

Ohtli Award Ceremony
Barbara Hines Speech
September 28th, 2018

Thank you so much. I am so honored and so humbled to be awarded the Ohtli award. Thank you to Honorable Carlos Gonzalez Gutierrez Consul of Mexico, all of the staff of the Consulate and to the government of Mexico.

Preparing for this award provided me with the space and time to reflect up on my work with the Mexican community and my ties to Mexico. Many of you may think of me at least recently as working on Central American issues and family detention, but my immigration work began with Mexico. Mexico has been such an important part of both my personal and my professional life.

Starting with the personal. My parents, refugees from Nazi Germany, moved to the small border town of Brownsville Texas from Chicago when I was nine years old. Our family fell in love with the border. As we live in such harsh anti-immigrant times today, we should celebrate the wonderful contributions that Mexico and Mexican culture have given us, particularly along our extensive border with Mexico.

For me, it was growing up in a bi-cultural, bilingual town. It was the fusion of Brownsville and Matamoros—The Rio Grande Valley is like no place else. It is not Texas and it is not Mexico. But it is a stellar example of what two cultures can bring to each other and how they can enhance each other. We simply went across the river, as we referred to it, and border residents from Mexico did the same. It was not about border walls or the Border Patrol or zero tolerance or detention centers. Instead, it was pinatas, pan dulce, and quinceaneras and a shared culture.

In addition to my family's personal history in Europe, the border was also one of my first subliminal messages to become an immigration lawyer. My mother always asked me to speak up and answer yes, all American citizens as we came back across the bridge, because of her accent and her fears arising from her experiences in Germany. My father, on the other hand, was more assertive and from him I learned for the first time what secondary inspection was. One day when we came across the international bridge, a

border agent asked him where he was born? My father responded by asking the agent where he was born? All of you who are naturalized citizens or immigration advocates know that place of birth doesn't indicate citizenship and my parents were naturalized citizens. But, non-compliance with immigration officials may not end well and for us it was secondary inspection, taking you out of line for further questioning and in our case, having the car searched and finally allowed to enter the country. My father who was prominent in business community in Brownsville complained and he received a letter of apology from the head of then customs agency. I might add that many people today and then are not as fortunate to receive a written apology.

My mother was the original gap year mother. Worried that I was becoming too provincial in a small Texas border town, and because of my parents' love of Mexico, she suggested that I graduate from high school early and begin college in Mexico City. That experience was transformative for me and as a 17 year old, opened up a whole new world for me, and set me on the path of my long connection with Mexico, Mexican Americans and immigration. Those of you that know me well know that I spend a lot of time in Argentina, but remember your first love may be the most important one and that is what Mexico is for me.

When I started practicing law at Legal Aid in Austin in the mid 70s, all my clients were Mexican—my first deportation case, my first family based immigration petitions, My first citizenship and naturalization cases and so on. And, of course, the legalization program of the 1980s when amnesty was a generous word, a humanitarian word, a program to integrate and incorporate community members, rather than uproot and expel them from our communities.

But for me the most important work was around access to education for Mexican immigrant children and of course, all other children as well. In 1977 when I was a very young lawyer, undocumented children could not attend public school under Texas law. The Austin Independent School District refused to even allow children with temporary permits under a then existing legal settlement to enter school. I successfully litigated that case to convince the Texas Education Agency to at least admit children with some type of temporary status here. Next we filed challenges to the Texas law all over the state and MALDEF, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund's case led to the decision in Plyer v Doe, establishing the right of ALL children, can attend public schools. Judge William Wayne Justice was so

prescient in that case- why would we want to create a permanent underclass of children?. That is similar to what I feel today—why would we want to create a permanent underclass of hardworking immigrants in our country.

What I feel most proud of is my work with many of you here to pass HB 1403 the Texas law, the first in the country that allows all immigrants, regardless of status, to attend Texas universities and pay in state tuition. Ironically, Texas was the first state to exclude children from public schools and the first to include them in the university system.. That law is now available in 20 states and the District of Colombia. We have all seen the benefits of access to education. It is so gratifying to see such accomplished and committed students and now professionals, who went to college because of the in-state tuition law, contributing to our community and to our State.

Today we are living are living in dangerous and challenging times—the rise of white nationalism, a virulent immigrant rhetoric, racial epithets, xenophobia, border walls—culminating in large scale deportations, fear in immigrant communities, the ending of protection for DACA and TPS and most recently, the unthinkable seizure of children from their families.

But we cannot give up hope. I am convinced that with all of us in this community and across the nation, committed to the struggle to protect the human rights of immigrants, we will see a better day. Advancing the rights of immigrants is a long term social justice effort. And I am proud to live in Austin where our city is committed to this endeavor.

Thank you so much to the Mexican Consulate for being such a strong, supportive and innovative partner, in our efforts to protect immigrants here in our community and to fight for a more just system of immigration. Thank you to all my former students and colleagues who work on immigration and civil rights issues. You inspire me and give me hope for the future. And to my family here today for all your love and support. And most of all to the immigrants who made our country who we are today.

As Octavio Paz, the Mexican Nobel Laureate, said “La libertad no necesita alas, lo que necesita es echar raíces”

Muchas gracias, que viva Mexico, y que gane la Copa Mundial