

2020 UNIDOS US CAPITAL AWARDS PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE | SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

Each year, the UnidosUS Capital Awards celebrate those champions who stand with us to combat the many challenges we face as a community. This year has been especially challenging. In many ways, it is like our community is fighting two pandemics, COVID-19 and a plague of hate, each of which takes an extra toll on communities of color.

As you will soon hear, our Capital Award for Public Service will honor our Affiliates in El Paso who provided critical assistance to the victims of the shooting there last summer.

On August 3, a 21-year-old white male from Allen, Texas, drove 600 miles across the state to attack a Walmart Supercenter known for catering to the local Hispanic community.

Armed with a semi-automatic weapon, he murdered 23 people and wounded another 24, including several elderly shoppers and a toddler, two years old. It was the single largest mass shooting of Latinos in history. His published manifesto decried what he called the “Hispanic invasion” and said he hoped to remove the threat of the “Hispanic voting bloc.” That was his intention.

This was an unspeakable tragedy. Last November—with the help of our Affiliates—I met with some of the victims and their families. I was struck by one story in particular.

A woman named Marivel was raising money for her daughter’s soccer team along with other team parents in the store’s parking lot when the shooter started firing. She took shelter, but she had lost her daughter in the chaos and she started to panic.

So, she left her hiding place and almost immediately came face to face with the shooter. They locked eyes and he raised his gun and fired. She fell to the ground and pretended to be dead until he went inside the store. But her fear for her daughter was so overwhelming that Marivel got up and ran into the store—toward his gunfire—to find her daughter.

Later, when they were at last reunited, Marivel didn’t realize that she had been shot. Twice. Once in the shoulder and once in the ankle.

Sitting next to Marivel was her husband. He is a big, burly man, a truck driver who was on his way home when the shooting happened. While Marivel was telling me her story, he sat quietly but there were tears running down his face the entire time. His pain, and Marivel’s, were still palpable.

It is up to us to stand against such hate. And we have seen it over and over. The tragic murder of George Floyd has awakened a profound movement toward racial justice in America.

The Black Lives Matter protests are long overdue. Latinos don't just empathize with the Black community; we identify with them.

And I am truly energized by the number of our people, both young and old, who have stepped forward to stand against racial injustice. Your fight is our fight. *Tu lucha es mi lucha.*

Our anger is justified. Our nonviolent protests are justified. These are critical steps on our journey to form a more perfect union.

And the next step on that journey? We need to vote.

Each of us has a part to play. Each of us can do something. *Y cada uno de nosotros podemos hacer algo.*

You know, my dad, who would have been 100 this year, worked in a steel plant in my hometown of Kansas City, Kansas, for 37 years.

As some of you may know, my Kansas City is just across the river from that other Kansas City. And every time my family crossed the bridge that connected the two, my father talked about how proud he was to have cut the steel beams for that bridge.

My dad was not the architect or the engineer, but he knew that without his work that bridge could not have been built. That bridge was his legacy just as much as it was for its architect.

Your vote is your legacy. Your vote is our bridge to a better future.

This election is about so much more than politics. It is about what kind of country we will become, what kind of life our children will lead, and whether justice can prevail in this day and time.

One of my favorite stories about the late John Lewis, the great civil rights leader, is not one that is often told. When I marched with him on an anniversary of his walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, I remember that there were a whole lot of leaders with us. And just before we got to the bridge people started to maneuver to get to the head of the line.

They all wanted to be front and center when the cameras started rolling. John Lewis just looked around and smiled. He said that when they crossed the bridge some 50 years ago, no one wanted to be in the front row, because they knew what was waiting on the other side: billy clubs, tear gas, and police dogs.

In this moment, we can walk in John Lewis's footsteps. We can be courageous. We can be fearless. We can take a stand against racial injustice. And we can do all that when we vote.

Remember: When we vote, you vote on behalf of the children they put in cages. When we vote, you vote on behalf of the families being torn apart in our neighborhoods. When we vote, you vote on behalf of the survivors of Hurricane Maria, the victims of El Paso and those being devastated by this awful pandemic.

Because each of us can put a name to those faces. Each of us knows their story. Each of us knows in our hearts who is responsible for their suffering and whom we should hold accountable. For us—for our community—our vote this year is not just a political one. No. For us, this time, it's personal.