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The Time for Latino/a Empowerment is Now

Hon. Patricio M. Serna†

I want to thank the Berkeley La Raza Law Journal and the Berkeley La Raza Law Students Association, together with the Center for Latino Policy Research, the Boalt Hall Center for Social Justice, and the Boalt Hall School of Law for presenting this symposium “Raising the Bar – Latino/a Presence in the Judiciary and the Struggle for Representation.” I am honored to be on this panel entitled “Breaking the Barrier: Latino/a Pioneers in the Federal and State Benches.” I am humbled to appear with such notables as California Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno; Honorable Cruz Reynoso, former California Supreme Court Justice and now U.C. Davis law school professor; Honorable Frances Muñoz, Orange County Superior Court Judge; and Dean Kevin Johnson, U.C. Davis School of Law. Special thanks to Victor Rodríguez, Symposium Editor of the Berkeley La Raza Law Journal, who was the major force behind this first national conference for Latino judges. The organizers of this symposium are making history today.

As the only Latino Chief Justice in our nation, I feel a special need to be a role model for our people, especially to our youth, and to carry the message of empowerment wherever I go. Now, through me, we have a voice in the Conference of Chief Justices and believe me, it is a resounding voice. From 1990 to 2000 our nation’s Latino population swelled to 35.3 million – a 60% jump. The rest of the U.S. population increased by 13%. This dramatic increase in our numbers translates to one word – “empowerment.” Empowerment in all aspects of our lives – political, economic, educational, and, yes, empowerment in the judiciary.

I am pleased, indeed, inspired here this morning, as I look out among you. I see so clearly in your eyes the light of enthusiasm, courage, self-confidence, commitment, accomplishment, deep faith, character, and loyalty. The light I see in your eyes reflects a vision that will surely continue to empower people of color.

Many of you came from poor families. I too came from a very poor family, a family of eight. My mother passed away when I was not quite two years old. My youngest sister was but seven months and my oldest sister was fifteen. My father, a laborer with a third grade education, raised six girls and two boys, and never remarried. My father taught us family togetherness, family love, and family support. To me, family is the most important thing in our lives and in our culture. My last thought in this world will be of family, and I know that your last thought will be of family also.

We, the panelists, are pioneers on the federal and state benches and have broken the barrier. But I'm happy to report that many others are now also breaking the barrier. This is only right because the time for empowerment has arrived. The great majority of us, including me, are the first generation in our family to attend law school.

† Chief Justice, New Mexico Supreme Court. Chief Justice Serna obtained his J.D. from the University of Denver College of Law and his L.L.M. degree from Harvard Law School. He spent four years in Washington, D.C. working with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Upon returning to Santa Fe in 1975, he was Assistant Attorney General of New Mexico until 1979, when he entered private practice. Justice Serna served as a District Judge from 1985 to 1996, including a two-year term as Chief Judge. He was then elected as justice of the New Mexico Supreme Court. In 2001, he became the nation's only Latino Chief Justice.
That is what binds us and makes us all pioneers.

As pioneers we must be aware and wary of what appears to be a retrenchment at the federal Supreme Court level—a retrenchment in our civil rights, a retrenchment in our employment rights, a retrenchment in other basic and fundamental rights. This means that greater reliance has to be given to state constitutions. More and more in New Mexico, we on the Supreme Court are relying on our state constitution to accord greater rights to our citizens than is currently being done by the U.S. Supreme Court. This is a national trend and I'm proud to say that New Mexico is among the leaders.

We are all role models in our families, in our communities, and everywhere we go. I frequently speak at schools—elementary schools, high schools, and universities. I always tell of my humble life story. I then tell the students that if someone like me—with no background of wealth or social position—can realize my dreams, they can also. I stress that I have honored three principles in my life. These are: (1) always be positively focused—never be negative; (2) be determined; (3) believe in yourself. I say the same to you here this morning—follow these three principles and I assure you that your goals and dreams, like mine, will indeed become reality.

Thank you for letting me be a part of this historic occasion. It has been a highly successful and positive one. Although true empowerment is still not fully realized, we have come a long way. We should be proud that we, together, are pioneers on this road to empowerment. We who now stand in positions of power and public responsibility must aspire to greater heights and you who follow must continue to advance those aspirations. I am so proud to know our future is in such capable, such dedicated, and such strong hands—you'll do a beautiful job. Gracias.