



LATINO CIVIL RIGHTS CENTER

AWARDS DINNER

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO

THURSDAY, JUNE 25, 1998

Hyatt Regency Hotel

400 New Jersey Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20001

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(8:20 p.m.)

MS. ROANE: It is the pleasure of my first duty to introduce Attorney General Janet Reno.

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

GENERAL RENO: I want to congratulate the recipients of the awards for their very good work in this community, as well as the work of the center for its tireless efforts to protect and vindicate the rights of Latinos in the metropolitan area, and to do more than that, to help build a community.

The LCRC's record of fostering education and promoting citizenship and addressing immigrant-related employment discrimination and police misconduct is one of which we can all

be very, very proud. I applaud the significant contributions of the award recipients, for they represent what a community and community service is all about.

The poor, in distinct but not separate ways, represent the best of community involvement, community redevelopment, justice for the sometimes forgotten in Government employment, finance, religious, and social institutions. Each represent key ingredients that must work together to ensure effective community change and interaction.

It is so important that we applaud community-based solutions and community-based organizations like the LCRC. You bring important issues to the table and ensure that we do not leave any one person behind.

When I left the community I loved in 1993 so suddenly to come to Washington I thought I would lose my sense of community, but instead I have come to love another community, a community that I walk through and have gotten to know, a very special city, but it reminds me that community is where the solutions to this Nation's problems lie again and again and again. It is in community where you give children the opportunity to grow in a strong and positive way. It is in a community that you come together to understand the tensions that divide you and to work through those tensions and conflict resolution to bring people together. It is in communities that we find our answers to the future. It is in communities that we give children a chance to grow positively.

How do we do it? We tend to sometimes think of affirmative action in law schools and colleges and yes, we must make sure that there continues to be diversity in the law schools and in the colleges.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: But we must also make sure that our children, before they get to college, before they get to law school, have equal opportunity for an education that can prepare them for a future, equal opportunity for proper educare in those first formative, critical years.

If we look at the building blocks of community and take them one by one, strong and healthy parents, children with proper medical care, children with proper educare.

Now, remember that word, because we talk about child care in those early years, but if 50 percent of all learned human response is learned in the first year, if the concept of reward and conscience is developed in the first 3 years, what good are all the prisons going to be if the person doesn't understand punishment?

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: What good is the university going to be if the child doesn't get the foundation of education that can take them on the way to college?

Let us make sure that in the communities we love we work together to put the building blocks in place one after another, without leaving the chink or the cut in the wall that causes it to crumble.

It is fitting that the LCRC, an organization formed in the midst of unrest and violence, is working so hard to ensure that the underlying causes of community discontent are addressed before they get out of hand. I know how important it is. I have been in a city I love, watching a horizon burn. I have seen violence. I have seen unrest.

I have seen people hurl all sorts of epithets at me saying I caused it as a prosecutor, I should resign, and I said, well, I have got to run for office, and that is going to be the best way of getting me out of office, and besides, if I were to resign, that would contribute to anarchy.

A month later, qualifying closed and nobody ran against me. My mother said it was because nobody wanted the job.

(Laughter.)

GENERAL RENO: But then I went out to the community and in long nights, in many halls and many houses, people hollered at me, and for the first hour it would be shrill and critical, and then by the end of the evening people would be coming up to me with a pat on the elbow or a hug, and it got quieter and quieter, because we worked through and developed an understanding and resolved the disputes and helped to understand the criminal justice process.

Government is very complex, but all I can tell is what you have done for this community is so critically important, and I salute those of you who have been there from the beginning, and those that have come along to contribute to understanding, understanding that only comes from people talking together, working together, speaking out against wrong and working together to solve the wrongs of the world. Don't give up.

One of the things that you have done is to make sure that people understand the joy of the marvelous qualities, the splendor of the diversity of this city. We must find common ground in that diversity to make our community stronger, and while we may have differences, we must approach these differences with tolerance and mutual respect.

I watched the same city that gave you so much trouble and then welcomes me back

when I come home, I watched it in another perspective, because I was born there 60 years ago July 21st. It was a sleepy little city that tourists came to after the war. It did not have much distinction, and then suddenly something happened while I was away at school.

More and more you heard this Hispanic voice. More and more you saw little Havana grow before your eyes, and then suddenly you began to see the creation of a great, splendid, international city that attracted other people from all over the world. You watched institutions begin to grow.

Yes, there were sometimes three steps forward and four steps back, but there was growth because of the contribution of my friends, my Hispanic friends who came with an appreciation for art, an appreciation for music, an appreciation for good food, and suddenly there were great Cuban restaurants all over Miami.

(Applause.)

(Spanish spoken.)

GENERAL RENO: Miami's strength, Washington's strength is America's strength. When I go to communities and see neighbors that are isolated each from the other, I do not see strengths.

When I go to communities and see neighbors reaching across ethnic and social and racial boundaries coming together to discuss the issues of crime and improving the education of their children, strengthening the local economy, I see a stronger, better community, and I see a stronger, better Nation. I applaud your efforts --

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: -- to reach across ethnic and cultural and racial lines, including your recent seminar with the All Souls Church to discuss race relations between Latinos and African Americans. Only through open dialogue, however very, very difficult at times, can we progress.

As all of you are well aware, we have an awesome task ahead of us as a Nation and as a community. No nation has the diversity or enshrines the value of liberty and equality as we do. Immigrants have come to this Nation from so many places and for so many reasons, and these immigrants and their descendents add to our society and give it strength, but sometimes they are hurt in the process.

My father came from Denmark when he was 12 years old. He spoke no English. He has his funny Danish clothes and second generation Danes in Racine, Wisconsin teased him

unmercifully. 4 years later he was the editor of the high school newspaper, and for 43 years he wrote beautiful English as a reporter for the Miami Herald.

This is a land of opportunity, and he appreciated it and would be so proud today, but he always remembered how people hurt him and how they teased him, and he was one of the kindest men when he reached out to others.

We must reach out to all who come to our shores and make sure that no one teases them and hurts them, but that everyone, no matter who they are, are treated with dignity and respect and understanding.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: But how can we do that when we all still fuss and argue too often, and how can we do that when we still see the politics of intolerance in our national dialogue? This intolerance has been so noticeable in the attacks.

I think we can do it, though, because in the midst of that I have seen schools here in the District teaching conflict resolution and understanding, teaching the appreciation for diversity in elementary schools to middle school students and to high school students.

I have seen at Temple University people come together from at least 20 different backgrounds and talk out their issues, but look at what we have an opportunity to do here in the District, as you watch a little fourth grader help resolve, through mediation, a peer dispute, and you see how she has learned this from teachers who have learned it.

I have a dream that every teacher in America has course work in getting their teaching certificate in how to teach conflict resolution, how to teach children to listen and to communicate and to understand and to problem-solve, rather than resolving their conflicts with knives and guns and fists, how to teach teachers to teach children how to appreciate diversity. We can do it.

And then can you imagine in every basic law enforcement course teaching police officers to resolve a conflict not with force, whenever possible, but with a tone of voice, a manner, body language that builds trust, trust through community policing, rather than trust through divisive enforcement.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: We must make sure, though, that we have the capacity to enforce, and the Department is dedicated to try to do everything it can to make sure that there is no discrimination in the workplace, and that when we see it we take action against it; when we

fail to follow through, that we find out what happened and take steps to prevent it in the future.

That is what you are all about, the positive look to the future. Not the look to the past, but the look to the future of how can we solve our problems and take advantage of the strengths of this Nation for us all.

It is a daunting task sometimes, but I think we're up to it, particularly in this city, with the strength just in this room.

Our commitment is to educate employers, employees and the public about the rights and responsibilities under the law. One way we enforce our laws is by assisting employers in intervening in a cooperative way before discrimination takes place.

Conversely, that means education and outreach. For example, the Spanish version of Americans With Disabilities Act Guide for Small Business will be ready for distribution in two weeks.

I also know the Department of Justice has worked closely with your organization on employment immigration issues, and I commend that partnership, but I also ask that you let us know how we can do better and what we can do better. I want to try to do everything I can to reach out, and I ask a question that I can't get answers to tonight, but I know I will hear from you to get the answers.

If you were the Attorney General of the United States, what would you do to more effectively enforce the rights of this Nation? I ask that question wherever I go, and I get some wonderful answers from people, which reminds me that at the basis of what you're doing is trust in people, a belief in people, not in their elected officials, not in their cabinet members, but in the fact that this Nation is a Nation of people made great by its people through all of its history.

And lest anyone suggest that one contributes more than another, let me share with you the story of our Queen of the Condominiums. Her name was Annie Ackerman, and she was the voting strength in Northeast Dade County. All the presidential candidates came down to see Annie when they were preparing for the Florida primary, and somebody asked her what she thought about all the Cubans that had come to town, and she said she thought that was a right good thing that happened to Miami.

A prominent young mayor wanted to meet her, and so I said, I'll take you to meet her, and we met at Esther's Delicatessen in North Miami Beach, and she said, young man, speaking to the mayor, who was Hispanic, this Nation's strength lies in its tradition as a Nation of immigrants. I feel quite comfortable with what is happening, and the day I will become

concerned about this Nation, the day I will begin to worry about this Nation, is when it is no longer a Nation of immigrants.

We are from so many places, but that is our strength, but instead of prizing that, there are increasing efforts to limit the use of language, particularly proposition 227, the initiative on bilingual education in California. That initiative ended bilingual education for limited English students and provided for only 1 year of English immersion studies for all students.

The administration opposed the initiative, which passed California's election this month. I know that some in the Latino community favored the initiative, and I recognize that many Latino parents were dissatisfied with the educational opportunities available to their children.

Many want their children to learn English faster and better, but we believe that this one-size-fits-all solution in the proposition will result in fewer limited English proficient students learning English, lower academic achievement in other subjects, and greater frustration for students and parents.

California's 1-year time limit for English instruction will harm kids rather than help them, and will limit the ability of local communities and schools to tailor approaches that meet the needs of their children.

We must ensure that our children learn, and that our teachers are given different tools to help them learn in a manner that is fair and effective. Federal legislation now in Congress, sponsored by Representative Riggs, also has an overhaul of the Federal bilingual education program, but does not ensure that replacement programs will actively work, nor does it give local educators the flexibility to determine how best to achieve these results.

We strongly oppose that bill. We must concentrate our efforts on supporting local English study programs that set specific goals that are held accountable for meeting those goals, and give the flexibility to enable educators and parents to fashion programs that work best for their students.

We must also ensure that teachers have the knowledge and the skills to get the job done.

This administration is endorsing such legislation next year when Congress reauthorizes all elementary and secondary education programs.

Finally, our challenge is to foster policies of inclusion, not intolerance in our schools, in our communities, in our political process. To live up to that challenge we must be vigilant that the protections afforded are not curtailed in any way, and that requires a constant vigilance.

In law enforcement, for example, in years past too many police departments had no black or Hispanic police officers and few, if any, women officers. Now, we are changing. We have not just men in blue, but women in blue, not just whites but people of all colors, Hispanics, Haitians, people from all over the world, men and women our youth can look up to as role models and as mentors.

But even if we had inclusion, we also have to have police that care, and there are so many that care so much. I have been to schools where a community police officer is known on the campus, and I watch the kids come up and take his hand and hold his hand and walk down the corridor with him. They trust that police officer.

We have got to build a community where they trust all their police officers, and where police officers, instead of being the division of a community, are the glue that bring it together.

It is a marvelous experience to stand in the Great Hall of the Department of Justice and watch three young men from Dorchester, Massachusetts, stand there and tell the President of the United States how important community policing has been to their neighborhood, and how these two guys, pointing to two big police officers, are what got them out of trouble and got them on their way to college.

Policing can be so important for a community, both in its protection and its coming together, and we need to work through differences to make sure that police are given the opportunity to build trust and that they learn through programs and understanding how to build that trust. We can do it.

Somebody said, why did you do this job? You get figuratively beat up around the ears, you appear before congressional committees, and my response to him is, it is a wonderful opportunity to try to use the law to help people and to protect people, and to protect their rights.

People say, well, do you see things getting better? I came to Washington loving this Nation, and believing in it with all my heart. After having the chance to get to know another city and come to know another community that I now love, after having a chance to visit from Nogales to Portland, Oregon, to Minnesota, to Boston, to Bangor, to Miami, to Houston, to El Paso, I believe even more firmly in this Nation and in its future, and most of all in its people.

I believe in its people because of people like you who, instead of letting division divide us forever, come together and say, let's sit down and talk. Let's sit down and work it out, and if we can't do that, then let's use the law the right way, through litigation to solve our problems.

But you haven't given up. You believe in others. You believe in the strength of people, and if we all continue the spirit reflected in this center, we are going to move it this next century with a new feeling and a chance to change a culture, a chance to have kids who believe that they can resolve conflicts by talking to each other rather than with knives and guns and fists, with community police officers who believe they can bring people together rather than break them apart, with families that believe they can live together in peace without domestic violence.

We have a chance, because of efforts like yours, to change the face and culture of America towards peace. God bless you for all you do.

(Standing ovation.)

(Whereupon, at 8:40 p.m., the keynote address concluded.)