

Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association Keynote
November 20, 2014

I would like to thank President Karem (CAR-EEM) Friedman, Vice President Walter Menjivar (MEN-GEE-VAR), and the other officers and members of the Board of Directors of the Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association for honoring me today with this year's CHBA Achievement Award. I am very appreciative of this recognition, especially when I see the list of past awardees. To be in the company of Governor Malloy, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Hartford Mayor Segarra and others is humbling. Thank you very much!

As I looked at your website, it is clear to me that in the 21 years since CHBA was founded, your work to support young people—Hispanics, students seeking legal careers, and others—has made an important contribution to our Latino community and our state. In particular, I call attention to your mentoring programs in our schools, as well as your scholarship program for law students that began 17 years ago.

These efforts are uplifting the dreams and career goals of hundreds of young people who, as we all know too well, often struggle to escape the clutches of urban life, of generational poverty, and other social conditions. The strides you have made to help ensure fair treatment of minorities by our judicial system is another example of the invaluable work you are performing on behalf of the Hispanic community and the State of Connecticut.

This organization's commitment to community service is also heart-warming to me, as service to the community is one of the hallmarks of the liberal arts education we provide students at Eastern Connecticut State University. I feel at home among you today, not only because we share a common cultural heritage, but also because your mission and the mission at my University are so closely aligned.

In fact, I note that your scholarship fund is administered by the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving, which was one of the early benefactors of a special program we have created at Eastern to support students from Hartford; the foundation continues to be one of the program's chief financial supporters, and I will speak about it more in a few minutes.

I was asked to speak today about my own educational experiences and how my personal history has informed my work as a college president. Let me say that each of us has one or more people in our lives who has provided inspiration, support, and counsel as we have worked to be productive members of American society. Some of those people have been family members; others are teachers and professors. Such is my case.

I was born in the mountain town of San Sabastían in western Puerto Rico and moved to Newark, New Jersey, when I was eight years old. I knew not a word of English when I landed on these shores. But I was fortunate; I brought with me the values and spirit instilled in me by my maternal grandmother back in Puerto Rico. My father taught me the importance of education during our early days in Newark, and his own commitment to providing for my family also will never be lost on me. Through my parent's sacrifices, I went to an outstanding Catholic high school for girls, and was accepted at Montclair State College, perhaps the best state college in New Jersey at the time. There, my freshman English professor gave me one-on-one tutoring to help me improve my writing skills, which I believe was the "boost" I needed to persist and graduate.

These three examples are just some of the people in my life who have supported me, and of the opportunities I have been afforded. I have taken these values forward in my own work as

an educator, knowing that every student has potential and deserves to feel valued. If students are given opportunity and support, they will succeed.

I know all of you have similar examples in your own lives, and I suspect that there are many young Hispanic attorneys in this state who feel the same way about you. They will never forget what you have done for them.

But not all students receive the same opportunities or support. I want to spend a few minutes talking about the history of Hispanics in Connecticut—the challenges and hurdles they have faced and still face today, and how we can do a better job of providing students of color, especially those living in poverty in our inner cities, with the support they need to go to college. Whether they become lawyers or pursue other career paths, our young people deserve an opportunity to improve the quality of their lives.

When I arrived at Eastern in 2006, I was not surprised to see that the challenges that my own family had faced in New Jersey were the same challenges that Hispanic families have faced for decades in this state.

In the early years, most Latinos migrating to Connecticut came from Puerto Rico, seeking a better economic future for their families than they had experienced in their homeland. They worked in factories, making rifles and munitions, or in tanning factories and for furniture makers. After World War II, migrant workers from Puerto Rico and other Caribbean countries were recruited to do seasonal farm work in Connecticut. They pruned trees, planted tomatoes, and picked mushrooms.

The biggest draw for Puerto Rican migrant workers was the tobacco farms of “Tobacco Valley,” which ran from Hartford to Springfield, Massachusetts—more than 200 tobacco farms covering 2,700 square miles.

Is there anyone here who has family members from those days? **(SHOW OF HANDS)** The tobacco farms attracted thousands of workers from Puerto Rico. Some workers slept in barns on flimsy cots, 50-60 to a barn. Others lived in camps in northern Connecticut and southern Massachusetts surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards.

Workers faced with 12-14 hours days, seven days a week, with no overtime pay. Deductions for meals, health insurance, and other expenses often took as much as two-thirds out of a man’s paycheck.

Eventually, the tobacco farms closed down, and migrant Hispanics moved to Connecticut’s cities. Hartford may be the city with the most startling changes. In 1950, the city had a population of 177,000, and 93 percent was white. In 2010, Hartford’s population was 125,000, a loss of 40 percent from 1950, and only 18 percent of the city’s population was white; 40 percent were African American; and Hispanics, hardly visible in Hartford in 1950, were 46 percent of the population.

As their numbers have grown in Hartford, Hispanics continue to face high rates of unemployment, poverty, crime, and low educational achievement. In 2010, Hartford had the second highest percentage of unemployed Latinos among U.S. cities, and the city’s unemployment rate was almost double the state average. And Hartford is the second poorest city in the United States, with more than 40 percent of the children in Hartford living below the poverty line.

Hispanics in Hartford are not alone in overcoming the social, economic, and educational challenges they have faced since Puerto Ricans started arriving in the United States in numbers back in the 1930s. Another intriguing example of the struggle for social mobility and economic freedom is Willimantic, where my University is located.

Puerto Ricans began arriving in Willimantic as early as the mid-1950s, flown back to the mainland from the western highland towns of Añasco and San Sebastián—where I grew up!—to work for the Hartford Poultry Company and the American Thread Company. They worked hard, the wages were better than what they could make in Puerto Rico, and as U.S. citizens, they had no visa issues.

In the poultry company, Hispanics processed 30,000 to 40,000 chickens a day. It was dangerous, and people sometimes lost fingers in the course of their work. The American Thread Company was still Willimantic's largest employer in the 1960s, with 2,000 workers, and some departments were staffed entirely with Puerto Ricans; only Spanish was spoken on those floors.

Like Hispanics throughout Connecticut, Willimantic's Puerto Rican community felt culturally isolated. They couldn't find Spanish-language music records, had trouble finding familiar foods, and had to depend on each other to live normal lives. With little education, these workers had scant opportunity to advance in their companies. They weren't paid well, they lived in substandard housing, and the benefits of a college education were largely unavailable.

Today, Willimantic's Latino community, once almost all of Puerto Rican heritage, now includes large groups of Mexican and Guatemalan residents. They make up 65-70 percent of the school-aged population, and literacy remains a central issue in the education of these children.

While very different communities, Hartford and Willimantic are examples of a continuing struggle for economic equality faced by far too many Hispanics in this country. The Hispanic high school dropout rate is twice that of African Americans and three times that of whites. Hispanics living in poverty are twice the national average. The college graduation rate for Hispanics is less than half that of the general population. You have seen the data, and I could spend all day reciting more.

But is clear from the work that this organization does in mentoring and financially supporting students in Connecticut that you need no pep talk from me to continue to do the work in our community that you have been doing so well these past 21 years.

But I want to step back for moment to expand the context of your work and my work. Helping a young Latina to graduate from high school is not simply about taking care of our own. Funding a first-generation Latino youth so that he or she can attend law school and perhaps enter the legal profession is more than a contribution to your local neighborhoods and communities. The work you do to improve the lives of individual Hispanics is part of a much larger national issue.

For some time, we have known that the economic, social, political and educational gaps and disenfranchisement that has occurred in the Hispanic and African American communities are not race-based. The sociologists tell us that the better predictor of success or lack of it today is income. Simply put, people living in poverty—regardless of their skin color—have a difficult time pursuing and realizing the American Dream.

This is especially true in our inner cities, where more affluent white populations have long since escaped to the suburbs, leaving an urban residential core in decay.

We have almost 50 million Americans living in poverty and they share the same barriers to a better way of life regardless of whether they are Hispanic, African American, white, Native American, or from some other ethnic heritage.

What is disheartening is that our nation's poor—Hispanics, African Americans, whites alike—have lost ground in pursuing social and economic mobility over the past three decades, while our nation's wealthiest families have prospered, especially over the past 10 years.

While net family worth in our country has gone down 36 percent in the past decade, the net worth of the wealthiest top five percent of Americans has grown 14 percent. Going back further, in times past when the United States has experienced an economic spurt, income growth occurred across the spectrum. In the 1949-1953 bull market, 80 percent of the income growth accrued to the bottom 90 percent of Americans; the wealthiest 10 percent enjoyed only 20 percent of the income growth. In the past five years, as our nation has recovered from the recession of 2008, the bottom 90 percent of Americans have not seen any income benefit from that recovery; the top 10 percent absorbed all of the income growth from the recovery plus 15 percent of the wealth of the lower 90 percent. This income disparity is at the heart of Connecticut's Achievement Gap.

Connecticut has the largest gap in the academic achievement of its K-12 students in the nation. The gap between students of color, urban students, and those from low-income families and their white, suburban, more affluent counterparts is evident in all four areas tested for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — reading, math, writing, and science — and at all 3 testing levels — 4th, 9th, and 12th grades.

Worse yet, the gap in performance grows wider as our children progress up the grades. When the latest test scores came out in 2011, Connecticut Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor called the lack of progress “shameful.”

While family income is the chief determinant in predicting academic performance, Hispanic and African American children, especially those in Connecticut's inner cities are most at risk and exhibit the largest academic achievement gaps among low-achieving students. The children of Connecticut who are at the bottom of the achievement curve are more likely to drop out of high school, much less likely to graduate from college, and more likely to live below the poverty line. All of them deserve better.

Hispanic students suffer the additional barrier of language. Do any of you recall the landmark *Aspira vs. New York Board Education* case in 1974? This case, along with others, spurred passage of the federal Bilingual Education Act of 1974, which directed that students whose native language was not English be given bilingual instruction so that they could learn English.

We still have work to do on English language instruction in Connecticut, and it is critical work to be done. More than 75,000 Hispanic families in our state speak only Spanish at home, yet **if a Hispanic child enters first grade without knowing English, he or she is a year behind the day they walk in the door.** By fifth grade, that gap is two years.

Our challenge is that the demand for bilingual education has outstripped the supply of certified teachers. In the past eight years, we have added 9,000 students in Connecticut who need bilingual instruction, yet the number of certified teachers in that time has dropped 34 percent. In addition, experts are telling us that the statutory requirement of 30 months of bilingual instruction is not enough time to successfully build a child's verbal, written, and reading skills. How important is literacy? With it, our young people have a chance of completing high school and going to college. Without it, their future narrows like a tunnel at night.

There is a financial element in this equation as well. If Latinos and African Americans graduated from college in Connecticut at the rates of their white counterparts, it would generate \$8 billion more in personal income a year, and hundreds of millions of dollars of state income tax revenue. In addition, for each person with a college degree, the public costs of unemployment benefits, public healthcare costs, and welfare is reduced \$1 million over the person's lifetime.

And in southern New England, where it is predicted that half the workers will be minorities by 2020 and two-thirds of all workers will require some form of college education, the achievement gap has become an economic imperative. So what will you do about it? Let me tell you what we are doing about it at Eastern.

We have several summer programs to help high school students transition to college. We have a one-stop tutoring and advising center that serves almost half of our student body each year. And we have the highest percentage of minority faculty of any college or university in Connecticut—including Yale, including UCONN—everybody!

But the program in which we have seen the most dramatic impact is our Dual College Enrollment Program with Hartford high schools, the program that the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving has been so supportive of in the program's eight years. **(Elsa's own words.)**

We are proud of the Dual College program, just as the Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association should be proud of the work it is doing to provide educational opportunity to Latinos and other young people. Your work to positively impact cultural isolation, language barriers, and other social conditions that exist for Hispanics in our state is commendable, especially as it relates to growing the numbers of Hispanic lawyers practicing their profession in Connecticut.

Let us not stop there. I would encourage each of you to get involved in educational reform in Connecticut, get involved in your local schools, and think about the link between growing income inequality, education, and the hopes of millions of Americans who deserve a better deal.

There are many economic and social reasons why we need to do a better job of educating Hispanic youth in this state and nation. Let me mention one more reason why we must educate all of our people. Education, a college education, is a powerful symbol of our identity as a free democracy. When diverse opinions are debated, differences are respected, and compromises are forged, we can best protect our freedoms and allow the rich diversity of culture and opinion that makes our nation strong.

As we move further into the 21st century, it is my hope that you will continue to encourage and support Hispanics to be part of the American Dream. Thank you for the honor of being this year's recipient of the CHBA's Achievement award, thank you for all the work you are doing in our communities, and thank you for allowing me to speak with you today. It has been my distinct pleasure.