

This Bond of Common Faith

I want to first thank the City of San Diego. You have greeted us with open arms and all of us appreciate the generosity, good will and passion with which you have welcomed us in your beautiful home.

I am very pleased to be speaking at what is consistently one of the most popular events at our Conference, our Latina's Luncheon. The issue of Latina empowerment is one that is near and dear to my heart. Throughout the years, this event has showcased some of the Latino community's most prominent leaders and role models. I am especially looking forward to today's panel and how it resonates with what I want to speak to you about today.

Our panelists are not politicians. They are artists, filmmakers, journalists and writers. Yet, the issue of immigration and the rise of anti-Hispanic sentiment have deeply affected - and continue to permeate their work. It is just one more example that shows no corner of the Latino community has been unaffected by the anti-immigrant wave of hate.

I am so happy to see you all here today. We do have much to celebrate.

This is the fortieth anniversary of the National Council of La Raza.

For forty years, this institution has played a significant role in strengthening America by promoting the advancement of Latino families.

- Our NCLR Homeownership network has helped more than 25,000 low-income American families purchase their first homes and has provided counseling to more than 145,000 families.
- NCLR and our Affiliates have built a network of health clinics and lay health-educators that in 2006 alone, provided care and disease prevention to nearly 100,000 people.
- In education, we have long championed making early childhood education more accessible to Hispanic children. Our charter schools also provide quality education to more than 25,000 Latino children a year.
- And during our forty years, NCLR and our affiliates have helped millions of Hispanic immigrants fully integrate into American society, by providing English-language training, civics classes and assistance with naturalization and voter registration.

We *also* have much to celebrate *as a community*.

Latinos continue to play a greater and larger role in this great country. Our singers top the music charts and our athletes perform at the top of their sport. We have a greater presence in the movies and on television with such stars as such as Eva Longoria, Jimmy Smits, Roberto Rodriguez, and Jennifer Lopez.

We have more leaders in business and the military and more leaders in Congress than at anytime before in U.S. history, including three senators: Mel Martinez, Bob Menendez

and Ken Salazar as well as 29 members of the House of Representatives. And for the first time in our nation's history, a Latino, Governor Bill Richardson, made a concerted run for the presidency.

We should also celebrate those whose names we don't know, yet who serve in ways great and small. Our teachers, our police officers, our firefighters, our doctors and nurses, and our ministers and priests. The people who prepare our food and clean our hotel rooms, those who work on our farms and factories, those who work at home and those who raise our children. And the people who are fighting for our country.

Each contributes to their communities every day and paves the way for the next generation to achieve the American dream.

We have much to celebrate both as an organization and as a community. But, if this year has taught us anything, it is that we still have much left to do.

Not everyone rejoices in our success. The vitriol and hate that surrounded the immigration debate this year was a stark reminder that our road is long and filled with obstacles.

Voices of hate demonized our community with labels like invaders, illegals, anchor babies, and swarms. They falsely claimed immigrants bring crime and disease to our country. They say that immigrants are a threat to our culture, our way of life and even to the sovereignty of our nation.

Such labels and rhetoric are not new to our community. We have heard them before. What *is* new: is how much of their hate-speech is being parroted on the nightly news and by a number of politicians in both political parties.

I personally went on Lou Dobbs' show to make the case about the hateful rhetoric and engage him in restoring some civility to the debate. His answer was to try shouting me into silence.

I am here today, to tell you that we will not be cowed and we will not be silenced.

This year, we started a campaign to expose the hate groups for what they are and to combat hate speech where it raises its ugly head. We are using this campaign to educate the public about hate groups, hate speech and its consequences - because we know that words have consequences...and hateful words have hateful consequences.

It is no surprise that hate crimes against Latinos are up 35 percent over four years. Hate groups targeting Latinos are up 48 percent since the year 2000. Two-thirds of Latinos say that the failure of the immigration bill has made life more difficult for Latinos overall and roughly half say that it has affected them personally.

The voices of hate have responded by saying, "But, we're not talking about immigrants. We LOVE immigrants! We're only talking about *illegal* immigrants."

Make no mistake. This is about all of us. Most Latinos aren't immigrants. The vast majority of Hispanics in this country are U.S. citizens or legal residents.

But, you can't tell that just by looking at us.

Ask Jesus Garcia, a legal resident of Texas who spent more than 30 hours in custody for appearing to be undocumented.

Ask the Chief Financial Officer of Micro Solutions Enterprises who was picked up and illegally detained along with 100 other legal Los Angeles residents when his company was raided. He asked why only those who looked Hispanic were being questioned. So far there has been no answer.

Ask 17-year old Justeen Mancha, a U.S. citizen, who emerged from her shower to find ICE agents with guns in her living room, shouting for "her papers" and looking for what they called, "illegals."

Ask Baby Tomassa of New Bedford, Massachusetts who was separated from her father by an immigration raid. For every two people deported, one U.S. citizen child is left behind. So far, more than 13,000 American children have been separated from their parents as a result of our misguided immigration priorities.

The humanitarian crisis being perpetrated under the name of enforcement needs to be recognized for the national tragedy that it is.

Our nation's immigration laws need to be enforced. But, what is happening today with these raids is an assault on civil rights, common decency and basic human dignity.

It is outrageous that only the workers are targeted in most immigration raids while the owners and managers of plants go unpunished.

We are better than this. America is better than this.

Forty years ago, in the year NCLR was founded, on the day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, Bobby Kennedy gave a speech at the Cleveland City Club. It was exactly two months before his own life would be taken.

He said then, "When you teach a man to hate and fear his brother, when you teach that he is a lesser man because of his color or his beliefs or the policies he pursues, when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or your job or your family, then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies - to be met not with cooperation but with conquest, to be subjugated and mastered.

We learn, at the last, to look at our brothers as aliens, men with whom we share a city but not a community, men bound to us in common dwelling, but not in common effort. We learn to share only a common fear - only a common desire to retreat from each other - only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force.

As a nation, we have let the voices of hate stymie real solutions to the immigration crisis. We have let them sow fear and terror in a population that has lived peacefully and productively within our borders for years and poses no real threat to our country.

It is time to take back the debate. It is time to make our voices heard. It is time for us to restore common sense and human decency to this equation.

- Criminalizing immigrants -- has NOT worked.
- Forcing desperate people farther into the desert -- has NOT worked.
- Denying care and assistance -- has NOT worked.
- Raiding their workplaces -- has NOT worked.
- And, building a wall around this country -- will NOT work.

We support a solution that restores the rule of law, secures our borders smartly and effectively, strengthens our economy and upholds the values of faith, family and hard work that are the cornerstones of our democracy.

Many of those living in this country without documents have been here for more than a generation. Most have worked hard, paid taxes, lived productive lives and been good neighbors. They have become integrated into American society and would gladly become citizens if they could.

Will we continue look upon them as a threat? Or, will we begin to recognize in them our common humanity.

How we resolve their status will say much about who we are as a nation.

Bobby Kennedy concluded his speech in Cleveland by saying,

"But, we can perhaps remember - even if only for a time - that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short movement of life, that they seek - as we do - nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can.

That was Bobby Kennedy's vision forty years ago. And it is a vision that still speaks to each of us today.

Fulfilling that vision is why the Latino vote matters. And after this election, it will matter more. Our vote will be the deciding factor in who is elected President this November. We must choose wisely. Let us choose someone who has the courage to use his bully pulpit to quiet the voices of hate once and for all.

It isn't enough, however, to choose a President with courage. We must also elect a Senate with courage, a House with courage as well as state governors and state legislators who show courage.

To do this, NCLR has begun an unprecedented collaboration to mobilize the Latino vote across the country. This campaign is already succeeding at historic levels by producing more than one million new citizenship applications.

We are registering voters in a partnership called Ve y Vota with NALEO, SEIU, ImpreMedia and Univision. And, we have launched a major new initiative to improve Latino participation in the electoral process with Democracia USA.

This is an historic election. It is not only historic for the make up of the candidates who are running; it is historic for the role we will play in it.

For forty years we have talked about the day when we would have the votes to make a difference. For forty years, we have talked about the day when we could take our rightful place at the table of American politics. For forty years, we have worked and struggled for the day when our voices would be heard.

That day is here.

That day is now.

It is time for us to stand and deliver.

Our message is simple: we will not be demonized. We will not be scape-goated and we will not be ignored.

Sixteen weeks from today, on November 4, 2008, I promise you America will hear our voice loudly and clearly in state after state across this country.

My challenge to you is to help me deliver on that promise. When you wake up on November fifth and the votes are counted...when you look into the mirror...will you know in your heart of hearts, that you have reached out to your friends, families, co-workers, and neighbors about the importance of this election? That you have worked to empower our daughters, mothers, nieces, aunts, and sisters? That you have done everything humanly possible to register and to mobilize and turn out our vote?

Because that's what it will take to clear the landscape of hate. That's what it will take to determine our own destiny in this great country.

I'm counting on you...every one of you...each and every day from now until the election. And, so is everyone in this country who hopes to live the American Dream.

Thank you.