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First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Annual National Conference of La Raza
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
July 20, 1998

Thank you, Administrator Alvarez, for that kind introduction. But, more than that, for the work that you and your colleagues at the Small Business Administration are doing every day to expand the circle of economic opportunity for all Americans.

It is indeed a great honor and pleasure for me to join all of you today, at this annual gathering of the National Council of La Raza. For 30 years, your voices for freedom and equality, for justice and inclusion, have resonated across this nation. Every single significant social crusade of the last half century -- from voting rights to the expansion of educational opportunities, to fair housing and immigration reform and civil rights, and so much else -- has one thing in common -- the stamp of La Raza. Your values -- family, community, self reliance, responsibility -- those are not just La Raza's values, those are America's values. I thank you for standing up for them year after year.

I especially want to join in applauding your leader. You know, it is hard to think of enough superlatives to apply to your president. Raul Yzaguirre has had the courage, the vision, and the passion for equality, which has led La Raza for nearly a quarter century. Even though Raul traces his family roots in Texas back to the 1720's -- far before I could trace my American roots -- as a child he was forced to carry an identity card with him at all times as proof of his American citizenship. His story is the story of so many Hispanic Americans, who have turned obstacles and challenges into opportunities and hopes fulfilled -- and like so many others he has inspired so many young people to do the same. He has been a tireless voice in promoting greater educational opportunities for Hispanic children -- serving as the chairperson of President Clinton's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans. I believe not just Hispanic Americans, but every American owes him a great debt of gratitude.

I also want to acknowledge the outstanding work of your outgoing chair, Irma Flores Gonzales. Thank you very much for what you have done on behalf of La Raza. I want to welcome the incoming chair. Around the White House, he is referred to as Janet's older brother, but you know him as a very accomplished Ramon Murguia -- who will be becoming the chair and will be leading La Raza into the next century.

The theme of this conference is so appropriate: "Honoring the Past: Forging our Future." Isn't it fitting that you would gather here in Philadelphia, where more than 200 years ago, people responded to the ringing of the Liberty Bell, and came to hear for the first time the words of the Declaration of Independence. This is where a few years later, the founders of this nation affixed their signatures to our Constitution, enshrining in law the principles of liberty, democracy, and equality. Where we have been committing ourselves -- decade after decade -- to the fulfilling of

those principles, by ensuring that the promise of America is a reality for all Americans.

I am delighted to be in a city that recognizes the Constitution with Hispanic Americans. I am pleased that you have so many elected officials from here in Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania attending the conference. It is fitting that here in this city where our nation started, we would take stock about how to honor the past, and forge our future. As some of you may know, I am working on behalf of a Millennium project sponsored by the White House Millennium Council. I have just returned from a trip that took me from Washington through New Jersey and to Massachusetts and New York -- where I asked Americans to think about how we save America's treasures. Those monuments, the documents, those places that tell our story - - who we are as Americans, what we stand for, and who we want to be. I visited many interesting places from the laboratory of Thomas Edison, to the home of Harriet Tubman --who led so many slaves to freedom. I watched proudly as our country made the commitment to save our Star Spangled Banner. And I visited with clan mothers from the Seneca Nation. I want to make clear that America's history includes every kind of American. It is not only in the places that I've named or visited so far, but it is in the ancient adobe churches in New Mexico, and the San Miguel Mission in Santa Fe.

Our history is in the lives of efforts and accomplishments of Hispanic Americans. Some of them are famous in this nation we honor; some of them are only known to their families and generations that have gone on. We need to be sure that as we take stock of our past, as we honor our past, we ensure that every American appreciates the many contributions of Hispanic Americans. Just think of where this country would be, who would be shut out by our system, without the pioneering legal work of Mario Obledo, who helped pull down so many of the barriers of discrimination throughout the Southwest. Who could imagine America's struggle for human freedom and dignity without thinking about Cesar Chavez, and his courageous crusade on behalf of the poor and the dispossessed? [Applause over remarks]

As I continue my work on behalf of saving America's treasures, I look forward to bringing to public attention many of the treasures that many of the natives from our Hispanic past that need to be included. [Applause over remarks] History is still being made. What countries might still be at war, or torn apart by fear and hatred, without the work of United Nations Ambassador, Bill Richardson, and all that he has done to make our country and our world a safer place? We hope that Bill Richardson will be the next Secretary of Energy, and I hope that happens soon so that he could bring his talent to a number of very important tasks in our country. Think about the talents of Cabinet members like Administrator Alvarez or Henry Cisneros or Frederico Peña. Many others, who in this Administration are making history themselves. [Applause over remarks]

I couldn't possibly mention all of them, but I must mention a few because of my personal relationship with them. Maria Echaveste has been a friend of mine for more than 15 years. I recruited her into the campaign in 1992 -- I'm not sure she knew exactly what she was getting into. She grew up in California -- the child of farm workers -- and because of her extraordinary

achievements, first, in the Department of Labor, then in the White House. She is now the Deputy Chief of Staff for the President of the United States and she briefs the President every morning on what is going on in our country and the world.

As I just said, I care deeply about the state of our children and young people, and I was delighted that, last Friday, the President announced his intention to nominate Patricia Montoya as the commissioner for Children, Youth and Families at HHS. She will be overseeing Head Start, welfare, child support enforcement, and other issues critical to the health and well being of all of America's children.

I am proud that this President is committed to making his administration reflect the diversity of our country. That means that he's not only placed Hispanics at the highest level of his Administration -- but has also appointed more Hispanics to the federal bench than the past two presidents combined. He's had 12 years to do it, and he has done it in five and a half years. Yet the Senate -- as many of you know all too well -- has refused to act on many of these appointments. That means that every day that goes by, our Judicial system and Americans are deprived of the skills of people like Sonia Sotomayer -- up for the Court of appeals in the 2nd Circuit, Richard Paez -- nominated for U.S. Court of appeals in the 9th circuit, and Jorge Rangel -- nominated for the court of Appeals in the 5th Circuit. Let's put these qualified Americans into their position, so that they can begin to administer justice for all Americans. I hope that the Senate acts quickly to confirm these extraordinary nominees and give them the positions they are entitled and qualified for.

Now, many of you know, it's certainly becoming the topic of some national discussion, that the Latino community is the fastest growing ethnic group in our nation. A recent report confirms that there are now over 10 million Hispanic children under 18 -- and soon -- as early as seven years from now -- Hispanics will become the nation's largest minority group. [Applause] Now that's very exciting news, but it also suggests some challenges and opportunities that can only be taken by those of you who are her today, and the people you represent. Never before have you been in a stronger position to work to improve the future of your families, your community, and your nation. Never before -- as we move towards this new century and millennium -- has education been so critical to fulfilling that future.

Hispanic families have long recognized the importance of education as the gateway to opportunity; and they know that when education is married to responsibility, it does become the recipe for the American dream. I also know that for too many of our young people -- living in inner cities or barrios throughout our country -- that dream is not yet a living reality in their lives. They do not yet respond to the call of action -- "Leer es poder." It is that call to action that we must continue to repeat over and over again -- reading is power, education is power. Without it, you cannot possibly be successful whether you are Hispanic American, African American, Asian American or any other kind of American, because the 21st century will be ruthless. It is a demand that all of us do what we can to get the education and skills necessary to compete in the global economy.

I have seen first hand, and I know, that so many of the lives here, if we turn out the lights and ask people to stand and tell their story, we would be here for a week. There are so many stories about parents who sacrificed, how great parents encouraged, how siblings did everything possible to make sure that every child in their family would get the education necessary. I know first hand about the story of one of my top aides -- Patti Solis Doyle. She has worked with me ever since 1991. She comes from my home town in Chicago, where she was born to Mexican immigrant parents in a poor neighborhood -- one of six children. Her mother only made it through sixth grade. And her father had only a 3rd grade education, but he understood the importance of making sure his children were educated; he held down three jobs from time to time. Both of Patti's parents were proud to become American citizens and determined to take advantage of the opportunities this country offered. They believed -- and it is still as true today as it was years ago in their house in Chicago -- that education was the key to a better life. Patti's father would say over and over again to each of his children: "you must always value yourself." Your values must be enhanced by the education you can achieve for yourself. Patti went on to college, leads a productive life and holds down a very important position. She recently had her own child -- and she will pass on that same love of learning as her parents did for her.

Yet, we know, in a recent report from here, that is not happening in every family even today. The good news that just came out in a report of educational attainment is that African American students are now graduating from high school at the same rate as Caucasian Americans. Latino children are still dropping out. You know better than I do, the cultural and familial reasons why children still drop out. You know better than I how we must do everything in our power to reach every family -- every mother and father -- to persuade them to stand behind their children's education as Patti Solis' parents stood behind hers. It may take three jobs, it may mean stretching very slim resources that the family has, but it is an investment in the future. You cannot forge the future in today's world without education.

I know that you are going to release a report this week -- "Latino Education: Status and Prospects" -- that reveals the seriousness of the education gap that exists today, and underscores the tremendous urgency for action. The gap of learning and opportunity not only hurts individual young people, and not even just holds back their families, it hurts all of us. It weakens America's chances to make sure every American has a productive future. How do we forge a future for all Americans when Latino children today are more likely to enter school with significant disadvantages, and less likely to be promoted to the next grade than other children? When today, as many as a third of Latino teenagers drop out of high school, and don't finish college? How do we move forward as a nation, when today, too many of our children are being left behind, deprived of the opportunities they need to participate fully in the growth and prosperity of America? The report not only lays out the challenges before us, it also offers a blue print for what's working.

I want to thank La Raza for bucking the trend that only tells the bad side of the story. There is a lot of good stories out there of schools and teachers and communities coming together to make sure children are educated. I have seen that in my own time. A few years ago, I visited

a school that is ensuring that Latino children succeed, an elementary school in one of the poorest areas in the San Fernando Valley. The vast majority of students are Hispanic, and, in the past, student achievement was at an all time low.

Finally, parents and teachers and business leaders and others in the community who cared about these children and said "enough." We know what will work; we just have to apply ourselves. So they did -- that school became a charter school. The parents and the teachers--they took action. They got rid of the crack house that was down at the corner. They made it possible for parents -- without any education themselves -- to feel welcome in the school because they'd show their respect for who they were: the parents of a child. So all of a sudden parents began to come into the school, volunteering their time, everybody worked together. Now there are computers in the classrooms, children wearing uniforms, parents volunteering as tutors. Academic achievement has soared, and this school has recently been named a National Blue Ribbon School -- the pride of the community.

Now, there are many schools like that that I could talk about, but there are not enough. That is where we all need to work together. We need to make it clear that children can learn; that all children have talents; that all children can contribute. For years, La Raza has made them a central commitment -- from the enrichment programs you started in the community-based projects, that you work on with AmeriCorps and other partners. I believe that we need a partnership in order to improve educational opportunities for our children. I believe that you have shown how to do that. You know as well as I that this is not a matter that should be or can be left to the private marketplace which has never valued poor children ever. We need to be sure we make the public school system work. We need to make sure it works well as the time passes.

I am certainly aware that many people have discovered Hispanic communities. Many leaders have come to talk to you. They have talked to you about an education agenda and their plans to create more jobs and greater opportunities. But I am reminded of something my mother and father taught me as I was growing up -- watch what they do, not what they say. [Applause]

Every child in America deserves a world class education. The administration under the President's leadership is pushing such an aggressive education agenda -- that agenda includes 100,000 new teachers. I don't know how many of you have ever taught or spent a lot of time in a classroom in the last few years. But in our poor schools, there are sometimes 30-35, even 40 children demanding the attention of one teacher. In our suburban schools, children are going to school, throughout their entire school year, in portable bathrooms. If we have more teachers in the classroom, then we as a nation are putting our resources where our rhetoric is. We're saying that we want to be sure that every child gets that attention through a teacher that that child needs. It is far more important that that child gets that attention from a qualified, passionate teacher if English is not the child's first language. [Applause]

The federal government pledge to hire 100,000 new teachers is similar to what the President did when he said that we could lower the crime rate if we put 100,000 new policemen

on the streets. And guess what? He was right. We have now put 76,000 police on the streets, the President has worked within his balanced budget to ask for the other 24,000. Crime has gone down. But it is still too high in many places. We are finally on the mend, seeing we can work our way out of this problem with the right kind of strategy. There are no [Applause over remarks] President from completing his plan for 100,000 police on the street. That makes no sense to me. When something is working, let's not change. I have faith and confidence that 100,000 teachers would have the same results in our classrooms.

We also need, as the President has advocated, to help build new schools and modernize the old schools. I have been to schools where the classroom is falling down, where the windows are broken, where the restrooms don't work. And we expect our children to feel good about themselves? They know better than that. Those poor children going to those decrepit schools know, despite the rhetoric, they are not valued, and we need to end that. [Applause over remarks]

The President wants to promote more public school choice --like the charter school I visited in the San Fernando Valley; create higher standards so that all of our youngsters know what they're aiming for, and will continue to open wide the door to college through Pell Grants and Hope Scholarships.

In an unprecedented commitment to boost the educational opportunities for Hispanic children, the Clinton Administration has requested more than \$600 million for the Hispanic Education Action Plan. It is a comprehensive new approach that will help Latino youngsters master the basics of reading and math, and help them, and their parents learn English, finish school, and prepare for college. Now, this education agenda cannot be enacted unless Congress voted to enact it. I urge the Congress to make this commitment to educate all of our children -- with a special commitment to educate Hispanic children -- on the top of our priority list. We cannot wait any longer for Congress to pass and implement a strategy that would work.

These young people -- who are waiting for classrooms that are overcrowded, who are hoping for a chance to engage in public school choice, or go to college if they can afford it, who have come here from many countries around the world -- know how important it is that they are successful in America. Teaching them English, as Education Secretary Riley has so often said, is one of the great tasks of nation-building. We want every child to be able to speak English. Does that mean that children should give up their native tongue? Of course not. It does mean we must demand the best of programs for all our children. [Applause] That's why the administration is committed to doubling federal funds, from \$25 to \$50 million, to meet the increasing demands for trained and certified teachers. We cannot afford to enact extreme measures that would simply cut off bilingual education and the opportunity that it provides for our children. [Applause]

We are taking other steps as well, to improve educational opportunities for Latino children, from a toll free line to make it easier for Spanish-speaking callers to get the information they need, to 200,000 Spanish-language copies of the Education Department's guide, "Getting

Ready for College Early.”

If we are to forge a future for all of our children, then every college classroom, every corporate board room, every elected body, must reflect the diversity that has always made this nation the strongest and most vibrant nation in the world. I hope that each of you will think of ways that you individually and for organizations, such as La Raza, can make sure that everyone in public life on the local levels--on the state levels and on the federal levels--is held accountable for what he or she is willing to do on behalf of education. The most important issue for America as we move into our future.

If we are to forge a future for all, then every child needs a safe, healthy, stimulating start in life. We now know how critical the first three years are for a child's brain development -- and for how that child will grow and learn for a lifetime. That's why the President is calling for a major investment in the Early Learning Fund -- seeking to double the number of infants and toddlers in Early Head Start programs -- and proposing the largest investment in quality, affordable child care in our nation's history.

If we are to forge a future for all, then every child in America needs to grow up healthy -- and every family in America needs to have adequate health coverage. Yet right now, there are 10 million children without health insurance coverage. I know that Hispanic children remain grossly under represented when it comes to that coverage. This Administration committed \$24 billion in last year's balanced budget to provide health care coverage to millions of uninsured children.

Even when you are able to get a law passed, and the President wants to invest \$24 million in children's health, we have to have your help in getting the word out. Through every way you can, please, let families and communities know that in every state there will be a program for uninsured children. Some children will be enrolled in the existing Medicaid program, others will be enrolled in a separate children's health insurance program. No mother or father, grandmother or grandfather, should be unaware of what is available. Unless parents and family members know about this expanding health care, children will still go without the care they need. So, please, get the word out. We would like to see by the end of the year 2000, 5 million fewer uninsured children -- and many of those will be Latino children whose parents will finally have the piece of mind to know they could play sports without worrying about getting hurt, chronic conditions like asthma can be taken care of, emergencies, accidents, illnesses can also be taken care of. Please help us make sure every child is enrolled.

If we are to forge a future for all, then every family must be able to benefit from the expanding economy. As you already heard from Administrator Alvarez, we are making the Hispanic community a top priority for expanding economic opportunity. When the President ran in 1992, he said he would work as hard as he could to make sure 8 million new jobs were created. Some people said that he should never have make that promise because it is very hard to keep. Well, today, five and a half years into the Administration, over 16 million new jobs have

been created, and 40% of those new jobs are filled by Hispanic Americans. [Applause]

If we are to forge a future for all, we must protect the most vulnerable in our society. That means not denying legal immigrants the benefits they've worked for -- and deserve. [Applause] When the President signed the Welfare bill he promised to restore the egregious cuts in benefits for legal immigrants made by the Republican Senate. And thanks to the tireless work of so many of you, he was able to fulfill that promise. Last year's balanced budget bill provided over \$11 billion to restore and provide Medicaid benefits to hundreds of thousands of legal immigrants. Last month's Agriculture bill contained over \$800 million to restore food stamps to 250,000 legal immigrants, including the elderly, the disabled, and 75,000 children. [Applause]

I want publicly to thank La Raza for the work they did -- particularly Cecilia Muñoz who worked very hard to pass the [Applause over remarks] initiative.

If we are to forge a future for all--then, we must have a fair and accurate census. According to the Census Bureau, the 1990 Census missed 8.4 million people, and undercounted Hispanics by 5%. As the President has said after the census, "It's not about politics, it is about people." We need an accurate census to determine who we are, and what we need to prepare all our people for the 21st Century.

This is no time to retreat on our nation's fundamental commitment to education and economic opportunity. This is no time to forget our common values. Today, as we face a new century and a new millennium, we are facing a stark choice: will education be available primarily to those whose families can afford to send their children to college? Will we begin to close the doors of economic opportunity and pull up the ladders that many of us have been fortunate to climb?

Or will we -- true to our own values and our own history--recognize that we must continue to invest in our young people and their futures? To be sure that every young person -- no matter whether they live in a border town in Texas or in the heart of the city in L.A. or Boston -- will have the chance to realize their own American dream?

In these times of possibilities and challenges, we should all remember, we are a nation of immigrants -- people of diverse beliefs, cultures and opinions -- bound together by our common faith in democracy and our common commitment to our children -- the next generation. This country has survived and thrived for more than two centuries because those who came before us were willing to take risks -- often against great odds because they believed there was a better future.

I can recall as Aida was introducing me -- and I wrote about this in my book, It Takes a Village -- as a young girl growing up in the suburbs in Chicago, which may be impossible for many to believe now because of how that city has developed -- I lived right on the edge of farmland. Every spring and summer into the fall, migrant workers would come to pick the crops.

Their children would come to school with us. Through my church, I began babysitting for children in migrant camps on Saturdays, so that the older children could also work in the fields.

Nothing in my life before the age of twelve had ever prepared me for that experience. I loved the children; I loved playing with them, reading stories to them, and running around with them. What I remember most, is how at the end of the day -- when those old buses would drop off the mothers and fathers and the older brothers and sisters -- the children would light up. They would begin running towards their parents. About halfway down the road, you'd see mothers and fathers and big brothers and sisters scooping up these little children. Sometimes scooping up two because a 7-year-old might have carried a 2-year-old to get there just as fast as her legs could carry her. I remember watching that scene and thinking to myself -- everybody has the same dreams; everybody loves their children; everybody wants the best.

I was only twelve, but I've never forgotten how for me that was a significant, changing moment in my own growing up. Then, some years later -- because of the good work of a wonderful minister in my church -- we would go down to the inner city of Chicago where we would have exchanges with young people from African American and Hispanic churches. We would sit in basements of churches, and we would talk about what their lives and our lives were like. Many of them had very different experiences than mine, but I found, I heard, I saw, I felt the common inspirations that bound us together, and how lucky we all were that by whatever means we all found ourselves in America.

All of you who are gathered here today, part of La Raza, have risen to the challenge that has always been given to every generation of Americans -- to do what you can to fulfill the promise of opportunity by taking responsibility, and by giving back to the community that helped you along the way. You have put education and economic opportunity at the top of your agenda. You have placed the highest value on civic participation and have urged your fellow Americans to use their votes and raise their voices on behalf of themselves, their children, and the future.

I cannot think of any more important words as we move towards the end of this century. Yes. Let us honor the past in our own individual lives, our own stories, our own memories -- those who came before, helped us have a brighter future. The best way to honor the past is by forging a productive, confident future for every American child. If we want to keep faith with the promise of this nation, started here in Philadelphia, over 200 years ago, then we must forge a future in which the Liberty Bell rings for all Americans -- so that every child is valued and respected in the family in which that child is born. Every child get the attention, the discipline, and the love and guidance that every child needs to grow safely. And every child can attend a good school with teachers who have the time and the training to give them the attention they need, that every child can gain the tools to succeed in the 21st century.

Children cannot vote; they cannot participate in the debates in the Congress. And that is why all of us must be their voices and use our votes on their behalf. Let us honor the past, and

forge the future in a way that makes it possible for us to look into the eyes of any little boy or girl, anywhere in America, and say we are going to do the best we know how to make sure you have the brightest teachers we can find for you. That, I think, is a dream we share in common-- that is a future we all see. I greatly appreciate all you are doing to make it possible, and pledge our continuing partnership on behalf of the children of America.

Viva la Raza!

Thank you all very much.