

**Speech to MANA de Albuquerque
Commissioner Gloria Tristani
Albuquerque, New Mexico
August 24, 2001**

[As prepared for delivery]

Good evening and thank you, Christine, for that kind introduction. I am particularly pleased to be here tonight because of my past history with MANA de Albuquerque. Some of you may remember that about 15 years ago I was President of the Albuquerque chapter. I knew then and know now the powerful advocacy and work that MANA engages in. As a New Mexican and a Hispanic, I am a strong believer in the work MANA does. So I am pleased to join you in este Brindis a La Mujer Hispana.

I am here in my official capacity as an FCC commissioner. But my remarks are shaped in large part by my role as a Hispanic, as a woman, and as a mother.

I believe passionately in the advancement of the Hispanic community and Latinas in particular. I have high hopes that we can continue to make progress by supporting each other. MANA is a great example of that. The mentoring, the networking, the support groups are so important to young Latinas who are trying to make their way in the world.

There is no better way for Hispanics to advance as a group than by establishing a strong commitment to education. It is a cliché to say education is the key to advancement in society, but it is true. I know this from personal experience. Education gives young adults the skills and the credentials to enter the workforce and have exciting and rewarding careers.

Today, unfortunately, Latinas are not benefiting fully from the educational system. Young Latinas have the lowest high school graduation rate among girls of any ethnicity. According to government data, 26 percent of young Latinas leave school before graduating, as compared with 13 percent of African American girls and 6.9 percent of white girls. And Latinas have the greatest gender gap in SAT scores than any other ethnic group. These are core issues we need to address if Hispanic women are to advance in society.

As a Latina, I know that Hispanic families highly value the academic success of their children. But I also know that in Hispanic families, nothing comes before *la familia*. This is a source of pride in the Hispanic community, as it should be.

The paramount value we place on family often falls most heavily on young Hispanic women. According to a study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), Latinas are often expected to provide child care for younger siblings, help older relatives, and work outside the home to help support the family.

These are valuable tasks that help keep Latino families strong, but they can also impact Latinas' education. According to the AAUW study, these household duties appear to contribute to the high dropout rate among Latinas in high school. One high school in Denver has adopted a more flexible schedule that allows students alternatives in class scheduling and in make up classes that accommodates the work schedules and family commitments of the many Latinos at that school. That school deserves great credit for understanding the culture of its students and for working with them to help prevent dropouts.

But schools alone cannot solve the problem of the high Latina dropout rate. Parents are the key. Just as young Latinas place a high priority on supporting their families, so too should Hispanic parents place a high priority on supporting their daughters' education. The same bonds that keep Latinas close to their families can propel Latinas to succeed academically. In 1998, Helen García and Norma Martínez-Rogers conducted studies of Latinas who received doctoral degrees. Latinas interviewed in both of these studies said that family support was vital to their academic achievement.

Parental support is particularly critical with respect to young Latinas. All parents, including Hispanic parents, need to avoid old stereotypes about how to raise girls. We can not afford to put the educational focus on boys and assume girls will be taken care of by their future husbands.

Many young Latinas will someday get married and choose to be full-time mothers and wives. I applaud and encourage those of you who make that choice. But it should be your choice, not your duty. Young Latinas should not have to choose between education and family.

One area of education that I strongly encourage young Latinas to explore is the technology field. The role of technology is increasingly important in all companies. People entering the work force are expected to have certain basic technical skills.

But even more important than baseline technical skills are the skills to develop and manage computer software and hardware. These jobs are at the center of the new economy. People with skills in computer networking, software, and hardware will have a powerful advantage in getting high-paying, rewarding careers. It takes hard work to develop these technical skills, but it is well worth it.

In making these suggestions, we need to set aside the stereotypes about computers and the Internet. The stereotypes I am referring to are things like: "boys are better at computers than girls;" and "people who spend lots of time with computers are anti-social."

Too many girls have bought into these misconceptions. This is evidenced by the fact that only twenty percent of U.S. information technology workers are women. I urge young Latinas to become more tech-savvy, and I urge Hispanic parents to fully support their daughters' education in whatever area they want to work.

And by the way, as we encourage our daughters in their educational pursuits, we need to ensure that our daughters who already know español keep their language and encourage our children who don't speak español to learn it. Being bilingual is not only important to preserving our identity and our culture, it is a valuable tool. I'm reminded of the story of the mother mouse who with her baby mice was backed into a corner by a cat. She started barking like a dog. The cat, perplexed, ran off. She turned to her children and said, "Now you know the advantage of being bilingual."

The family is clearly the most important contributor to the progress in the Hispanic community. But there are other factors as well. Two of these factors are directly related to my work at the FCC. One is television, the other is the Internet. While the Internet is becoming a valuable tool for Latinos, the portrayal – or non-portrayal -- of Hispanics on television is a problem.

In the area of broadcast television, there are too few Hispanic characters. This problem is compounded in several ways: First, Hispanic households watch more broadcast television than Anglo households. A recent study showed that 64 percent of Hispanic households watch more than four hours of television per day.

Second, a very significant portion of the Hispanic population is young – 36 percent of U.S. Hispanics are 18 years old or younger. These two facts mean more Hispanics are young and impressionable compared with other ethnic groups and they watch more television than children in other ethnic groups. This greatly magnifies the influence of television among Hispanic youth.

The bad news is that Hispanic youth rarely see anyone on television who looks like them. Despite the rapid growth of the Hispanic population, a recent study by Children Now, a children's advocacy group, revealed that the number of recurring Hispanic characters on prime time television actually decreased from 3 percent to 2 percent in the most recent television season.

This is a problem. Studies demonstrate that young people feel it is important to see people who look like them on TV. Children want to identify with television characters, but it's hard to when no one looks like you.

This is particularly true for Latinas. If a young Latina had watched every single prime time broadcast television show last year, she would have seen Latinas in only 5 of 902 recurring characters last season, and three out of those five characters worked in low level service jobs. One young Latina commented that "they never show us as being good people, having a career, going to school."

Not only am I troubled by the lack of Hispanic characters on prime time television, I am confused by it. A study by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute found that half of Latinos questioned watched a television program last year because it featured a Latino actor or focused on Latino communities. It would seem to be good business for networks to include more Latinos in recurring roles. I cannot understand why they continue to avoid realistic portrayals of hardworking, interesting characters that happen to be Hispanic. I urge them to do better in this area.

But in the meantime, you should make your voices known. Write to the stations here in Albuquerque and let them know you think there should be more Hispanics – and more positive images of Hispanics -- on television. I can tell you that broadcasters do listen, and it is not a waste of time to express your opinion. Let me explain why.

As some of you may remember, in August of 1999, a nationally syndicated radio show called “The Don and Mike Show” caused an uproar with a segment they aired. They telephoned a Mexican-American woman in El Cenizo, Texas and subjected her to the most offensive and racist verbal attack I have ever heard. This show was carried in 60 markets around the country, including Albuquerque.

I happened to be in Albuquerque the week after that broadcast occurred. People complained directly to me. I responded by saying that there was probably nothing the FCC could do because we are only authorized to fine broadcasters for obscene or indecent material. Although the FCC did end up fining the station for putting the woman on the air without her permission, we did not fine them for their actual remarks.

Fortunately, that was not the end of the story. As you know, people here in Albuquerque were so outraged by that incident that they complained long and loud to the station that carried the Don and Mike Show. People also contacted advertisers on the Don and Mike Show and complained. The radio station owner cancelled the Don and Mike Show. Good for you -- no more Don and Mike in Albuquerque. I was very pleased and proud that New Mexicans can make their voices known when they want to. And when they do, broadcasters listen.

The lack of Hispanics on broadcast television has not had a positive effect on the broadcast community. But I hope you will remember the experience with the Don and Mike Show. Send letters to the local television stations and the networks. Tell them you demand more positive Hispanic characters on prime time. Make your voices heard. You can make a difference.

The other area of the FCC’s work that is having a positive effect on the Latino community is the Internet. According to a 2000 report by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, over nine million Latinos are currently accessing the web. Fifty-eight percent of those people stay on line for at least one hour per day, five days a week. And over half of all Latino Internet users say they use the Internet to access websites dedicated to Latino issues.

I am pleased that the issues, the businesses, the news, and the culture that define the Hispanic community are flourishing on the Internet. That bodes well for preserving and strengthening our collective identity. For a culture such as ours that celebrates la familia, the Internet is a wonderful way to keep families close even when they are far apart. Having moved temporarily from New Mexico to Washington, DC, I can tell you that email has been a great way to help me stay close to my friends and family here in New Mexico. It's also a great way to keep in contact with our family members who are in the military.

It is also very encouraging to see that where traditional media, such as television, is not adequately serving Latinos, the Internet is helping to fill the void. One problem with the Internet, however, is that it is still not nearly as accessible as television.

The U.S. Department of Commerce studied Internet usage and found the existence of a "digital divide." This refers to the relatively large number of upper-income Anglo households that have Internet access, and the low number of poor and ethnic households that don't.

This is due in large part to the significant upfront expense of purchasing a computer for the home and then paying monthly Internet access charges. Nearly half of Latinos surveyed by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute said these costs were too high a barrier to obtaining Internet access at home.

That is one reason the Congress created and the FCC implemented the e-rate. The e-rate allows schools and libraries to acquire Internet access lines at discounted rates. This can be very valuable to the Hispanic community by making Internet access available in schools and public libraries to Latinos who do not have computers at home.

One of the best votes I ever cast at the FCC was the one that fully funded the e-rate plan. When this plan first began, powerful Members of Congress pressured the FCC to drastically scale back e-rate funding. The FCC voted to fully fund the e-rate, and it has turned out to be a great success. I am honored to have played a role in supporting that program, and I know it has had a positive impact on the Latino community for those who cannot afford Internet access at home.

My grandfather, the late U.S. Senator Dennis Chavez, of New Mexico, inspired me to enter public service. He was a remarkable man. He taught me that one of the most important things a person can do is be a voice for the voiceless.

I have done my best at the FCC to give a voice to the Hispanic community. I have continued to press the television networks that under-represent – or misrepresent -- Hispanics on television. I have also been an advocate for minority and Hispanic ownership of broadcast licenses. And I have fought for strong FCC rules to require television and radio stations to provide equal employment opportunities to Hispanics and other minority groups. It only stands to reason that if we had more Hispanic owners of

broadcast licenses, and more Hispanics working behind the camera, that we might begin to see images that reflect the true richness and diversity of America.

But in the end, it will take more than the FCC or other government agencies to bring the kind of advances needed for Latinas. It will take a renewed commitment by Hispanic parents to support their daughters' education as best they can. And it will require the efforts that MANA and others groups engage in to strengthen the Latina community. We must keep our voices strong and make our voices heard. Working together, we can make this vision a reality.

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