



Department of Justice

OPENING REMARKS

BY

DICK THORNBURGH
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

AT THE

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
NATIONAL HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH PROGRAM

WASHINGTON, DC
SEPTEMBER 19, 1990
MAIN JUSTICE BUILDING

Buenos dias. Today we have special guests at the Department of Justice. I would like to welcome Hispanic students who are visiting with us this morning from Lincoln Junior High School. While you are here, I encourage you to meet and talk with the men and women who make the Department of Justice such a great place to work. Perhaps you will consider one day joining us in public service -- an abiding and rewarding commitment to your community and country -- and one the prospects for which have been heightened by the actions of our Civil Rights Division in challenging redistricting plans which diluted Hispanic voting strength.

As you know from your American history classes, some of the most exciting tales tell of Hispanic explorers who crossed the supposedly drop-off ocean to discover that land which would become America. This great legacy -- leading to present day accomplishments -- lies behind National Hispanic Heritage Month, first established in 1968. It appropriately encompasses Columbus Day, when we annually commemorate those first intrepid Spanish adventurers and later missionaries who discovered much of North America.

Many stayed on, and over four centuries, many more have come to this country, especially from south of the border. Today, fully eight percent of our citizens are men and women of Spanish and Latin American heritage. Hispanic Americans represent a bright Spanish tile in America's multicultural mosaic -- highly

visible in the arts, science, education, industry, commerce and, of course, our federal government.

Hispanics in this Department serve as attorneys, special agents, analysts, support staff, and immigration officials -- so many, in fact, that with our 9.6 percent Hispanic representation, Justice continues to lead all federal agencies. Earlier this week, I administered the oath of office to Jimmy Gurule, our newest Assistant Attorney General. And that record is not only one of service, but one of bravery in the line of duty. In April, the first FBI Medal of Valor was awarded to Special Agent Edmundo Mireles, Jr. of the FBI, who, severely wounded in a Miami shootout, still prevailed over his assailants to save his fellow agents.

This year, the Department's Hispanic Employment Program Achievement Awards singles out those individuals who have been instrumental in furthering our goal of employment opportunity for some 8,000 Hispanics within the Department. But our commitment to equal opportunity extends beyond employment to education.

Let me talk for a moment about education, about "Excellence in Education -- Key to Our Future", the theme of this year's National Hispanic Month.

At the beginning of last summer, I taught a classroom of seventh-graders through the Justice Department's Legal Advocates in Education Program. I look forward to seeing the same students again at Stuart Hobson on October 4th. This program matches D.C. students with Department volunteers who act as mentors and tutors. Many Justice employees will use eight hours of administrative leave per month to participate in voluntary school partnership programs -- as their contribution to this year's program of "Education, Excellence -- Key to our Future".

It is such resolve -- and caring -- for America's youth that will secure America's future. The Hispanic Mentorship Program with Lincoln Junior High School is one such endeavor. Directed at assisting youth "at risk" in our school systems, this approach was initiated by the Department's Hispanic Employment Program Managers Committee.

As you may know, I chair the White House Domestic Policy Council, where we have discussed in depth how to prioritize educational opportunities for individuals of Hispanic origin, and have formed a Domestic Policy Council Task Force on Hispanic Education chaired by Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos. In regard to that, I would like to call your attention to a fine film to be shown here during Hispanic Heritage Month -- "Stand and Deliver." It is based on the true story of Jaime Escalante,

a math teacher at East Los Angeles' Garfield High who refused to write-off his inner city students as losers.

He successfully convinced eighteen Hispanic students that the Advanced Placement Calculus exam was their ticket out of the Barrio. Escalante made loud and clear his expectations of them -- that just passing was not enough. He calculates two futures on the blackboard, showing the truth that if they weren't willing to do math, they had better move along to woodworking class -- to build a shoeshine box for their limited life ambitions.

Sometimes all students need is someone who believes in him or her -- enough to make demands of them. I am pleased to announce that the first fifteen volunteers in our Hispanic Mentorship Program have already been trained. Mentors and students will be matched up within the next couple of weeks. If, as "Stand and Deliver" illustrates, a single individual can make a real difference in children's lives, just imagine what fifteen dedicated people can accomplish!

They will be asking -- no, demanding -- that students, such as those here today from Lincoln Junior High, make a commitment to succeed in life. The students in "Stand and Deliver" "deliver" because Escalante not only teaches them math -- he teaches them self-respect. As educators, parents and caring

citizens, we will all try to pose the same hard, but understanding, questions Jaime Escalante did: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life repairing other people's cars, or would you rather engineer and create them?" But these will be questions asked with confidence that through hard work and perseverance, life's aspirations are always attainable.