

As a Latina leader in this great and diverse city, I want to share my own story as the daughter of immigrants



Paul Garcia, in his 1977 Chrysler Newport Brougham, leads the Mexican Independence Day Caravan 2021 in the 3300 block of East 95th Street on Sept. 17. John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune

BY NANCY ANDRADE

Growing up as a child of immigrants, I knew the sacrifices and challenges my parents faced but did not fully understand until I was older. As an adult, I, too, experienced sacrifices and challenges of a different sort. It takes guts, grit, chutzpah or ganas to start over in a new country and leave behind everything known and loved about your homeland. The immigrant story of many Latinos in the country is one of courage,

perseverance and triumph over adversities. It is a daily fight to overcome obstacles such as discrimination and access to justice.

As commissioner for the Chicago Commission on Human Relations (CCHR) and as a proud daughter of Latino immigrants, I'm excited to reflect on my past as we close out Hispanic Heritage Month. Specifically, I'd like to share how my family showed me the importance of resilience and advocating for others.

I was 12 years old when my father suddenly lost his job at a steel mill on the Southeast Side after the mill declared bankruptcy and locked out the workers. The workers organized against this injustice to fight for their benefits and pension. When I saw my father unexpectedly lose his livelihood and ability to support his family, I did not fully understand the situation's complexity or its impact on my life. The workers raised money to hire a lawyer and regularly met with him to discuss their class-action suit.

This is where I got to be involved. One evening, the interpreter did not come to the meeting, and I had to translate for the Spanish-speaking workers. I stood in a smoky union hall next to a lean and tall young lawyer translating words that I didn't fully understand as best as I could. It was at that moment when I understood what had happened to my father and to the hundreds of Black and Latino workers. I understood the work of a lawyer was to help those who experienced an injustice. This was the moment I knew I could do the same by becoming a lawyer.

It is my duty to represent every Chicagoan who experiences any form of discrimination on the basis of race, immigration status, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation as they search for housing, or navigate the workplace. As a Latina leader in this great and diverse city, I am committed to uplifting families that come to this country with nothing to give their children everything. During this celebratory and reflective month, I want us to look ahead and think of what our community can do to make Chicago stronger and more equitable.

Looking at the world through a justice lens, the CCHR department aims to ensure that everyone knows their rights regardless of ZIP code or immigration status. The CCHR can bridge the access to justice gap by empowering the community to speak up against discrimination. Everyone has the right to fair and affordable housing, the right to access public resources and the right to work in a safe place.

As the proud mother of a 10-year-old boy born with Down syndrome, I know the sacrifices and challenges parents face to care for their children — especially when they have special needs. Caring and advocating for a child with special needs at times can be overwhelming. Families can be exhausted by this and may unwillingly overlook the fact that they are experiencing discrimination and fail to advocate for themselves. The CCHR is committed to reaching out to all families.

As commissioner, I have seen a profound level of unease among communities of color, low-income communities, and Latino immigrants who find themselves living in fear of deportation when they only want to provide for their families. Time after time, I've seen Latino parents endure constant harassment and violence in the workplace to protect their

children while providing a roof over their heads and a hot meal on the table. I tell parents and anyone who feels unheard, we are here for you.

As we close the Latino and Hispanic Heritage Month, I envision our city and the Chicago Department of Human Relations building a bridge to justice and equity. All Chicagoans have rights, and to the immigrant community, I say, "Welcome, we are here to help."

Nancy Andrade is the commissioner and chair of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations.