



Janet Murguía's 2007 NCLR Capital Awards Speech

One reason our Capital Awards are so meaningful to me is that they capture the incredible potential of our community. By honoring national leaders, we also honor those who have built the foundation for Latino success: Moms and Dads and the families they represent, community organizers, affiliate presidents, business leaders, elected officials, and many, many others.

Leadership at the national level is possible only *because* of your contributions, and in that sense, the Capital Awards honor our entire community. They reflect our collective strength, and they open a window to our next accomplishments.

In that sense, it is telling that our awardees exemplify such a wide swath of America. Well, except none of them are women. (*laughter*). We'll work on that next year.

That shortcoming aside (*laughter*), think about the different experiences our awardees bring to leadership for the Latino community.

Senator Graham is a born-and-bred South Carolinian, and a veteran of the U.S. Air Force. As a Senator, he continues to serve his country in the U.S. Air Force Reserve.

Congressman Gutierrez is the first Latino *ever* elected to Congress from the Midwest. He has been, among other things, a teacher, social worker, and community activist.

Cardinal Mahoney was born in Hollywood. Yes, Hollywood, California. And then he became a priest. And *then*, he took on issues as diverse as adoption, HIV/AIDS, and farmworkers.

Conservative, progressive, religious leader. Veteran, teacher, priest.

And yet, they have many values in common. The values that define America. Patriotism. Integrity. Belief in family, faith, and fairness.

That's America. All of us, doing different things, for different reasons, but in the end, bound together by core values, like freedom and justice for all.

We need to keep that in mind as we tackle the very big issue in front of us - comprehensive immigration reform. The values we are talking about are precisely what will overcome extremism, narrow-mindedness, and cynicism.

As we begin the final push to fix our broken immigration system, the voices of fear and hate are still out there. Last November, voters told them to pipe down. But extremists don't listen too well. They are still out there.

We have to be vigilant. We can't let our guard down. We have to focus on what the American public wants – and they want solutions. If we do that – if we confront the rage with common sense– we will fix our broken immigration system, for today, tomorrow, and decades to come.

The time is *now*. We have the leadership, right here in this room, to get it done. It's within our reach. This is our moment. And we must get it done.

And then we'll have another great American moment. We can create a new

American Dream for all 300 million of us. We can bring people out of the shadows, and put fear and extremism on the scrapheap of history.

But to do that we have to prepare for one great challenge: how to *integrate* our new immigrants into the rich American fabric.

Integration has always been the cornerstone of American progress.

Throughout our history, millions have come here, looking for a better life.

And they didn't just find it – they *made* it. They created it through a wonderful merging of their cultures within the American mosaic.

Immigrants have *always* expanded America's foundation of freedom and opportunity while adding to its richness.

Now it's our turn. When we win an earned path to citizenship – and we must – it will be an opportunity, not an accomplishment.

Make no mistake, for literally centuries, Hispanic Americans have tried hard to be just that – Hispanics and Americans. Today, the newest members of our *familia* continue in that tradition.

When Latino radio stations activate our communities, they magnify America's tradition of peaceful protest; when Senators Menendez, Salazar, and Martinez take the oath of office, they open doors for thousands of Latino public officials; when *La Opinion* sponsors a presidential debate, it elevates our voice in the great media marketplace; and when Alfonso Soriano hits another one out of the park, he stands on the shoulders of Hank Greenberg and Jackie Robinson.

And when Latinos register, participate, and vote, we embrace and elevate America's greatest value – the constant yearning to refresh our democracy.

We have begun the journey. Now our goal must be to imagine America 20, 30 years from now ... what do we want it to look like? Let's dream together about the America we would like to see.

We should learn from our history. We know that 100 years ago, during the last great wave of immigration, people didn't step off the boat and immediately integrate.

100 years ago, Americans responded to the dual forces of immigration and industrialization in unprecedented ways. Through public policy, we created universal public education, followed soon by the adult education system. From city halls to Congress, governments advanced education, protected workers, and finally gave women the right to vote.

Last century, philanthropy and citizen action created the settlement house movement, to help immigrants integrate, and the modern public library system, to give all of us the gift of reading.

We need the same kind of bold and decisive action now, as we face the new forces of immigration and globalization.

Let's build on the great partnerships we developed to pass comprehensive immigration reform – labor, business, civil rights groups, religious institutions, conservatives, liberals, and everything in between - to make the push for integration succeed in the 21st century.

Let's not stop there. What can we do, just as people, as Americans?

We can follow the example set by the nearly 300 Affiliates of the National Council of La Raza which are helping immigrants learn English; ensuring their children graduate high school ready for college; training people for better jobs; increasing their access to health care; and helping them buy their first homes.

We can help a high school student navigate the college application process. Help a struggling family open a bank account. Register people to vote – not just fellow Latinos, but Korean-Americans, immigrants from Africa, and anyone who is new to the American experience.

I guarantee you that these investments, large and small, will pay enormous dividends, just as they did 100 years ago. Today's immigrants may look or sound different but they are just as committed to our ideals and they want to be part of this country just as much as our immigrant ancestors.

These are men and women who are crowding into classrooms, camping out overnight, and waiting up to two years just to learn English. These are men and women who have fought valiantly and died bravely in Iraq and now are waiting patiently for a shot at citizenship for themselves or their families.

The “American Dream” is not part of history or an abstract concept to them, it is real and it is tangible. They are working hard to achieve it and they

have already seen great progress in their own lives and the lives of their children.

I'm going to leave you with this. A few months ago I was at a very rare night out at the movies with friends. The movie ended late, 10 or 11 p.m. at night, and we stopped at the ladies' room. Being so late, we were re-routed around some familiar "wet floor" signs. As I waited for my friends, I could hear someone singing in Spanish and I recognized the song. She was singing "*Desde cielo una hermosa mañana* – from the heavens comes a beautiful morning."

Imagine a woman cleaning a bathroom late on a Friday night and she was singing such a happy song. That's the kind of passion and joy immigrants bring to their work and to this country. The song referred to a beautiful morning but I think she was singing about her belief in a beautiful tomorrow.

Her unbreakable spirit and unbridled optimism should be a reminder to all of us of the very essence of America's promise –that our best days are not behind us, they are yet to come.

Gracias.