



Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown

Praise for *Latino Leaders Speak*

“Very few people understand the power of personal story better than Mickey Ibarra. It's the power to engage, inspire and transform both the storyteller and listener by inviting them to take a shared journey, from the launch of the quest, through times of adversity, to a place where they can serve as leaders in their community. More than that, story can help people come together by making them more human and relatable across political, ethnic and gender divides. Ibarra gathers prominent Latinos to share their stories with the next generation of leaders—Latino and non-Latino alike—at a time when shared stories are so badly needed. *Latino Leaders Speak* belongs in every American classroom.”

—Giovanni Rodriguez, *Forbes* contributor and
founder of The Silicon Valley Story Lab

“‘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. Many times our stories are not told, or are told through a stereotypical, negative lens. Many of the contributors are well known in the Latino community, but their personal stories are not. Mickey Ibarra’s eye-opening personal story itself serves as a source of inspiration, and these Latino leaders’ stories will help inspire the community to realize that it is possible to achieve one’s dreams and goals despite obstacles.”

—Patricia Guadalupe, Contributing Writer, *NBC Latino*,
and Washington Editor, *Latino Magazine*

Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
Mickey Ibarra & María Pérez-Brown



Arte Público Press
Houston, Texas

Latino Leaders Speak: Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph is funded in part by a grant from the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance.

Recovering the past, creating the future

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by Victoria Castillo

Names: Ibarra, Mickey, editor of compilation. | Perez-Brown, Maria, 1961- editor of compilation.
Title: Latino leaders speak : personal stories of struggle and triumph / Mickey Ibarra and María Pérez-Brown, editors.
Description: Houston, TX : Arte Público Press, [2017]
Identifiers: LCCN 2017003704 | ISBN 9781558858435 (alk. paper) | ISBN 9781518501272 (kindle) | ISBN 9781518501289 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Hispanic Americans—Biography. | Success—United States. | Leadership—United States.
Classification: LCC E184.S75 L36232 2010 | DDC 973/.0468—dc 3 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017003704>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Copyright © 2017 by Latino Leaders Network

Printed in the United States of America

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN, LATINO LEADERS NETWORK.	ix
Henry Bonilla Congressman, U.S. House of Representatives	1
Susan Castillo State Superintendent of Schools, State of Oregon	5
Joaquín Castro Congressman, Texas' 20 th District	15
Francisco G. Cigarroa Physician & Chancellor, The University of Texas System	19
Henry G. Cisneros U.S. Secretary of Housing & Urban Development	27
Virgilio P. Elizondo Reverend Father & Professor, The University of Notre Dame	37
Lily Eskelsen-García President, National Education Association	45
Alberto R. Gonzales U.S. Attorney General	53

Carlos Gutiérrez	59
Businessman & U.S. Secretary of Commerce	
Luis V. Gutiérrez	67
Congressman, U.S. House of Representatives	
José Hernández	77
Astronaut, NASA	
Maria Hinojosa	91
Producer, Author & Journalist	
Dolores Huerta	105
Civil Rights Activist & President, Dolores Huerta Foundation	
Mel Martínez	113
U.S. Senator & U.S. Secretary of Housing & Urban Development	
Robert “Bob” Menéndez	125
U.S. Senator	
Omar Minaya	133
General Manager, NY Mets	
Gloria Molina	139
County Supervisor, Los Angeles County	
Richard Montañez	149
Author & Executive Vice President, PepsiCo	
Janet Murguía	161
President & CEO, National Council of La Raza	
Soledad O’Brien	171
Journalist, Producer & Anchor, CNN	
Federico Peña	181
Mayor, City of Denver	

Thomas E. Pérez	189
Chair of the Democratic National Committee & U.S. Secretary of Labor	
William “Bill” Richardson	195
Governor, New Mexico	
Adam Rodríguez	203
Actor & Screenwriter	
Ken Salazar	209
U.S. Secretary of the Interior	
María Elena Salinas	221
News Anchor, Univision	
Ricardo Sánchez	231
Lieutenant General, U.S. Army	
Hilda L. Solis	243
U.S. Secretary of Labor	
Lionel Sosa	251
Author, Advertising Executive & Artist	
Julie Stav	255
Financial Expert & Best-Selling Author	
Leticia Van De Putte	261
Texas State Senator	
Nydia M. Velázquez	267
Congresswoman, New York’s 7 th District	
Antonio Ramón Villaraigosa	273
Chairman, Democratic National Convention & Mayor, Los Angeles	

Introduction



Mickey Ibarra

Founder & Chairman
Latino Leaders Network

I was an Assistant to the President of the United States and Director of Intergovernmental Affairs at The White House before mustering the courage to publically share my personal story.

President Bill Clinton showed me the way by sharing his story often. First by introducing himself to the American people during the campaign of 1992 using a video biography called “The Man from Hope.” This method had never been used before by a presidential candidate and proved to be an effective vehicle for delivering an inspirational message of obstacles overcome to achieve success.

My experience at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue for nearly four years and observing reactions to the president’s story triggered my desire to help others by sharing mine. Our stories are powerful and need to be told; when we do, it gives readers and listeners confidence to achieve their dreams as well.

Now my story: only in America could a Mexican kid who grew up in Utah foster care end-up being a witness to history, working alongside the President of the United States. Thirty-two years after arriving in Washington, I still feel a great deal of gratitude for the lessons learned from the many people who helped

me along the way. Please understand that I share my story knowing that every detail may not be accurate but rather, is my best memory and understanding of the facts and sequence of events.

My father, Francisco Nicolás Santiago Ibarra, is a Zapotec Indian who came to this country as a *bracero* from Oaxaca, Mexico in 1945. His first job was picking fruit in Spanish Fork, Utah. Eventually he left the fields and landed a job at Kennecott Copper Mine as a demolition crew member. It was a union job with better pay, benefits and security.

Dad met and married my mother who was younger, white and Mormon. In the early 1950's that was unacceptable for most in Salt Lake City. By the time I was two years old, the predictable happened: my parents divorced causing my father to lose his military draft deferment. He was soon drafted into the United States Army and sent to Germany. Soon after the divorce, my mother, who was 18 years old, relinquished custody of my younger brother David and me to the Children's Service Society of Utah. We were placed together in foster care.

For most of the first fifteen years of my life, we were without traditional parents. As kids, we both wondered about who we were and why we were alone, but we coped with our experience differently. I was the peacemaker and negotiator with a lot to say and always feeling a responsibility to help David make it. But despite my best efforts, David withdrew. He was extremely shy, afraid and angry. David would not talk. I literally talked for him. His teachers at elementary school would come and get me out of class when he was acting-up to settle him down. He often would go to the restroom, hide in the stalls and would not emerge for anyone else.

When I was six years old, we briefly reunited with Dad after he remarried and the State of Utah allowed him to take custody of us. However, when that marriage failed, we were right back in foster care. Although we were very fortunate because of Ila and Cecil Smith in Provo, Utah, a white Mormon family who cared for us for more than seven years at the request of my father.

I talked too much but otherwise was doing fine in school; I got along with everybody. Yet, my brother continued to struggle. This was when I first experienced the impact of skin color. David, who is a shade darker than me, was confronted with discrimination and racism. David was resentful about our life in foster care. Often people would ask David the simple yet hurtful question, “Well, if your name is Ibarra—most often pronounced in Utah as “Eye-Bear-Ah”—how come you’re living with the Smiths?” It caused him to fight back with his fists. The same person never asked that question twice, but it dragged David deeper and deeper into trouble.

During the summer of 1966, our father invited us to come and visit him in Sacramento. I was fifteen years old; David was fourteen. By this time my dad had left Utah after using his GI Bill benefits earned during his military service to take night classes at the Hollywood Beauty College in Salt Lake City. He became a hair stylist in Sacramento and was able to achieve his dream of owning a business: The Mona Lisa House of Beauty. Dad operated a successful beauty salon for nearly 30 years.

While vacationing in Sacramento, David pleaded with Dad to let us live with him. He agreed with one condition: we could not split-up. He told us, “You’ve never been separated before and you’re not going to be split-up now.” He required that we remain together.

I was not sure about leaving Utah. I had just completed my freshman year at an elite private four-year high school, thanks to the intervention of my foster mom, Ila Smith. Sports were of supreme importance to me, and I had made the junior varsity football team. In the end, I knew David wasn’t going to make it in Utah so we decided to reunite with Dad in Sacramento.

Our foster parents were very disappointed. They thought we were making a big mistake. But they realized it was our mistake to make. We packed and shipped all of our belongings by mail, got a bus ticket and off we went to Sacramento in August of 1966.

There are a few crossroads that truly changed my life. The decision to leave Utah was a game changer for David and me. Doing so gave us the opportunity to gain self-awareness and helped us find the identity missing in our lives. We weren't "Eye-Bear-Ah" anymore. We had the opportunity to spend time with our father and learn from him.

I have never been around a harder working man in my life or anyone who is more proud of his Mexican heritage. We were able to meet our family and become more familiar with Mexican culture. It was an amazing and positive experience that for the first time gave us a true sense of belonging.

The biggest change was how many Latinos lived in Sacramento and how much more casual California was about race. We felt immediately more comfortable about our identity; it helped set us on a path to leadership. That path started for me with sports and then continued as senior class president and being voted "Most Likely to Succeed." David joined me in student government as junior class president at Luther Burbank Senior High School. Today he is a successful entrepreneur in Salt Lake City, member of the Latino Leaders Network Board of Directors and founder of the Ibarra Foundation to help Utah Latino students attend college.

Since the early years in Utah and California, I have experienced so many terrific professional leadership opportunities as a teacher, union organizer, White House official and now, some 32 years later, representing my clients. The common thread is advocacy. I am an advocate by profession.

Like reuniting with Dad in Sacramento, my experience advocating for President Clinton at the White House was another pivotal crossroad in my life and career. President Clinton taught me a most valuable lesson about advocacy early on during my time there: "Winning is about addition and multiplication; losing is about subtraction and division." I always try to win by addition and multiplication. It can build a movement, win elections,

achieve good policy, fight for a cause and turn-out a crowd. That is the best leadership formula for success in politics and in life.

I realized as we exited the White House on the final day in 2001, it was going to be important for me to figure out how to continue the conversation with so many leaders that I had come to respect during my time there. Nearly four years with a West Wing office made it possible to convene not only hundreds of elected officials but also many non-elected officials, Latino and non-Latino alike. The White House offered a unique platform that most showed up for when invited.

Founding the Latino Leaders Network was in part a strategy for creating a platform to share our personal stories and to help each other succeed. It has embraced a simple yet difficult mission to achieve: “bringing leaders together.” To do so, we organize the quarterly Latino Leaders Luncheon Series and the Tribute to Mayors held during the winter and summer meetings of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

The Latino Leaders Luncheon Series is an opportunity to honor national Latino leaders willing to share their personal stories of overcoming obstacles to achieve success. The gatherings are re-energizing and motivating. They ground us in what leadership requires and how important it is to continue our efforts to help each other succeed.

We honor elected officials and also leaders from all walks of life—entertainment, sports, science, academia and more. We honor a broad cross-section of Latino leaders from different professions and sectors, but also from different ethnicities and backgrounds. We have a diverse Latino leadership community and their stories can help unite us. Yes, we are “stronger together,” to borrow a recent campaign slogan.

Since 2004, the Latino Leaders Network has convened 49 luncheon events hosting nearly 11,000 guests. This book, *Latino Leaders Speak: Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph*, includes 32 keynote addresses delivered at the series as its primary source material. We want to share these stories with everyone in Amer-

ica to learn about our heroes, our role models and our leaders. We especially hope the addresses inspire young people on their paths to success.

While growing up in Utah foster care, I felt different but didn't know why. Reading this book as a young man may have caused me to dream bigger, faster and stronger earlier. We have so much to celebrate and so much to learn from each other.

It is my hope that this book will inspire all readers to dream big, get prepared and get ready to lead.



Henry Bonilla

Congressman
U.S. House of Representatives

September 2, 2008

Henry Bonilla is the founder of The Normandy Group, LLC, a well-respected, bipartisan government relations firm based in Washington, D.C. He is a former congressman who represented Texas' 23rd congressional district in the United States House of Representatives. Bonilla is the first Hispanic Republican ever elected to Congress from the 23rd Congressional District, a district that had been Democrat since its creation in 1967. Before he spent fifteen years in politics, Bonilla spent fifteen years in the television news business as an executive producer and producer of news and public affairs programming in the San Antonio, Austin, New York and Philadelphia markets. Bonilla left his career in television and ran for public office in 1992 after being inspired by then Minority Whip Newt Gingrich.

Born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, Bonilla grew up in a housing project in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood on the West Side of San Antonio. He graduated from South San Antonio High School in 1972 and received his Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Texas at Austin in 1976. Today, he uses his life experience to inspire young people to follow their dreams.

I was born in a housing project in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood on the West Side of San Antonio. Later on in life, the family struggled. My grandmother on my mother's side often had to work as a maid at the downtown Baptist Memorial Hospital in San Antonio, taking the bus to work every day for 30 years. It set an example of hard work, doing for yourself and trying to pull yourself up from your bootstraps.

My father was a great example of hard work. But my mother, who was the only one in the family who had a high school degree, understood that if the kids stayed in school, they had a shot at living the American dream. I count my blessings every day that I was so fortunate to be born in a country that allows someone with my background to be successful.

Before I spent fifteen years in federal politics, I spent fifteen years in the television news business as an executive producer and producer of news and public affairs in the television markets of San Antonio, Austin and Philadelphia. At the peak of my career in that line of work, I was responsible for the 11:00 p.m. news on WABC in New York that averaged between 2 and 13 million viewers each night. Back then, I would pinch myself some nights in my New York City apartment talking to my mother. It cost a lot of money to call long distance back to San Antonio but I missed tortillas and chorizo and all of the dishes that she made back home. I had to learn, as I was on the phone with her, how to make and roll tortillas. They didn't come out perfectly round, but at least I had them, a taste of the culture that I grew up in.

Being part of a Hispanic community is something that you always want to hold on to. There are wonderful aspects of the culture regardless of which Hispanic community you come from. But then first and foremost is waking up every day being proud to be an American and proud of what this country has to offer.

As I moved on years later to run for Congress, a lot of people said, "Hey, you can't run for congressional office." This was in 1992. "You've never even run for student council before. How

can you run in an area that is 70 percent minority, that has an incumbent congressman who's been in office for eight years, and in politics going on 25 years? You can't possibly win." All I ever had to do is have somebody tell me I couldn't do it, and then I would not be denied.

One of the greatest moments I would have when I was in office is speaking to high school and college students, giving them examples of my life and how they might relate to it so that they could be successful as well. I always walked away thinking that if I just reached one student on any given afternoon or any given night, telling him my story of struggle and, fortunately, of success, they might say, "You know, man, if that guy can do it, coming from his background, maybe I have a shot too."

We owe it to young people, those of us who have been successful, to let them know the story of struggle and success, of meeting failures and getting up again, getting knocked down and continuing to move forward. We owe it to them to provide that opportunity for them as well to be successful.

Sometimes, you never know when it's going to come back to you. I'd be in a crowd later on and a young college student would tap me on the shoulder and say, "Mr. Bonilla, I remember what you told me a couple of years ago. Now, I'm attending MIT. I never thought I had a chance to do that." Or, "I'm attending a local college. I never thought I really was college material." You walk away thinking, *wow, you've made a difference.*

As I moved on in Congress, some days I'd say to myself, "I can't believe I'm getting to do what I do." I co-chaired the last two conventions. I got to be a chairman on the Appropriations Committee that decided funding for the entire federal government for my entire fourteen years in office. And then I think back to those days when we had to live in a little metal mobile home in my grandmother's backyard for a while, just because we didn't have a place to live in between homes growing up on the South Side of San Antonio. Then I would think of how far I had come.

I want to leave the legacy of opportunity for my children and their grandchildren in the future. I don't want them to wake up someday and say, "what happened to my country? How has it become so different from what my dad grew up in that gave him that opportunity?" So, every day while I was in office and what I to do today as well, I work for those principles, and will continue until the day I die, to preserve the environment that this country has provided for many of you and me to prosper and to grow—if you're willing to work hard, stay out of trouble, continue working and apply yourself. That is what I'm committed to doing until my last day on this earth.