy journalist has garnered her universal respect and allowed her to secure high-profile interviews with prominent global figures, ranging from Latin American heads of state to every U.S. president since Jimmy Carter. In 2004, Salinas was a moderator of the first-ever bilingual national Democratic presidential candidate debate on Hispanic issues. Three years later, she co-hosted the first-ever Democratic and Republican presidential candidate forums in Spanish on the Univision Network.

Salinas has been a spokesperson for “Ya Es Hora” for many years, motivating Latinos to come become citizens, register to vote and come out to vote. Salinas has dedicated her whole career to informing and empow-

ering our community and now is even more determined than ever to advocate for the Latino community.

There are two different sets of challenges that I have faced: one as a woman in the news business and the other as a Latina journalist.

As a woman, the biggest challenge is dealing with machismo, sexism and the double standard, however you want to call it, but it does exist in our industry as it does in our culture, unfortunately. If it's true that women have to work twice as hard to get half of the recognition that men do, women who work in Spanish-language media have to work three times as hard to get one-third of the recognition that men do. But the good news is that we can because we have that God-given ability as women to multitask and do many things at the same time—we learned it at home. I know, at least I did.

My father was a brilliant man. He was a wonderful, loving, caring man, but he was kind of old school. He believed that the woman's place was in the home. We have to understand that he was born in 1909; so it was the sign of his times. He believed that it was important to educate his daughters so that they could become good wives someday. Yes, he taught us morals and he taught us values, things that were very, very important to him. On the other hand, there was my mother, my mother who worked and worked and worked and worked. She was a hard-working woman, a seamstress. She worked long hours behind the sewing machine and cutting table, and was the best mom that anyone could ever want to have. We were very poor at that time but somehow, we never felt that there was anything missing in our lives. We led a happy life.

When I bring my daughters to Los Angeles and take them to the place where I used to live—it's right across the street from Sports Arena on Figueroa—it just makes me feel like I'm at home. I don't care if I get stuck on the 405. I don't care if there's smog or traffic. I just feel good. It just feels like I'm home. When

I see Figueroa, I say to myself, “My God, that’s where I grew up.” That house we used to call “La Casa de las Cucarachas” was our apartment. When I’d wake up in the middle of the night in my closet—because my bedroom was a walk-in closet—I’d go to the kitchen, boom and *cucarachas por todos lados*. So, now, the “La Casa de las Cucarachas” is a parking lot. But still, when I drive by there, I have those memories. I really thank my mother for never allowing us to realize that we were poor, that we were missing anything, that there was anything lacking in our lives. We were just very happy and we had a very good example in them.

You know, growing up in a home with an intellectual dad and a hardworking mother kind of prepared me for what I do, for a career in journalism. I inherited from her a strong work ethic and from my dad a social conscience.

I’ve always said that women can do everything men can do, and we do it better because we do it in high heels. Really. I mean, can you imagine Jorge Ramos being pushed out of Trumps’ news conference wearing stilettos? I don’t know if he would handle that very gracefully. Jorge has the fight with Trump, and I’m the one that gets the hate mail. They tell me, “Go back to your country. Go back to Mexico.” Here I am in L.A., the city where I was born, in the community where I was raised, in a country that I love and that I owe loyalty to. It’s incredible that I still have to prove that I’m an American. I’m an American. I’m a Mexican American. Hyphenated or not, I’m an American. I’m as American as apple pie, even if I eat the apple pie after a nice plate of *chilaquiles*, which is my favorite breakfast.

Anyway, so that leads me to the challenge that I have faced as a Latina journalist.

Thirty-four years ago, I started working at Channel 34. Thirty-four, the magic number. It’s a good number. Things were very different then than they are now. Some are some are not. KMEX was a small station, considered by many a low-budget, low-quality station that no one watched except for recently arrived immigrants. As a rookie reporter I covered politics, and

there are some people in this room who remember that and whom I interviewed during that time. When I covered politics, I remember going out and trying to get interviews. The kind of response that I would get, especially from candidates for national office, was, "You're from Channel thirty what?" They didn't know we existed. The picture became clear to me when I realized that they didn't know *we* existed because we were not participating in the political process.

As many of you know, in the early 80s in Los Angeles, although we were 25 percent of the population, we had no political representation. Not in city hall, not on the board of supervisors, not on the board of education. So when a seat on the city council opened up all of a sudden, there was the possibility of a Latino being elected, and there was a Latino running. So I went out and I did interviews on the street. It was in the Boyle Heights area, I remember. I interviewed sixteen people and out of those sixteen people, fifteen people were not voting. They didn't know there was an election. They weren't participating for whatever reason. They weren't registered. They weren't legal. For whatever reason, but they were not voting. In fact, and I told my news director, Pete Moraga, *que en paz descanse*, that I couldn't do the story because no one was participating in the election. How could I do a story about whom they were going to vote for if they weren't going to vote? He explained that my story was right there in front of me. We don't have political representation because we're not participating, because Latinos are still disenfranchised from mainstream America. Not only did it give me a good journalistic lesson, but it marked my career. It set the tone for what I knew would be my mission: the political empowerment of Latinos in the advancement of my community. I knew from that moment on that my reporting had to go above and beyond the daily news. My reporting had to include informing Latinos of their rights, but also of their responsibilities in what was to many their newly adopted country.

There were about fourteen million Latinos in the United States at that time. Fast forward three decades, and we are now 55 million Latinos. Los Angeles is about half Latino, about 50 percent Latino. We have plenty of political representation at all levels. KMEX is now the number one station in the country, regardless of language. I'm no longer the rookie reporter trying to explain to politicians why Spanish-language media are relevant. Yes, we've come a long way. We in Spanish-language media have grown hand-in-hand with the Latino community. No more low-quality, low-budget stations that nobody watches. We compete with mainstream media in quality and in quantity of viewership. Our audiences have become more sophisticated and more demanding. We don't want to keep it all to ourselves. We want to share it with those who are not lucky enough to speak Spanish or understand Spanish.

You know, there are so many people who have worked so hard for so long to defend the rights of Latinos; elevate our image; highlight our many contributions to be recognized as an integral part of society. And it's worked. Look at how many of you are here representing big corporations; how many of you are here as elected officials or appointed officials; how many of you are running a business or leading a foundation. Now, high school dropout rates among Latino students have dramatically dropped, and more and more Latinos are going to college, thanks to the work of many of you.

In politics, our influence has also been felt. I now see and I've seen in the past couple of decades how just about every major campaign includes staffers to work with the Latino community for Latino outreach or deal—"deal," that's an interesting word—with Spanish-language media. I'm not saying that they love us now or that we have a love affair with the campaigns and with the politicians, but they are paying attention to us because they know that they can't win an election without Latinos. They know that the best way to get to Latinos is by having respect for them and by having respect for their language.

You know, there is so much to celebrate and so much to be proud of. Unfortunately, it's not all good news. We've been reporting these days how disproportionate the number of Latinos are arrested and end up being victims of police brutality. Tens of thousands of families have been separated by deportation. Thousands of Central American kids have been separated from their families and have been jailed, detained at the border. Sadly, there's one thing that through all of our hard work we have not been able to overcome or to change: that is racism.

You know, we don't really have to worry about that guy who comes out and says immigrants are criminals, drug dealers and rapists. He's eventually going to disappear. I'm convinced. I'll bet on it. I'll put my money on it. But we do have to worry about the millions who buy it, who support him and who agree with him and who keep him at his current levels in the polls. He's not there because of fake numbers. He's there because there are actual people who believe what he's saying and who have those pent-up feelings and think that now it's okay to verbalize them and to show them. Those are the people we need to worry about.

The political climate for Latinos has definitely suffered a setback. This is a new challenge for you as community leaders and also for me as a journalist and for many of my colleagues in Spanish-language media. You, of course, need to continue leading by example, and I as a journalist need to continue to denounce injustice and oppression when I see it, calling prejudice and discrimination by its name, to question authority, and to condemn abuse. I can't be a bystander, and I won't. I need to tell success stories of people like you in this room, and I also need to tell the stories of those who are victims and are rejected by society.

This has been a good year for me journalistically. I've been very lucky to win three awards: a Gracie Award, a Walter Cronkite Award and a Peabody Award. And now I'm nominated for an Emmy Award. Thank you. And it's all for a program that I did last year, the children's border crisis, *Entre el Abandono y el Rechazo*, *Between Abandonment and Rejection*. By the way, that's a name that one

of my bosses didn't like. He said, "No, it's too long. No, it's too convoluted. No, people won't understand." Well, when I came back from my journey to Central America, I knew that that was the only possible title, because when you talk about these kids, you understand that they are *entre el abandono y el rechazo*. Abandoned by society, by their government, sometimes by their families, and rejected in a country that is not willing to take them in and open the door to the land of opportunity. But I'm not telling this story to brag about my accomplishment, but because of the important meaning of these awards. You know, the Peabody's are given to stories that matter. There are seventeen judges, and they all have to agree; it has to be unanimous. They all agreed that mine, along with the other awardees' stories, mattered.

As far as the Walter Cronkite Award is concerned, this is what was said about my story: "It was balanced and revealing reporting from the point of view, not of politicians, but of families in their countries of origin which brought viewers face to face with women and children directly affected. This is a kind of story often left out of the immigration debate." This is what the Walter Cronkite Committee said about my story.

While mainstream media was focusing on the political battle at the border with this issue, where politicians were accusing each other of causing the crisis and the children were being put into detention centers or deported, my crew and I went to Guatemala and Honduras and El Salvador and showed the conditions of violence, poverty, drug wars and gang-infested neighborhoods that drove these kids out of their countries. This was a humanitarian crisis that needed a human face; it wasn't just a political debate.

Now, there's been a lot of talk lately about advocacy journalism. I know that we are accused of being advocates. We're not journalists, they say, we're advocates, as if it was an insult. You know, like when they say, "You're liberal. You are a liberal," and you say, "Eh? So, what? Are you trying to insult me?" Okay. So, when they say, "You are practicing advocacy journalism," I don't

feel insulted by that. I don't feel insulted because, wasn't that what they said about Rubén Salazar when he reported on the injustice toward the Mexican-American community, first in El Paso and then in Los Angeles many years ago? What an honor to be in the same category as Rubén Salazar.

I believe that reporting the trials and tribulations of immigrants is not advocating. It's contributing to a healthy debate on the issues that otherwise would sound like a monologue with everyone accusing Latinos for all the ills of this country. Now, I've been reading a lot about Rubén Salazar in order to gain some perspective, especially on what's going on right now. I found an interview that was done by Bob Navarro with Rubén Salazar. When he left his job at the *Los Angeles Times*—he left his job as a reporter and went to work for KMEX Channel 34—they couldn't understand why he would do that, why he would leave such a reputable job to go work for a station, as I said before, that nobody watched, low-quality, low-budget.

This is what he asked, this is the exchange. What Bob Navarro was telling him during that interview was that Salazar was becoming an advocate because that's what Spanish-language TV did: advocacy. Three months before Rubén Salazar was killed, Bob Navarro asked, "But is advocacy the name of the game? Can you work as a functional day-to-day reporter in the position of advocacy?" And this was Rubén's response: "I'm only advocating the Mexican-American community just like the general media is advocating really our economy, our country, our way of life. So, I'm just advocating a community, which, by the way, the general community has totally ignored. And so, someone must advocate that because it's easy for the establishment to say, 'Aren't we all the same? Aren't we all Americans?' Well, obviously, we're not. Otherwise, we wouldn't be in the revolutionary process that we are now."

Can you believe that was 45 years ago? Forty-five years ago and here we are having the same conversation in this country. Well, some things have changed and some things have not. We're

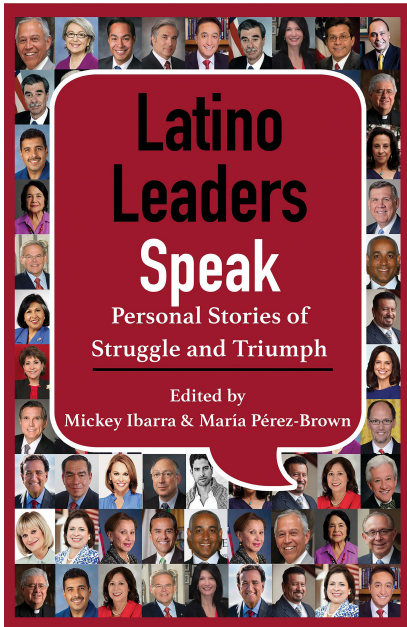
not the same Latin community that we were in the 60s and 70s or even the 80s when I started my career as a reporter. *Hoy, sí, tenemos voz y voto, y por eso ahora, sí, haremos la diferencia.*

You know, there's a silver lining to all this and to this climate of immigrant bashing. It has united the community in a way that I have not seen in many, many, many years. Latinos are finally realizing that they have to take control of their destiny. More than ever I see Latinos motivated to go out and vote. I have been a spokesperson for "Ya Es Hora" for many, many years, motivating Latinos to come out and become citizens, and if they qualify to register to vote, to come out and vote. Like I said, it's been my mission. I dedicated my whole career to informing and empowering our community, and I feel privileged to have had that opportunity. But my mission is not over. Now we have to start again. But it's okay. I'm not afraid to start over again. I'm not afraid of work. My momma taught me how to work. She gave me a good work ethic. I'm ready to continue taking on the challenge.

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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.”
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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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