

# **UCLA**

## **Chicanx Latinx Law Review**

### **Title**

Fireside Chat: The Life and Legacy of Ambassador Vilma Martínez

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5jw0b6mk>

### **Journal**

Chicanx Latinx Law Review, 40(1)

### **ISSN**

1061-8899

### **Author**

Editors, Editors

### **Publication Date**

2024

### **DOI**

10.5070/cllr.v40i1.63725

### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2024 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

# **FIRESIDE CHAT: The Life and Legacy of Ambassador Vilma Martínez**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	185
I. WELCOMING BY LILA BURGOS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE UCLA LATINO POLICY AND POLITICS INSTITUTE. . . . .	186
II. NAACP AND LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATIONAL FUND. . . . .	188
III. MEXICAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE FUND . . . . .	190
IV. DEMOCRACY IN PERIL AND LATINA’S ROLE IN THE RE-BUILDING . . . . .	200
V. AUDIENCE Q&A: PATH TO AMBASSADORSHIPS, HOW TO KEEP FIGHTING FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, AND COLLABORATION AMONG LATINX GROUPS . . . . .	202

## INTRODUCTION



This transcript captures an interview with one of law’s greatest Latina leaders: Ambassador Vilma Socorro Martínez. The interview occurred at the inaugural Latina Futures: Transforming the Nation Through Law & Policy Symposium on January 21, 2024, at UCLA’s Luskin Center. The Chicana-Latinx Law Review’s Editor-in-Chief, Evelyn Sanchez Gonzalez, and Chief Articles Editor, Luz Murillo, had the honor and privilege of interviewing the Ambassador, specifically on two topics: her impressive civil rights career at the NAACP and MALDEF, and her thoughts on future leadership towards re-building democracy. This

transcript only captures a small portion of her massive contributions to law and the reader is encouraged to continue learning about her legacy. It has been lightly edited for readability. An audio recording is also available with UCLA's Latino Policy & Politics Institute.

## **I. WELCOMING BY LILA BURGOS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE UCLA LATINO POLICY AND POLITICS INSTITUTE**

Good morning, everybody. Welcome in, welcome in, you do not want to miss what's next. All right. So, this weekend, we have been listening to the testimonies of Latinos who are leading the nation's most pressing legal policy and advocacy work.

This work is fundamentally about changing the entire trajectory of our community's lives. So just thank you everybody for being here. Especially being a Latina in this country, many of us do not need to look far in our ancestry to see how our leadership of our mothers, our tias, our Abuelas, our comadres, is precisely what it took to land us in the privileged seats we're sitting in today.

And it's within this critical history, that there are lessons learned on what they did to survive, to overcome great obstacles, and to ultimately succeed, to thrive, and to lead. And we've heard about a lot of Latinas this weekend who have been the first, in their position, right? And we have a very important opportunity to hear from another first, next.

This morning, we have the opportunity to hear from a Latina who was the first woman to lead a nationally prominent Latino civil rights organization in the '70s, the first Mexican American chairman of a major university board of regents in the '80s, and who served as the first female United States Ambassador to Argentina in 2009 to 2013.

Among her many other landmark achievements. The Honorable Vilma Socorro Martínez became the first female President and General Counsel of MALDEF as a 29-year-old attorney in 1973.

Can you imagine being 29 in 1973, fighting to earn the respect of all of your tios? Unbelievable. So apparently, she looked so young at the time that no one would take her seriously. Yet, she knew that she had to earn and win the respect of her colleagues, and that it was a necessary step in mobilizing the collective power needed to tell the public who Mexican Americans are and why their lives are important.

Our team had the opportunity to meet, to meet with Vilma, and she shared with us several powerful leadership lessons from her life and she

emphasized that leadership is going to come at different forms, in different parts and times of our lives. She shared that while at the start of your career, it's going to be indeed about proving yourself.

As soon as you become a leader, creating an impact also requires admiring what others do well, and doing everything possible to help them succeed because their success is your success and as the collective success of us all. Her mastery and understanding this reciprocity also served the collective good when she assumed the role of United States Ambassador to Argentina at age 66.

It wasn't about proving herself at that point of her career, right, but it was about earning the respect of an entire embassy composed of over ten different government organizations, because their success was the collective success and represent, representing the entire United States. So she took the time to meet with every single staff member and listened closely to what they wanted to achieve.

Through our conversations with her, one of the things that became apparent was that listening very carefully is one of Vilma's superpowers. And over the course of her life, she sat on many powerful boards, committees and commissions and she worked hard to exert patience, to earn respect, to get to know the culture of every single organization she was a part of, and to use what she learned to engage in strategic tactfulness that is critical for understanding how to mobilize and advance key issues.

For us, listening closely to Vilma, we learned that we must own our own power, because especially, when we have had courageous and brilliant leaders like her be the first, it is our responsibility as the next generation to keep that door open so that we are not the last. I could stand here for a while and share with you how prolific Vilma's accomplishments have been for women, for Latinos, and for our country, but to learn from her as a gift, and for this next hour, I implore you all to listen closely, because within her wisdom and experience is a key to leadership that we need to face today's complex and systemic challenges.

So I want to welcome to the stage Evelyn Sanchez Gonzalez, Luz Murillo, and Ambassador Vilma Socorro Martínez.



## II. NAACP AND LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATIONAL FUND

**LUZ:** First, I have to say that I'm very thankful to be here and to continue this conversation with you Ambassador.

**LUZ:** Ambassador Martínez, you graduated from Columbia Law, and you began your career as an attorney at the NAACP, Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which is America's premier civil rights, legal organization, fighting for racial justice, with a special focus on advancing the rights of black people in America. Can you tell us a bit about your experience there?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, it was very exciting. It's where I learned to practice law, the beginning. They call it practice for a reason, you have to keep practicing, and I had the privilege of working on so many interesting cases. You know, the ones that are known, are cases like *Griggs versus Duke Power*, *Phillips versus Martin Marietta*, perhaps less well known, I also got to work on the Northern School Desegregation case, *Keyes versus the Denver Public School District*.

So it was just very exciting to learn from these brilliant, accomplished attorneys but, you know, you learn more than that while working at an organization that is doing all this advocacy. So, for example, at one point, I wanted to file a case that sort of was, you know, on the edge, if you will and I knew that the risk taker was our boss, Jack Greenberg.

The brilliant legal mind was the Legal Director, Jim. So I waited for Jim to be on vacation and then, I, I went to Jack to say, oh, Jack, you

know, this is a difficult case. We might not win it, but you know, the issue is so important, and I think we should file it. He says oh file it, file it. So right away, I file it before Jim gets back from vacation.

But as soon as Jim is back, I'm in his office saying, you know, Jim, we, we just filed this lawsuit. He laughed, because of course, he knew exactly what I had done, but he helped me make the case. And so one of the things Jack taught us, is one you hire people smarter than you are, because then, you know, you have a better chance of success, and you take risks.

You sometimes have to take a case because it's important and I did learn, you know, other things, unfortunately, that sometimes you win a case, but you don't get the result you want for your clients, and one of the examples is we all know Brown versus Board of Education 1954.

So I'm at the Legal Defense Fund. I arrived in 1967, many years later, but among the things that I did while I was there is I was sent to various jurisdictions in the south to implement what the Supreme Court had mandated in 1954. So it underscored the importance of you know, sometimes it's just going to take a lot of additional work to get the results that you want.

**EVELYN:** Thank you. How do you interpret your work on employment discrimination, affirmative action and school desegregation in today's legal landscape?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** You know, I, I think I've told you, I love the phrase, today's legal landscape. We need to remember that one, because what it means is that the issues, although they're the same, are different, I was listening to the voting rights panel yesterday and it occurred to me that in my time, the voting rights, discriminatory efforts were different from the ones they were describing yesterday.

So changing legal landscape, but you still have to be there and, and press your case, because. and you're going to hear me say this again, but it's important because I've come to understand that breathing life into our nation's ideals and goals is never done. I'm thrilled to be in the company of these brilliant law students, and all of you practitioners, professors, and also many different fields, because, you know, you have a lot of work to do.

**EVELYN:** Getting ready, we're getting ready.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** You know, one, before I forget, one other thing that, that I learned at, at the Legal Defense Fund, is how much you

learn when you think you're making contributions. I was asked to serve on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which was doing a study on the education of Mexican Americans in the southwest.

It was a five year, of course, unpaid assignment, right? But I learned so much, and it came in handy years later, when I did become head of MALDEF and then, luckily for me, when I arrived at the Legal Defense Fund, Pete Tijerina, who was the founder of MALDEF, was there from San Antonio visiting Jack Greenberg to ask him for help in starting a legal, Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, which started in 1968 and I have the privilege of becoming the liaison between these two wonderful organizations.

**EVELYN:** Ambassador Martínez yesterday, you shared such an insightful phrase with us, and I feel like it's worth repeating to the audience. Today's legal landscape is more sophisticated, but equally pernicious.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Pernicious. Yes, I did say that.

**EVELYN:** I think you had given us a, like the voting rights example, but I'm curious if you have other examples to share with us?

### **III. MEXICAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE FUND**

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, I think, you know, I'm going to talk about the voting rights example, because one of the major accomplishments of MALDEF, as I look back in my time there, my nine years as head of MALDEF, was going in and getting the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

It was up in '75 for renewal because they had a 10-year life. So, in 1975, it was up for renewal, and I had followed Jack Greenberg's advice and I had hired a very smart guy to be head of the Washington, D.C. Office for MALDEF. So Al Perez, calls me says, you know, the Voting Rights Act is up for extension. We, MALDEF, should go in for expansion. And I said, well, you know, why? You know, what, you want, you want to vote you register, you vote.

Al being smart, did not respond, but in the next few days, I don't think there was FedEx in those days, I get this packet of materials from Al Perez, studies that had been done by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights documenting voting rights abuses throughout, mainly Texas, but for example.

The registrar all of a sudden would run out of forms, even though the persons might have traveled, you know, many, many miles to get to the office, but the one that was more pernicious was on, on election day,

on Spanish language radio, they ran a public service announcement that unless, unless you were duly authorized and qualified to vote, you should not vote, lest you subject yourself to fine and possible imprisonment.

So today, you heard they're trying different things. You can't let people have water, you can't get to, too many mail-in ballots. You can only do ten or let us say. So, they're different, but it's, it's the same issue and it requires the same persistent advocacy.

So needless to say, Al was right, and we, MALDEF, went in to, for the first time, you know, to try to, to do this, to get the Voting Rights Act, which had been called the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever passed, not only extended but expanded.

And why was it called the single, most important piece? It was because it was credited with registering over one million black voters in the south, and resulted in the election of over one thousand black elected officials.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** So, so we, we did that.

**EVELYN:** Yeah. And I think what's noteworthy about that is that the 1965 Civil Rights Act is known as the most successful piece of civil rights legislation, yet it excluded Mexican Americans.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Yes, it did.

**EVELYN:** But you, but thanks to your work at MALDEF, you know, Mexican Americans are included in the new era.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** As we were saying yesterday, everyone, thanks to MALDEF's work and, of course, you can never do this by yourself. We talked about this also yesterday, which I think is worth sharing with the audience, because we talked about cross racial solidarity and, and that's an important lesson here.

As we geared up to try to get the Act expanded to cover us. I, of course, thought that the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights would support MALDEF's efforts. So I went to make my case at the Leadership Conference and unfortunately, Clarence Mitchell, who was then the head of the NAACP, he was so powerful, he was often called the 101st Senator, and he was opposed to having the Leadership Conference support our efforts.

We asked why? And he said, look, last time this Act was passed, people challenged the constitutionality of the law. If we amend it this way, it's going to invite another constitutional law challenge and it's so



important, we don't want that to happen. Now, fortunately, I've been trained at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, right?

Well, as a lawyer trained at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, I understand those concerns, but we know as lawyers, that if there were to be another challenge, there is what we lawyers call the separability clause.

So that even if the Chicano Latino Amendment fails, the Act stays in force. Well, I thought that was a very compelling legal argument, but it didn't take, it didn't, you know, succeed. So they did not support us, however, who did? The Japanese American Citizens League, which was a member of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Some of the labor groups also supported MALDEF's efforts. Later we went and asked the membership of the Congressional Black Caucus for their support, and they gave it.

The lesson here, I think, is we have to work at cross racial solidarity- it doesn't come easy. There can be honest concerns, right? They had an honest concern, I understood it. But it didn't prevent us from finding a way ultimately all to move forward, which we did.

**LUZ:** Yeah. I do want to just backtrack a little bit because you were selected as President and General Counsel of MALDEF becoming the first woman in MALDEF's history to run the organization. Can you speak a little bit to the goals that you have for the organization coming into your position as president and how did you strategize to bring those goals to fruition?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Okay. Well, you know, I'm going to be very candid about the goals. They're not, they're not overly interesting, but I think they're very instructive and important for those of you who might, at some point, lead an organization. So for me, the reason I wanted that job was that I felt it was very important for our community to have an institution to represent us.

So I wanted to be sure that MALDEF had a framework, which would survive any leader of MALDEF. That MALDEF had to find a way to stand alone. So what did that mean as a practical matter? As a practical matter, it meant a lot of different things. So clearly money. Okay.

What is the best framework to get money? MALDEF had been started with a Ford Foundation five-year grant. So clearly, we needed to diversify foundations, look for other sources of money from corporations and the public and the Latino community. So we had to put that in motion the, the money part and we had a contract also, by the way, with

the EEOC to train Latino lawyers in employment discrimination litigation, which was new at the time, fairly new.

So I went to D.C. to negotiate that. So you look for the different sources of funding, then you look at the staff, and the board. Okay. Is this the staff and the board that you're going to need to, to, to move this organization forward? And what I, what I noticed is that we had brilliant new attorneys, and a few experienced lawyers, and I thought we had to change that mix a bit, because you really need an experienced person to work with the enthusiastic new lawyer who might not understand, okay, you file a lawsuit today, but do you know how long it's going to take?

It could take years, and it's going to be a lot of money, before you get a decision. So we instituted a litigation review memorandum to analyze all of this before filing anything. So that was the part of the structure, but then program. Okay. Let's talk program. What does MALDEF want to do? It's going to protect the civil rights of Mexican Americans?

Well, does it want to operate in every field that we suffer in justices in? We couldn't. We didn't have that kind of money. So you step back, you analyze, where can we make a difference for our community? So we decided, education, employment, and voting. A few years later, we added a fourth major program area, which we called immigration, domestic crossover issues.

So that was, that was part of it, and so the other part is, the public didn't know what is a Mexican American in the '70s, but, but we, we knew, we knew that we were going to be the largest minority group in the United States, but nobody else knew that I guess.

So, so what do you do about that? Well, fortunately, I went and got a small grant to hire PIPR. Have you ever heard of PIPR? No one has, but it's the public interest public relations and their job was to make sure that MALDEF's issues were in the daily briefing that the President gets on his desk and that, and that articles about us appear in the East Coast media, because unfortunately, even today, the East Coast media runs the show. So that, that was another part of, of what we did.

**EVELYN:** Quick follow up to that.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Yeah.

**EVELYN:** As you mentioned, the public didn't know who Mexican Americans were, so I am curious about that. What did you come to realize that?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, you go and get facts and data, and you try to persuade the public in different ways. So you accept invitations to debate people at the association of the bar of the State of New York, I debated Governor Lamb, Washington, D.C. on the importance of Latinas. Then I had one, one funny, well, it's, it's funny, it's not really funny.

But, so here I am in L.A. making a speech at their town hall and I'm trying to, you know, present us. You know, we have not only the demographics, but you know, you, you can earn money like, from our community. So good. I thought, you know, I'm making a difference here. So all of the questions except one, that I got, dealt with Mexican Americans as? You want to take two guesses? Immigrants, illegal aliens, pardon me, and gang members.

I mean, that was their view of who we were. But it didn't stop me from going to other places and making the same pitch, you just have to believe in the importance of what you're trying to do and keep at it.

**EVELYN:** Of course. Yesterday, you also shared with us that MALDEF recently celebrated its 50th anniversary?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Yes.

**EVELYN:** We're curious about how you see, how you feel about that?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, I told you yesterday that, and, and I said to the MALDEF crowd also, that, when I first thought, about 50 years of MALDEF, part of me was very disappointed, because I had hoped that at some point MALDEF's work would be finished, would be complete. Well, I did think so.

But I had to reflect, right? I had to reflect, as we say. I had to reflect. And so, what I concluded is that this country, our country, has very lofty goals and ideals and it's not as if you meet them once or for an instant and it's done.

It's work that never, ever, ever ends, all of you know this. But, when you are celebrating a 50th anniversary, it does cause you to reflect and one of the things that I also thought about, Evelyn is that, you know, when I think about my, my time at MALDEF in '73 to '82, all right. So, it was education, employment, the vote, immigration. It's still that, isn't it? Right?

It's still that. Different manifestations, different incarnations, but it's still there and, and so it's so important that all of you dedicate your

very considerable talents to pursuing, it, to pursuing the definition of our country.

You know, this, the other thing we talked about is you, you are going to define what America is. What is it? What is it? It's under attack. It's under challenge, as we hear every day in the news, so we, we will have to define what America is.

Do we still believe in equal protection before the law? Do we believe in the rule of law? Well, we have to get ourselves out there and vote and persuade everybody we can get our hands on to get out there and vote. So, yeah.

**EVELYN:** You talked a little bit about the external challenges, right, you went out into the community and talked to everyone about who Mexican Americans are and the power that we hold. I am interested in knowing what challenges did you face in your role as president that came from within the organization?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, well, starting with when I ran for office, okay? For that, for that position Graciela Olivarez and I were the first two women on the MALDEF Board, and we were not docile, shall we say?

And so, you know, we, we did make a lot of friends on the board. And, and when Marion Obledo decided to step down, I was looking at the various people who were applying, and I didn't think they could do the job. And so I called this gentleman that I knew, who was a brilliant lawyer, and I was trying to get him to apply for the job, but he said, no, no, he said, I don't have the stomach for it and he said, literally, because I have all sorts of stories.

I couldn't push him further, right? Although, so, so then I'm complaining to my husband, you know, these people who are applying, they can't do the job. So, then Stewart says to me, okay, why don't you apply for the damn thing? And, and I'm thinking, oh, God, no, and I said, you know, they will never elect me. And so, he just looked at me and said, well, since when have you started thinking like that?

So don't ever think like that. So, my, my friends on the board learned that I was going to put my, you know, name in, they said Vilma, I don't know about that, but we could get you board chair, but, you know, President and General Counsel, mm, I don't know. I said, well, are you going to be with me or not? Right? Because I'm going to go for it. So in the end I did go for it and I barely won.

They never told me what the vote count was, but I'm sure it was close. Interestingly, because what we do talk about is leadership. The gentleman who became my board chairman, after I was elected, Gregory Luna, from Texas. Gregory did not support me. He wanted the other candidate, but once the board spoke, no one helped me more than Gregory to learn what to do.

So poor Greg would call me and he said, Vilma, I understand that you were in Denver, and you were speaking before LULAC, and you said this? I said, yeah, that sounds about right. And he said, well, you could have said, you know, this other way that was, you know, kinder, more diplomatic, whatever, and I said, okay, Greg, Greg, I promise next time, I will, I will do that, but that in itself was the lesson in leadership that Greg taught me. He helped me enormously.

And then well, that's the ones that I remember that they, you know, and you're, and you're busy proving yourself, which, which makes it more complicated, because it's very personal, at the same time, that you're trying to build all of this framework and whatever.

But then, you know, as you heard in the introduction at age 66, you know, fast forward here, I was asked to be Ambassador to Argentina and here I am in charge of a three-hundred-person embassy with a lot of different U.S. Government Agencies and locally employed Argentine national staff and this is not my field. I'm not a Foreign Service Officer.

I wasn't trained in, in diplomacy. I'm a litigator. Tricky. So, so a litigator who has to be diplomatic, right? Think about that. What was interesting to me is that because it wasn't any longer about me, except I wanted to do a good job, you know?

I wanted to do a good job of representing the interests of our country there. I knew I had to rely on, on these wonderful leaders and, of course, they didn't believe me when I said, you know, I want to hear what you want to say, what you want to do from agriculture department, commerce department, state department, all these different departments. What are your goals and how can, how can I help?

And so finally, they started to believe me, and we worked together to, we, we used to say we were going to recalibrate the relationship between our country and theirs to make it more robust and, you know, more fulfilling for both sides and, but, so that was, that was a very interesting experience.

**LUZ:** So going back to MALDEF.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Yeah.

**LUZ:** You experienced some, some challenges, but you also experienced a lot of successes. So, we're curious to know about what successes stand out to you the most?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** You know, thank you for that. Thank you for that question. I, when I reflect on my time there, I think of a number of things. Certainly the Voting Rights Act expansion, the other thing I think, I think a lot about is the, the Census Bureau. MALDEF had sued the Census Bureau trying to get us counted on the one percent form instead of on a sample basis.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** But we lost. We lost. But what do you do then? Well, you go to the Census Bureau, and they started a committee to advise them on the 1980 Census and I was asked to serve on that. And at some point, I chaired it and presented the testimony to Congress as to why, why we should be on the 100 percent form and that was successful.

So that's why today, I think about that experience, you know, in, in the sort of Administrative Law arena, working on committees, etcetera, that, that really can be so important. The other success that I feel very proud about, I'll mention two more. The other, but one is Plyler v. Doe.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** I mean, when I looked at that litigation review memorandum for that case, I knew it would go all the way to the United States Supreme Court. I knew we'd have to raise the money for it and, and I knew that it wasn't a surefire winner, but remember what I talked about the Legal Defense Fund, and Jack Greenberg, and taking risks?

I mean, here, the consequences were so immense that the risk was absolutely worth it and the investment to file the lawsuit litigated all those levels and thankfully, we got Plyler v. Doe. So that's the third area that I'm very proud of.

Plyler v. Doe, was a challenge to the Texas State statute, which denied undocumented children access to public school education unless they paid \$1,000 tuition per year per child, but we proved that would be unfair, because the parents of these children paid into the tax system that supported public schooling in Texas and, of course, we made the sociological argument that if you don't educate these children, who, for all practical purposes, come here, because their parents brought them here, you know, blameless in the eyes of the law.

Are you really, as a society going to say, we're not going to educate this group of people and, and lose out on what today, if you look today, at what the dreamers contribute to our economy, it's, I don't have the data on top of my head, but even the CATO Institute talks about how ridiculous it would be to lose all of that, all of that brilliance, and money that goes into the coffers of the United States.

So that was a very important case for, for MALDEF, and for our community, and interestingly, at that time, I was on the Board of Regents of the University of California and one of the ex-officio members, was the superintendent of public instruction Wilson Ryles. So, of course, I go up to Wilson, I say, Wilson, you know, we just sued Texas over this issue, and what are you going to do about educating these children?

He says, I'm going to educate them. I said, good. So that was good. Yeah. And, and then, I guess the last success that I feel very strongly about is the first one, we discussed, that when, when you set out when you set out to try to make these changes, it's very important to have a framework that that survives you, right?

**EVELYN:** Yes.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Yes. So I feel proud of the, the, that what I was able to do to help MALDEF develop that what I call an institutional framework. That's why the legacy.

**EVELYN:** Speaking of the framework.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Yeah. It can be hard as a leader to know when to step down.

**EVELYN:** I was sort of experiencing that as Editor-in-Chief of CLLR, but you do have to move on eventually. So we're curious. How did you know when it was time to step away and pass the leadership baton on to the next generation of MALDEF?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, I'll tell you it happened when I started, you know, I traveled 50 percent of the time. So when it started to feel like I wanted to throw up when I got on the airplane, I thought it was telling me something, okay, these are, these are physically, physically exhausting jobs and for those of you who are going to be litigators, and I've said this to Luz and Evelyn, people don't know this about litigators, because they just see you in court all, you know, dressed up and, and ready to go.

But you've got to be in good physical condition to do all of this, and you've got to, you know, be prepared and ready. So it's very demanding and, and, and I really, I felt, personally, I had done what I could or that I had made, the contributions I could and, and I, you know, one of the things that I also learned, and in this Jack was not a, a model, but that I felt or not that I felt many people within the Legal Defense Fund felt that he had stayed too long.

And so, when I went into the job, I had that thought, as well. So, so the combination of, you know, just physically, emotionally, it's time for me to move on and, and, and I told you something else that helped me reach that decision of when, and I forgotten about this until you asked me this question.

You know when I first became head of MALDEF, I went to get advice from a lot of people in New York and ACLU about what kind of structure would be best for MALDEF. I went to Dr. Ernesto Galarza from Stanford and, and his view was MALDEF should not try to be a national organization, but operate at the local level, because that's where the differences occur.

Then I went to visit Judge Carlos Cadena in Texas, to ask him when we were looking at the immigration, domestic civil rights crossover issue. I wanted his thoughts, because he, he, he was the brains, one of the brains along with Gus Garcia behind *Hernandez v. Texas*, which is the U.S. Supreme Court case that said Mexican Americans are a nationally identifiable group and a group entitled to equal protection before the law.

So I wanted to get the advice of this brilliant man about the fourth probe, fourth possible program area. He said something very interesting to me. He said, well, well, he said, you know, I would not do it, because I know how much work we have yet to do for citizens.

Yeah. He said that, but then he added, but then he said, but you know what? You and MALDEF are in charge of this and you need to think about it. And so, that's when I learned about the power of the inter-generational consultation, but, but the respect, you know, going both ways, right? And so I thought that was very important. So that helped me figure out it was also time for me to let you know, let other people, let other people do this job. (Laughter) Let them have some fun.



#### IV. DEMOCRACY IN PERIL AND LATINA'S ROLE IN THE RE-BUILDING

**LUZ:** Thank you for that, Ambassador. I do want to switch gears a little bit, because when we started the conversation you touched on, you know, this idea of democracy being in peril and this conference is taking place following a non-peaceful and reluctant transfer of power, due to the January 6 Storming of the U.S. Capitol. It's taking place at the tail end of a pandemic, and during an election year. Considering the significant challenges faced by the nation, what in your view, are the most pressing issues confronting young people today?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, you know, frankly, I think the most pressing issues confronting all of us, including young people, is the viability of our democratic form of government, given this attempted coup, we recently survived and the, and the ensuing and enduring political divisions of our country. I mean, we all have to work on that and, and we're going through a period where millions of Americans and much of one of our major political parties have resorted to bypassing the rule of law for the sole purpose of seizing or staying in power.

Thinking about young people in particular, I remember vaguely when I was young and we talked a bit about this. The challenge is people don't always take you seriously. So you have to, you know, fight to be taken seriously and I'll tell you something else, you're going to lose some of these fights, you're just going to lose, and what are you going to do about that?

When I think of the political policy decisions that, that we are going to face this year, this year, there's division and if you're on the losing side, are you going to say, oh, I can't possibly support them because they didn't stick with me on this issue?

Or are you going to be politically sophisticated with it? You know, what, I'm really unhappy with their position on whatever issue is close to your heart that maybe you don't get everything you want? Or are you going to say, you know what, the greater good from my point of view, in describing greater good, requires me to go ahead and, and support this candidate or the other candidate.

So I think it's very important that you stay involved, because, as I said, at the outset, you will be defining what America is for my granddaughter, who's here, so thank you, but you know, I'm serious about that. I, again, I did what I could to, to breathe life into our country's professed

commitment to equal protection before the law. That was very important to me, as a lawyer, as a person.

And so, I think that's a huge challenge for you and I think, unfortunately, or not unfortunately, just the reality is, we talked about this yesterday. In many ways, today, your job is much harder than mine was. I'll tell you why I say that. Sometimes, we see ourselves or we are told we are the other.

The other. Right? You're not mainstream, you're the other. Okay. Well, yes, to some extent, that's true, but today, today, you know, 50 years after I became head of MALDEF, we're not just the other. We're the owners. We are the owners of this enterprise. We are the owners of what the United States of America is going to be. We, we own it.

So you have this double barrel on you and, and you have to find clever, creative, smart ways to deal with being both, because you are both and, and I think, from what everything I've seen at this conference, you're up to it to, so.

**LUZ:** Ambassador that, that leads me to ask, how do you believe that Latinas in the law can actively contribute to addressing these challenges and shaping a more resilient and a more inclusive future?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, I think, I think today the same way that I thought 50 years ago, which is that we are a community, but we're individuals, and each one of us wants to do a different job. You're going to go be a public defender, you're going to go into private practice. Some of you will be teachers, some of you will be CEOs. Hopefully one of you will be president.

Yes. We belong everywhere and, and we should enjoy it. We should take ownership and that's, so I, I think, that's what I think.

**EVELYN:** Beautiful.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Oh, on that happy note, before I forget, because I didn't want to say this. I just thought about it this morning going over my notes. You know, when I was going on and on about you know, you're both the owner and the other, which is true, but the other complication is that you are also going to work at a time when so many of our fellow, our fellow citizens worry about being replaced or victimized and they're challenging programs such as affirmative action and DEI efforts.

So I, I, I know it's going to be hard, but as I said, I have, I have confidence in you. May I have one more parting thought?

**EVELYN:** Oh, please. Yes.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Okay.

**EVELYN:** We love it.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** So, so I had this parting thought, you know, it has been a real joy and privilege for me to work with Evelyn, and Luz on this assignment. It was wonderful to listen to many of you, in the different sessions covering so many different issues, I learned a lot and I've been watching my teenage granddaughters and their friends, equipping themselves, you know, to become informed, and productive members of our society, productive citizens. So I can only conclude that the future of our country is in very, very capable hands yours.

## **V. AUDIENCE Q&A: PATH TO AMBASSADORSHIPS, HOW TO KEEP FIGHTING FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, AND COLLABORATION AMONG LATINX GROUPS**

**EVELYN:** This has been an amazing experience working with you and being able to learn about your legacy, really, really grateful. We do have a few audience questions. We have a few questions, dealing with ambassadorships and figuring out really where to, where does one even start when you don't have foreign service experience, but if you were just kind of starting from scratch, especially, especially if you're, you're coming from like a less affluent background?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, you know, these are, there are very few ambassadorships, first of all, and there are fewer political appointee ambassadors, because most of them come from the career foreign service part of, of the world, our world. Some countries don't have any political appointee ambassadors, they're all career.

We have a mix. And so, you know, I don't, I don't know that I can advise you on that, except that it's probably important to be politically involved, even if you can't, if you don't become a major donor, I was not a major donor. I think I was interesting to the White House, because of the work I had done in these different fields, and I think also because at that point in time, you know, Argentina was had led, led by a woman, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. And so, there was a sense that she was actually looking for a woman ambassador from the United

States and the U.S. had never sent a woman ambassador and still hasn't, other than me to Argentina, or although many countries throughout the world didn't have women ambassadors there.

So all I can say is, is stay involved and make your interest known and, and, you know, hopefully the best.

**EVELYN:** So thank you so much. And we have another question asking about how do you recommend one pursues civil rights litigation career, given that the federal courts now are packed in a certain politically leaning way?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Oh that that's a very good question. So I'll just answer it by telling you my story. So we, we talked about the fact I became head of MALDEF in '73 and the all of you are too young to remember this, but I was told by my colleagues at Cahill Gordon, the law firm I was working with at the time, why would you even do this job because Nixon has packed the courts.

Okay. Well, you can't let that stop you. Bluntly, put, you just can't let that stop you. And, and I had the, you know, when I was the, this very young lawyer at the Legal Defense Fund, I was very frustrated that we couldn't make the big changes that I wanted to see, through, through the law.

And so I went to work with the New York State Division of Human Rights on their Equal Employment Commission, and then I went with the private law firm and got to work on the Pentagon Papers case, and that was exciting before I came to, to MALDEF and now, I've lost my train of thought. This happens when you're 80.

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** I think that answered the question. Thank you.

**EVELYN:** Thank you. Yeah. No, you for sure answered the question. Thank you, Ambassador. And there's another, there's a question in here. I hope I can phrase it correctly and then I hope I'm understanding it correctly, but I think it's getting to this idea of like how a lot of advocacy organizations first started out as being centered on Mexicans, but now they are inclusive of other Latinx groups. And so we're curious to know about how that collaboration evolved or how you've seen it evolve?

**VILMA SOCORRO MARTÍNEZ:** Well, you know, there still is the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund focused on Mexican American issues. There is what used to be the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Educational

Fund. I think they call it Latino Justice. Now, there is a Cuban American Legal Defense Fund in Florida. And we actually, we actually thought about trying to combine these at some point, but here's the issue, and this conference touched on it a bit. Yes, we're Latinos, but that's a big group. Puerto Ricans are automatically citizens. That's different from Mexican Americans who are mixed.

So we have citizens, we have permanent resident aliens, we have undocumented to or documentable, we have undocumented who maybe are not documented and that's who we are. So the legal issues can have different, you know, permutations and then the, the Cubans were political refugees with status, different status from these other groups.

So it's very difficult. So the, the only thing to do is to be respectful of these different approaches and work together where you can and there's a lot of overlap, obviously, and so people take advantage of that good overlap, frankly. And I know for example, you look at Latino lawyers or MALDEF, when they give those scholarships. They don't necessarily say you have to be Mexican American, you know, they look at the broader picture.

So, so I think there's a lot, there's a lot of very good synergy and working together and there should be more.

**EVELYN:** So, of course. Yeah, so that concludes the questions that I was given. I'm not sure if there are more index cards, but again, we want to thank you so much for this opportunity. So grateful.



