

**“Tobacco Alley and the Thread City Blues:  
The Story of Latinos in Connecticut and the Power of Education”**

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First of all, I want to thank all of the people listening to this presentation today, including those with us here in Farmington as well as those listening in Brookfield and other locations through teleconferencing technology. I continue to be amazed at how technology has brought us closer together; we are truly a world community today. I hope my presentation adds to your own sense of what it means to be a citizen of today’s global society.

I also want to thank Margarita Baquero and Adriana Bacellar for inviting me to help Otis Elevators celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month through the Otis Hispanic Leadership Forum’s Career Development Committee. I applaud your company for the work it is doing to create a diverse workforce and to support a global perspective among its ranks. One of the core values of our University is inclusion; we work very hard to ensure that our students graduate with an appreciation and knowledge of other cultures. It is reassuring to know that they might work at an international company headquartered in Connecticut that also understands the importance of cultural awareness and global perspectives. In looking at the United Technologies website, your commitment to inclusion and diversity is clear, not only from the double-digit increases in minority representation you have seen in the past five years, but also from the various forums, including the African American Forum and Hispanic Leadership Forum, that you have created. So I thank you for taking advantage of this opportunity to learn even more about the Latino community and its heritage.

The title of my presentation today is “Tobacco Alley and the Thread City Blues: The Story of Latinos in Connecticut and the Power of Education.” I am guessing that most of you know about Connecticut’s tobacco farms, and of course, Thread City refers to Willimantic’s famous thread mills. I will be referring to both in a few moments, but with a relatively short amount of time to speak with you today, I am not going to give you a lengthy history lesson.

I do want to touch on some of the interesting things that have transpired since Latinos first started showing up in numbers in Connecticut, the challenges that have faced them, and the role that education plays in improving the lives of Latinos and other families in our state.

I realize I am biased in my role as a University president, but I suspect most of the people in this room have a college education. Therefore, I feel comfortable in saying that a college education continues to be the best pathway to professional success, regardless of someone’s background.

Let me give you a brief sense of my own background as I begin to go back in time to look at the history of Latinos in Connecticut. I was born in the western mountains of Puerto Rico in a beautiful town called San Sebastian. It is in the coffee growing part of the island. Neither of my parents had more than an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, but like most parents, they worked hard to support their family and they had aspirations for a better life for their children. This commitment to finding a better life for me and my siblings caused my father to immigrate to America. He ended up in Newark, New Jersey, and brought the rest of us there to live. My parents worked for many years in the Fedders air conditioning factory there, and I learned to navigate life in the housing projects.

One thing that my father told me every day was that getting an education was the best path I had to getting out of the projects and having a life I could be proud of. I will never forget this guidance or the support that my mother and father have provided me over the years. It gave me the confidence to go to college and the inspiration to become a teacher and later an administrator in the world of higher education.

I have been very fortunate, and could spend all my time today telling you of the many people who have helped me along the way. Some of those people were family members, others were members of the Latino community, and some were simply kind and generous people who wanted me to succeed. I certainly had barriers to break and obstacles to overcome, and I would not have been able to do so without that support. Only through the grace of God, the support of my family, and many mentors did I make it.

I can point to a number of other Latinas who have worked hard and also found support from their families and others to achieve appointments as college presidents — in Texas, California, Illinois, and Indiana, and even more Latino men in similar positions. Certainly as we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, we can also look to other professions to observe successful Hispanics. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor comes quickly to mind. Ray Suarez, one of the lead anchors at PBS is of Puerto Rican heritage. Felix Arroyo, chief information officer for AT&T, grew up on a ranch in San Antonio, where his father was a Mexican migrant ranch hand. Bill Perez, former CEO at Nike, was born in Colombia. Astronaut Carlos Noriega was born in Peru.

But as inspirational as these success stories are, they are not the norm for people of Hispanic heritage. I want to devote my time today talking about the average Latino person in Connecticut, and how we can improve their lives. The fact is, Connecticut Latinos have faced many hardships in their efforts to be accepted as members of the state's population.

Latinos, most of the in the early years from Puerto Rico, came to Connecticut on boats, on planes, by train and bus, seeking a better economic future for their families than they had experienced in their homeland. In the 1930s, people like Miguel Fernandez came to Connecticut to work in factories such as the New Departure ball bearing factory in Meriden; salaries there were three times what he was making in San Juan. Gumersindo del Río was one of six men who were recruited to the Winchester Rifle factory in New Haven; he became the first Puerto Rican political boss in New Haven. During World War II, other Puerto Ricans came to Connecticut to work for Electric Boat in New London and the munitions factories in Bridgeport and New Haven. Other jobs could be found in the tanning factories, and the hat companies, furniture makers, and other manufacturers in Danbury and other towns.

Following the war, and through a relationship between the Puerto Rican Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, migrant workers from Puerto Rico and other Caribbean countries were recruited to do seasonal farm work in Connecticut. They pruned trees on the tree nurseries in Meriden, planted tomatoes on farms in Cheshire, and picked mushrooms in Franklin, only 10 miles down the road from our campus in Willimantic. In the fall, they picked apples.

The biggest draw for Latino immigrants were the tobacco farms in "Tobacco Valley," which ran from Hartford to Springfield, Massachusetts — more than 200 tobacco farms covering 2,700 square miles. They attracted tens of thousands of workers from Puerto Rico. Some workers slept in barns on flimsy cots, 50-60 to a barn. Sanitation and plumbing were meager at best. Others, recruited by the Shade Tobacco Growers Association, lived in 14 camps in northern Connecticut and southern Massachusetts. The camps were surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards. Until the 1970s, only the men came up from Puerto Rico. By that time, work was available for women in the curing barns and entire families ended up living in the camps. As Edna Negrón, who later became an elementary school principal in Hartford, noted, the camps were "barren," with "nothing to do."

It was tough, hot, uncomfortable work in the tobacco fields. Néstor Morales, who came to Connecticut from Cataño in 1964, said: "By the end of the day, your back was hurting, your feet were hurting, your knees were hurting. And one time, we found a couple of snakes there."

In addition to difficult working conditions, the contracts signed by the migrant workers often were not honored by their employers. The contracts typically stipulated 40-hour weeks, with a minimum of \$1.60 per hour; time and a half for overtime; three meals a day. The airfare from Puerto Rico was to be no more than \$75 and could be paid off by the worker in installments. In reality, workers were faced with 12-14 hours days, seven days a week, and no overtime pay. Deductions for airfare, meals, health insurance, etc. often took as much as 2/3rds out of a man's paycheck.

One of the ways to face such obstacles was to invite friends and relatives from Puerto Rico to Connecticut to help share the struggle. The result was enclaves of people in Connecticut cities from the same areas in Puerto Rico. People from Comerío and Cayey ended up in Hartford; Meriden was the stopping point for many people from Aguada; immigrants from Ponce and Guánica came to Waterbury; and New London was a popular stopping point for people from Ánasco. I have discovered that many families from my home town of San Sebastian ended up in Willimantic — it truly is a small world!

In addition to the life of migrant workers in the tobacco fields and other farms, Latinos found work in the factories. In Willimantic, where my University has been part of the community since 1889, Hartford Poultry Company recruiters brought back workers from Puerto Rico to work as early as 1956. One of the poultry company's supervisors, Don Cheo, and his wife Eloa, would loan airfare to the workers, who arrived in town to stay in the Cheo's boarding house, paying \$20 a week to live there.

"Rosario" gives us some sense of that time in a 1984 interview: "We were 14 young girls who were brought here (from the south coast of Puerto Rico) to work at the chicken factory. The beds were in a line and two of us would sleep in each bed. (Our sponsor would) lock us up to prevent us from leaving the house late at night."

Rosario and her friends processed 3,000 chickens an hour: "The work was fast and sometimes the girls would cut themselves with the scissors."

"Norberto," a Puerto Rican who came to Willimantic the more typical way — Florida to New Jersey to Connecticut — also worked at the poultry plant. His work consisted of killing 40,000 chickens a day for processing: "I worked there two months; if I hadn't left, I would have died there."

The other large employer in Willimantic was the American Thread Company, which was Connecticut's largest employer in the 1890s. In fact, it was the largest plant in the world in 1892, and it is said that Thomas Edison's first project after inventing a commercial light bulb was to wire the thread company's Mill #2 so that it could add a night shift. The thread company was still Willimantic's largest employer in the 1960s, with 2,000 workers. It began to recruit Puerto Ricans for jobs that were paying \$2.34 an hour.

Workers at both the chicken factory and the thread mills would bring their lunches from home. Unlike today, there were no local restaurants in Willimantic catering to Latino palettes. In fact, years later, when "Dahlia" enrolled at UConn, her brothers would bring her rice and beans to campus so that she could eat at least one meal a day of the food she was used to eating at home.

Latinos also felt isolated. They couldn't find Spanish-language music records, had trouble finding viandas and other foodstuffs, and had to depend on each other to live normal lives.

With little education, these workers had little opportunity to advance in their companies, and also had to put up with a great deal of prejudice and resentment from French-Canadian, Polish, Italian, and other national groups who felt they had been passed over for work. They weren't paid well, they lived in substandard housing, and the benefits of a college education were largely unavailable.

Other discrimination existed. Here is a heart-breaking story. Edna Negrón was a dark-skinned Puerto Rican, while her sister was fair skinned. Her sister's hair was cut in the front of the salon, while Edna had to go to the back of the shop to have her hair cut by the "black women." This was 1958!

Latinos also had to deal with language barriers, and many Hispanics learned English the hard way — from newspapers, radio, television and comic books. There was also the residential segregation that continues to exist, with publicly subsidized housing creating Latino concentrations separated from the rest of the communities Latinos lived in. They have used these "villages within a town" to provide protection and support to their our families, but they are still reminders that Latinos are often treated differently.

The Church was also a haven and a refuge. Hundreds of Hispanic Catholic and Pentecostal churches have sprung up around Connecticut in the past 30-40 years.

Latinos have also suffered from low expectations. Several years ago, a Hartford Courant story described a senior at New Britain High School — we shall call him John — whose parents had come from a small rural community in Puerto Rico. He was 13<sup>th</sup> in a class of more than 800 students at New Britain High School, the highest ranking ever achieved by a Latino student at that school. Yet as John described it, "A lot of (teachers) think that if you're Spanish, you're probably not going to be a good student, and you get lumped in like that." John ignored those low expectations and is now on the path towards a career in medicine. His situation is not unique; one Willimantic Latino recalls that during her school years there, "If you couldn't speak English, they would put you in special ed."

These issues of language, cultural differences, discrimination, low expectations, and other challenges still remain, but the hard work of the Latino community across Connecticut is showing progress. In towns and cities in Connecticut, a number of public schools are seeing significant gains in

the academic achievement of minority students through higher expectations, innovative teaching practices, and stronger accountability measures. New Haven's Amistad Academy — a middle school whose students are 98 percent African American or Latino — achieved the largest performance gains between the 6th and 8th grade in the state. Hartford's Dwight Elementary School, with 95 percent of its students from low-income families, more than doubled the percentage of students within goal range on state achievement tests.

The Latino community has also been proactive in responding to the loss of manufacturing jobs in our state and nation. Many Puerto Ricans and other Latinos over the years were able to feed their families by working in American factories. Many of those jobs have disappeared overseas or been replaced by automation and other technology. Groups like the Spanish Learning Center in Danbury, the Spanish American Development Agency in Bridgeport, and the Spanish American Merchants Association in Hartford, New Haven, and Willimantic are working hard to provide training and support so that more Latinos have an economic future.

I have shared this historical perspective with you to make the point that Latinos in Connecticut have worked hard to be part of our economy and communities. It has not been easy, and there are compelling reasons why our state and nation must do a much better job of educating Latinos and other minorities. Here are some numbers that, when added together, offer a clear picture of what needs to occur.

- 80 percent of the population growth in Connecticut in the past decade was due to the increase in the Latino population.
- The population growth is more rapid among school-aged children; 13.4 percent of the total state population is Latino, but fully 17 percent of the K-12 population. In Willimantic, that figure is closer to 65 percent.
- 50 percent of all workers in southern New England will be minorities by 2020.
- 68 percent of all jobs in Connecticut by 2018 will require some form of college education.
- While approximately 30 percent of all Americans have a bachelor's degree, fewer than 13 percent of all Latinos do.

When taken together, these numbers make it clear that we need to graduate more Latinos and other minorities, not only because they deserve a better quality of life, but also because they will become an increasingly larger part of a workforce that needs to be better educated. At least in Connecticut, our work is cut out for us. Again, the numbers tell the story.

- The "Achievement Gap," the difference between the educational attainment of white, suburban, well-off children and their poorer, urban, and largely minority counterparts, is the subject of major educational reforms across our country. In no other state is the gap between the haves and the have-nots as wide as it is in Connecticut.
- What is more, despite whatever educational reform efforts may have been tried to date, the gap actually gets worse for African American and Latino children as they progress through school, as evidenced by National Assessment of Educational Progress testing. In Connecticut, the gap between the test scores in mathematics, writing, reading, and science of African American and Latino children and their white, presumably more affluent counterparts, worsens from grade four to grade nine to grade 12. While all groups seem to be doing better on the tests, Connecticut's educational inequity is the largest in the country.
- If education is a valid indicator of economic and social progress, it follows that poor educational performance translates into further economic and social inequity. Therefore, it is not surprising that national data shows significant economic and social disparity for people of color compared to whites.
  - While only 14% of the white population has less than a high school diploma, 41% of Latinos have not completed high school.
  - The high school dropout rate for Latinos is twice that of African Americans, and three times that of whites.
  - Approximately 12% of Americans live below the poverty line; the figure for Latinos is 21%.

- And while about 30 percent of all Americans have at least a bachelor's degree, only 12.7 percent of Latinos do.

Is a college education the principal answer? Certainly the challenges facing Latinos and other minorities are complicated and multifaceted. Nutrition, health, home ownership, and adult literacy are just some of the related social issues that must be addressed at the same time we look at ways to improve our educational systems. But clearly, education must be part of the solution, for the value of education in changing someone's life is clear and irrefutable. As Horace Mann said almost 200 years ago, education is "the great equalizer . . . the balancing wheel of the social machinery." Today, almost two centuries later, data backs him up.

- Employers pay a differential of about 74 percent for a college education, amounting to about \$1 million over someone's lifetime. In Connecticut alone, if we could bring the college graduation level of Latinos up to that of whites, Latinos and other minorities would realize another \$8 billion in taxable income, improving their own lives while helping to pay for public services in our state.
- It is also estimated that educating a person reduces social costs by \$1 million per individual over their lifetime — this represents lower unemployment compensation, health care, welfare and other public service costs.
- Finally, and this is national data, not just Connecticut, we would see a 2-4 percent growth in our Gross Domestic Product if we brought the educational attainment of our minority populations up to the average.

But we cannot expect a Latino or black child to aspire to and become a doctor, an engineer, an attorney, or an entrepreneur when their basic academic skills erode as they progress through our schools. So what can we do? Here are a few thoughts for you to think about, as parents, as school board members, as activists in your own communities.

1. **Recommit to educational excellence in our local schools.** It means supporting school budgets. It may mean a longer school year. It certainly means that parents and other community members need to be a bigger part of the school day, as active participants not casual observers. And it means hiring and paying for better teachers. This is the most important aspect of improving educational outcomes, according to most experts. In fact, in Massachusetts, Texas and elsewhere, students' performance when taught by the top third rated of teachers was 600 percent higher than those students taught by the lower third of teachers.
2. **Support Pre-School for all children.** Children with pre-school are 30 percent more likely to finish high school and twice as likely to go to college. As part of this, we need to fund and support **Pre-School English Literacy Instruction for non-native speakers.** Latino children without English are a year behind the day they walk into first grade. Family literacy is a critical component of literacy programming; without English speaking in the home, any literacy instruction that takes place in a school setting is wasted.
3. **Encourage collaborations between K-12, community college, and university systems.** A great example of this is in El Paso, Texas, where the local school system, the local community college, and the University of Texas-El Paso have joined forces with local nonprofit agencies to energize the entire community around the task of improving the graduation rates of Latinos, who constitute 80 percent of the population in El Paso. In my own town of Willimantic, we are working with the school system, with Quinebaug Community College, and with others to provide pre-school literacy instruction, math tutoring in the middle school, and a pathway to college for minority youth who previously had not had access.
4. **Provide more scholarship aid to Latinos and other minorities.** Asking a poor student to take out loans to pay for their education is a disincentive for many to go to college. Almost 3/4s of Latinos high school students in a recent poll said the reason they couldn't go to college was because they needed to help support their families. A great example of what can happen when scholarship funds are made available is in Danbury. The Latino Scholarship Fund has raised hundreds of thousands of

dollars, with the result that 80 percent of all Latino high school graduates in Danbury are going to college.

- 5. Here is something you can do here at Otis, if you aren't already doing it. Support more internships for minority students.** We all know the value of on-the-job experience. Whether paid or unpaid, internships provide students with invaluable work experience and an opportunity to demonstrate their skills. Hiring them after graduation is a natural next step in the process.

Economic power. Social equity. Personal income. Reduced costs of public services. Tax revenue for our state. There are so many good reasons why we need to do a better job of educating Latino youth in this state and nation. But there is one more reason why we must educate all of our people. Education, a college education, is a symbol of our very identity as a free democracy. In many other nations, societies that are hardly free, you can only get into college with connections. In Turkey, for example, only one percent of the eligible population gets into college. Our meritocracy is far from perfect, but people from all walks of life can attain the highest academic ranks, based on their talent and their hard work, not their pedigree. I am but one example of that truth.

In the process of raising the educational attainment and competence of all Americans, we can protect our great democracy. In a vibrant, unfettered marketplace of ideas, where diverse opinions are debated, differences are respected, and compromises are forged, we can continue to protect our freedoms and allow the rich diversity of culture and life experience that makes our nation strong. As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is my hope that more Latinos and other minorities in this country will be allowed, encouraged, and supported to be part of the American Dream.

I have shared a lot of numbers with you today, but I wanted to leave this one for last. This is data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and it is the kind of information that will tug at your heart. Conclusive, scientific data indicates that at age nine months, all children show the same mental acuity. All children, period. Regardless of race, the employment level of the mother, whether or not the mother has a parental partner, the mother's income or the mother's educational attainment. The same mental acuity. In fact, the only factor that seems to impact the level of mental activity is the birth weight of the child. Children born prematurely or with a lower birth weight are below average in mental agility at age nine months. That certainly speaks to the need for nutritional programs for pregnant women, but beyond that . . . we are truly all born equally. It is what happens as our children go out into the world that must change. It is time we make sure that children of color, urban children, and children from poor families are given an equal chance to succeed as they walk the path of life.

Again, thank you for inviting me to help you celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month. It has been my distinct pleasure to be with you today.