

Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



Nydia M. Velázquez

**Congresswoman
U.S. House of Representatives**

November 16, 2010

Congresswoman Nydia M. Velázquez is currently serving her twelfth term as the Representative for New York's 7th Congressional District. In the 114th Congress, she is the Ranking Member of the House Small Business Committee and a senior member of the Financial Services Committee.

She has made history several times during her tenure in Congress. In 1992, she was the first Puerto Rican woman elected to the U.S. House of Representative New York's 7th Congressional District, which encompasses Brooklyn, Queens and the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In February, 1998, she was named Ranking Democratic Member of the House Small Business Committee, making her the first Hispanic woman to serve as Ranking Member of a full House committee. In 2006, she was named Chairwoman of the House Small Business Committee, making her the first Latina to chair a full Congressional committee.

Born one of nine children in Yabucoa, Puerto Rico in 1953, Velázquez started school early, skipped several grades and became the first person in her family to receive a college education. After graduating magna cum laude in political science from the University of Puerto Rico in 1974, she earned a Master's degree from New York University and taught Puerto Rican studies at Hunter College.

As a fighter for equal rights of the underrepresented and a proponent of economic opportunity for the working class and poor, Congresswoman Velázquez combines sensibility and compassion as she works to encourage economic development, protect community health and the environment, combat crime and worker abuses and secure access to affordable housing, quality education and health care for all New York City families.

I love the work I do, my community and the people that I represent. It's all those beautiful children that give meaning to the work I do in Washington. I honor my father and my mother, because believe me, growing up in a rural barrio of Yabucoa with nine children, when things were really tough, my father and mother never walked away, even in the most difficult moments. Sometimes when we cried at night because we were hungry, my mother would say, "Don't worry." I would say, "Mommy, I want soda," and she would go and mix sugar and water and give it to us with some lemon juice. They were relentless; they understood their commitment to give to us a better life, a better future, and they instilled in me the value of education. That taught me that, once I'm gone or do something else in life, that commitment is the best legacy that we can leave to our young generations.

From a young age, I saw how political action could benefit people's lives. Some of my earliest memories involve talking politics at the dinner table, going to political rallies with my father or listening to him giving a speech in a flatbed truck. I came to NY at the age of nineteen to work on my master's degree at New York University. I was able to come to New York because the government of Puerto Rico gave me a full scholarship. I do know that there is a role for government to help those most vulnerable, and I will always, always fight for that.

I came to D.C., though I wasn't supposed to be here. I was supposed to be a number, a school dropout or something else, but I wasn't. Since I came to Washington, I decided. I don't know why, but I guess because I saw my father struggling to understand rules and regulations when he opened up his little brick

shop—*una fábrica de cemento de bloques*—and he couldn't understand them. There I was, a sixth grader, trying to interpret for him in Spanish regulations that at an early age I didn't understand. It was very difficult for my father. So, when I came here, I knew that the most important thing to be able to provide for my community was jobs, and still today that is our biggest challenge.

I decided that I wanted to serve on the small business committee. Soon, I asked, "Where is the money, financial services? I'm going to go and I'm going to ask for financial services." I am proud of the work that I've done as chair of the small business committee, especially making sure that the tools are there to help Latinos and minorities expand economic opportunities. If there is any accomplishment, at least I can tell you that every time an agency cabinet hires a contracting officer, they call me up and let me know what they did because they know that I'm watching to see if they are accomplishing their contracting goals for small and minority businesses.

I have flown on Air Force One with multiple presidents and taught a secretary of state how to dance tango. I have had the privilege of chairing the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI). Not bad. Not bad for the kid from that barrio in Yabucoa. I know something about starting with little and using education to find your way in life, which is why it has been so important to me and a privilege to lead the CHCI, which helps young people pursue their dreams. As the Hispanic community's role in the United States grows, CHC and CHCI will continue working to ensure that Latinos claim their place in the American narrative.

By 2013, there will be 75 million Hispanic-Americans. That is 25 percent of the population. Hispanic entrepreneurs as a group is growing three times faster than any other group. The buying power of Latinos is approaching almost \$1 trillion. My friends, if that is not power, what is? We are becoming an ever more politically robust force.

Voter turnout among Hispanics reached record levels in 2008. This year, during an otherwise very bad election for Democrats, Hispanic voters made the difference in returning Senate Majority Leader Reid, Senator Boxer and Senator Bennett to Congress and retaining the Senate. I hope that Senator Reid is listening and all those potential presidential candidates: You just can't win without at least getting 40 percent or 45 percent of Latino voters in this country.

When Sonia Sotomayor became the first Latina Supreme Court Justice, young Latinas and Latinos were immediately provided a new source of inspiration. If we are to capitalize on these strengths, there must be additional opportunities for the next generation of Latino leaders. CHCI's mission is to make sure that these young people can achieve their goals.

In the last two years, we have been changing the face of the federal government here in Washington. We have been changing the makeup of the committees in the Senate and the House. We have been changing the workforce's face throughout Washington. We doubled the students that we are serving to 1,500 students, the number of congressional interns and the number of ready-to-lead high school students. In 2010, the CHCI has awarded 150 scholarships, the most ever. So, we are very proud of that.

It is the CHC's job to ensure Latino voices are heard on policy matters. Today, we are making our presence felt on every issue, big and small. I'm proud to say that there are historic numbers of Latino appointments in the new administration. This wasn't done because of the work of the CHC. This was done in collaboration with the community-based organizations and Latino leaders.

We fought with all of you to ensure everyone is counted in the census. The CHC worked to boost the size of Pell grants. The caucus helped pass healthcare reform legislation, including \$2.55 billion for minority-serving institutions and \$1 billion for Hispanic-serving institutions, and we changed the face of the U.S. Supreme Court forever.

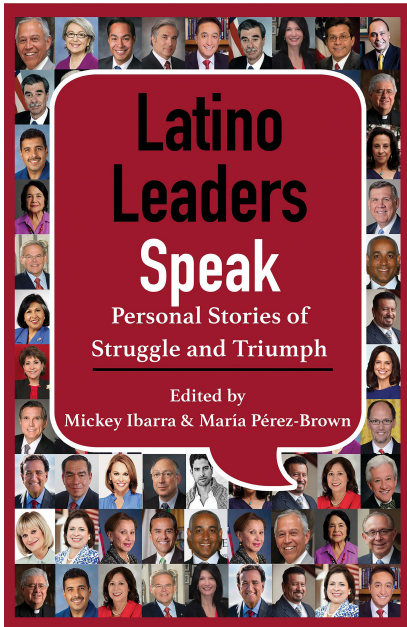
The political math may have changed in Washington, but one thing will remain constant: our commitment to justice. We will not stop fighting to make sure that we do what the American public is telling us to do. They are ahead of policymakers in Washington and political pundits. They want to reform the broken system that we call immigration. We have to do it.

This morning, I had a meeting with Speaker Pelosi. Now, I'm walking out to go and meet with President Barack Obama. Hopefully, during the week of November 29th, we will be taking a vote in the House of Representative for the first time on the DREAM Act. This is not going to be easy. We want a standalone bill without adding jobs or H-1 visas, because we cannot lose our leverage to bring about comprehensive immigration reform. If we attach any of those elements to the DREAM Act, ten million undocumented will continue to live in the shadows for years to come. I am not telling you that this is going to happen, that we are 100 percent there.

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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.

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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