

Ladies and Gentlemen...take a look around you...in this room are represented some of the finest members of the media, some of the best writers, journalists and news people in this country and abroad.

Also in this room are leaders. That is correct, leaders. Leadership is defined as “the capacity or ability to lead.” Many of you in this room tonight have that capacity. Whether it is by pen, by radio, or by television, whether you are a writer, a reporter or a producer, all of you have the capacity to influence others, and lead through the work that you do.

Before you earned this ability, before you were able to acquire this capacity, many of you had to win the war against the insidious forms of adversity that we have faced in business and our daily lives. You are men and women who have summoned the courage, the spirit and the strength to forge ahead and say YES I CAN, in the face of NO YOU CANNOT.

As the Chairman of the Fundraising Committee for the Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, I am excited about our ability to effect change and the ability to effect change that resides today within this group. It is enormous, it is incalculable...and the urge to tap the potential that is in the room is irresistible...I warn you now that I will succumb to this temptation.

You have proven to be men and women who are able to summon a winning attitude to pursue your passions, to pursue your dreams and strive to reach your goals. And now, it is your turn to open the door for others.

We all know that in a few short years we will be the largest minority in the United States, and we will comprise nearly 25% of the population of this country. But let us not deceive ourselves, not even for a split second into thinking that these numbers automatically equate to success. Under closer scrutiny you will see that Hispanics are lagging behind economically, educationally, and politically, and THAT is what I would like to discuss tonight.

The Florida Hispanic Chamber is going to create an organization so strong and a political voice so powerful that we will rise above the conditions that keep Hispanics down. We will do this by concentrating on three themes; I call them the Three E’s.

“Educate, Elevate, and Empower.”

The first “E” is Educate. I think all of us here will agree that our success can be traced to one pivotal truth—the value of education in your life, and the role that education can play in the lives of Hispanic children here in Florida, and throughout our nation.

Sadly, the educational road traveled by nearly a million Hispanic children in Florida is a treacherous one. This road is lined with potholes and perilous detours often ending in barricades with ominous signs that read, “DO NOT ENTER.”

As the only Hispanic on the recently created Florida Board of Education, a critical issue on my radar screen is the unacceptably high rate of Hispanic high school dropouts. The number is a staggering 30% and it is increasing.

This means that nearly a million and a half children nationwide are being left behind, hopes dashed, dreams destroyed and finding themselves once again trapped on a dead end road. What makes this so alarming is that the number of high school dropouts is 4 times lower for whites and 2.5 times lower for African Americans than it is for Hispanic children. Drop out rates for both of these groups have steadily decreased over the past 20 years, while the Hispanic drop out rate has increased. That this could happen in our country is not only a national disgrace, but a national tragedy.

Three Presidents, beginning with President Bush in 1990, have devoted significant resources to study the issue and they have recommended far reaching solutions. One key recommendation is the active involvement of the business community. I'd like to recognize two organizations present here today who have responded to this White House call to action. These organizations are Telemundo and Univision, both conducted a broad based television campaign of public service announcements entitled, "Education Matters." We must follow their lead.

We've covered the first "E," I'd like now to talk about the second "E" – that is to ELEVATE.

Every one in this room recognizes that the ability to elevate yourself is not an external force; rather, it resides within the human spirit. The capacity to conquer any challenge begins with a positive attitude-- a positive attitude rooted in positive self-esteem.

Every single Hispanic child at risk of dropping out of school is a child whose spirit may be dampened but whose spirit cannot, must not be destroyed. Every single person in this room, through the work that you do has the capacity to elevate the spirit of these children.

Regardless of profession or position, we must celebrate Hispanics who are not only in film, television, music and sports, but regular people; we must recognize Hispanic fireman, policeman, entrepreneurs, doctors, teachers, lawyers, artists, scientists, and students. And, I am glad to see, that as of today, we are beginning to recognize writers, reporters and journalists.

It is important that we elevate Hispanics who have not forgotten their roots, and who believe in giving back to the Hispanic community. There are many great Hispanic baseball players, but there is only one Sammy Sosa – someone who has really made an effort to give back to his community.

By elevating Hispanics as role models, across all areas of life, we can by example radiate hope and nourish the spirit of Hispanic children. I am convinced that we can bolster the

spirit of our children, foster their educational achievement and ultimately demonstrate the vital importance of Hispanics to Florida and our nation.

The third E is to EMPOWER Hispanics.

We need to insure that Hispanic's rise to significant leadership positions in business and government, in elected and appointed political positions across the state, and we must make sure that Hispanics play a greater role in the media, in many of the positions that are represented here tonight. As writers, reporters and journalists. These ARE positions of power that offer the capacity to lead, and that offer the capacity to effect change by influencing attitudes.

There are many ways we can do this. Identify Hispanics in your community who have faced the challenges and beat the odds. Identify Hispanics who have overcome obstacles and achieved success. I'm not just talking about "financial" success. I'm NOT just talking about high profile leaders. I am talking about every day people. People who are doing what they want, people who are happy. These are people who we should seek out, these are people we should recognize, these are people we should elevate so that we empower our youth, we empower adults and we empower all Hispanics so that we may develop the right spirit, the right attitude and the right mindset to achieve our goals.

What else can we do? We must register people to vote. Regardless of party, the fact is, as the fastest growing segment of the population, we must secure representation that reflects the size and scope of our role in today's America. Redistricting is an another issue that right now, today, affects who will be your voice in government not only right now, and next year, but for the next ten years.

Let me give you a personal example of the challenge we face in placing Hispanics in positions of power. I am a member of the Federal Judicial Nominating Committee, whose function it is to identify qualified applicants for Federal Judges and U.S. Attorneys in the Southern District of Florida.

We met recently to review applications, interview and ultimately submit a list of names to the president of the United States for a number of high profile positions in Florida. Although scores of Hispanic lawyers should have applied for these positions, I am sad to report that only a handful responded. That my friends, is a problem and highlights this very point. We must create mechanisms that not only help us identify Hispanics for various leadership roles in private and public sectors, but provide these people with the support systems to secure these positions.

When we talk about Hispanic Americans we are speaking about individuals from more than 20 different nations with countless dialects, different skin colors and varying tastes in food and music. Given our diversity we must not let this become our own adversity. Therefore, unity is the password to the power in this room. On this note, I'd like to close with a story about unity that Geese flying in formation can teach us.

Lessons from the Geese

As geese flap their wings, they create an uplift for the bird following. By flying in a V formation, the whole flock adds 71% greater range than if any bird were to fly alone.

Lesson: If we share a common direction and a sense of community, we can get where we're going more quickly and easily because we are traveling on the thrust of one another.

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone, and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front.

Lesson: If we have as much sense as geese, we will stay in formation with those who are headed where we want to go, and we will be willing to accept their help as well as give ours to others.

When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into formation and another goose flies at the point position.

Lesson: If we take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing leadership as with the geese, we become dependent on each other.

The geese in formation honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

Lesson: If we "honk" we need to make sure it is encouraging.

When a goose gets sick or wounded or is shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it is able to fly again or dies. They then launch out on their own, with another formation or catch up with the flock.

Lesson: If we have as much sense as geese, we too will stand by each other in difficult times, as well as when strong. Let us all fly in formation and help those who are counting on us.

Thank you.