CELEBRATING 50 YEARS: BECOMING THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR HISPANIC LEGAL PROFESSIONALS

By: Daniel R. Hernandez, Alejandra Escobar, Julia Massari, and Alba Cruz-Hacker

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the Hispanic National Bar Association (HNBA) celebrates its legacy of 50 years. The organization has traveled far in five decades, making immense strides in carrying out its mission to bring equity and empowerment to the Hispanic legal profession and to advocate on issues impacting the Hispanic community in the United States. In retracing its history and the profound contributions of so many, the HNBA celebrates with immense gratitude all who have supported the organization and helped make this historic milestone a reality. It is that history, resolve, and commitment of so many leaders that inspires us to continue the work to overcome the persistent obstacles that we encounter in our profession and community.

FROM LOCAL BEGINNINGS. . .

> **Like most noteworthy organizations and group efforts, the Hispanic National Bar Association was founded in times of adversity. It was a conscientious response to the increasing struggles and burdens facing the Hispanic community in the United States.**
>
> — Honorable Francisca Cota, *HNBA Historian, A Review of the History of the Hispanic National Bar Association*

Now a national institution, the HNBA began its life as a local organization from California. Mario Obledo, Luis Garcia, and Cruz Reynoso formed the California Mexican American Bar Association. Their mission was to hold California to its ideals and to advocate for equal education and equality in the workplace. They hoped to be recognized as social and political advocates for the residents of all California regions, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or economic standing.

The founders of that young organization were seeking opportunities to expand their outreach. They applied to have their organization be a representative on the Board of the Council on Legal Education Opportunities (CLEO). Their request was denied, however, because their organization was not national in scope. The founders were not deterred. They understood how important CLEO representation was and refocused their efforts toward a vision of creating a national organization. They strategically reached out to their Puerto Rican friends on the East Coast to join their Board and decided to change the name of the organization to represent the new, expanded scope. Thus, in 1972, the La Raza National Lawyers Association (LRNLA) was born. The founding members of the new, expanded organization included Mario Obledo, Hon. Cruz Reynoso, Hon. Louis Garcia, Miguel Angel Méndez, Al Gonzalez, Hon. Lorenzo Arredondo, John Huerta, A. Baltazar Baca, and Donato Tapia. They began the organization that became the institution that is the Hispanic National Bar Association today.

ADVOCACY: A FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE OF THE HNBA

Throughout its history, the HNBA has advocated for issues to protect and elevate the Hispanic community. Advocacy is inherent to the organization's goal—to act as a force of positive change in the world. Justice William H. Rehnquist was nominated to the United States Supreme Court in 1971. During the nomination and confirmation process, evidence came to light alleging that Justice Rehnquist had harassed and intimidated minority voters in Phoenix, Arizona. While many civil rights groups opposed the confirmation of Justice Rehnquist, including the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), there was no national group of Hispanic attorneys on record opposing the Rehnquist nomination. Finding this fact unacceptable, Mario Obledo, along with a small group of LRNLA members, wrote a telegram to the Senate Judiciary Committee opposing the Rehnquist nomination and recommending instead Federal District Court Judge Reynaldo G. Garza, a well-qualified Hispanic jurist.

Although their efforts were not successful Roberto Rabago, Lorenzo Arredondo, and Donato Tapia were determined to create a national organization for legal professionals. They drafted the LRNLA's articles of incorporation, and after its official incorporation, the LRNLA met the American Bar Association's requirements as a national organization, and successfully represented Hispanics in the CLEO. This was a critical milestone in the HNBA's history.

EXPANDING THE MEMBERSHIP

After reaching the official status of a national organization, the group was focused on expanding its membership. In these initial years, A. Baltazar Baca (Balt), the La Raza National Law Student president, was a catalyst to significantly increasing the organization's membership. As part of his efforts, Balt accumulated nearly 800 Hispanic student names to create the first national mailing list of Hispanic law students. This list was used to recruit future HNBA members and leaders.

Balt was a champion and advocate for more inclusivity within the organization. During his presidency, 1971-1978, he cast the deciding vote to include all Hispanic and Latino attorneys in the organization, not just those of Mexican descent. This decision was critical in expanding the membership base and furthering the overarching purpose of the organization: to be the *Voice of the Hispanic Legal Community*, and to serve the interests of the Hispanic community at large. By 1981, the LRNLA changed its name to La Raza National Bar Association (LRNBA), which better reflected the growing organization's membership and national presence.

BUILDING A FINANCIAL FOUNDATION FOR THE HISPANIC NATIONAL BAR ASSOCIATION

As the LRNBA began to grow, financial stability was critical to its success. In 1983, Mari Carmen Aponte was elected president of the LRNBA—the first woman to lead the organization. Her presidency focused on elevating the organization and strengthening its financial health, including securing a venue for the organization's annual convention and securing U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor as the convention's distinguished keynote speaker. The Convention was highly successful, building a foundation that earned the LRNBA the necessary credit to host future events. This Convention was a turning point for the organization and its growth towards the national organization it is today.

The LRNBA continued to expand at an exponential rate. The organization published the first national directory of Hispanic lawyers, serving as the first source for referrals of legal work among Hispanic lawyers, corporations, and other clients seeking to diversify their legal representation. Project P.A.S.S. was also launched, creating a program that provided stipends to Hispanic law students to underwrite the cost of preparing for the bar exam.

In 1984, La Raza National Bar Association was incorporated in Washington, D.C. and officially changed its name to the Hispanic National Bar Association—the name we all know today.

STRENGTHENING THE HNBA THROUGH PROGRAMS, MEMBERS, AND EXTERNAL COLLABORATIONS

For the last five decades, the HNBA has not lost focus of its multifaceted mission: to serve the public good, to advance Hispanic legal professionals and students, and to be the national voice for the concerns and rights of Hispanic legal professionals and community members. Inspired by those who came before and whose diligent work and commitment forged the path forward, the HNBA continues to honor their legacy of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the profession and in society. Today the HNBA is a Delegate to the American Bar Association House of Delegates, Liaison to the Association of Corporate Counsel, Liaison to the International Bar Association, Liaison to National Association of Latinos Elected and Appointed Officials, Liaison to The White House, and Liaison to the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. The organization is also a member of the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda and the Coalition of Bar Associations of Color. These partnerships and collaborations are possible after years of engaging in focused programs and initiatives that have advanced the HNBA's critical work and national Mentorship Program was first established in 2005, allowing members to support younger generations of attorneys and law students by providing connections, career advice, and opportunities. Different iterations of mentoring programs now exist, including the National Young Lawyers and Law Students Speed Mentoring Program offered during the Annual Convention and multiple regional mentorship programs across the country. In addition, the "*La Promesa en El Derecho*/The Promise in the Law" booklet was published in 2006. This community outreach initiative aimed to educate the community on the U.S. system of government, the justice system, and basic individual rights guaranteed by the law. Over 30,000 copies were printed and distributed throughout the country that year. Currently, *La Promesa en el Derecho* booklet is available to the public on the HNBA website.

Another important milestone was reached in 2006, when the HNBA adopted its first $1 million budget. This allowed the organization to fund the HNBA Law Student Division and the HNBA Judicial Division (then Judicial Council), two groups which continue to play an essential role in the organization and the communities across the country. Advancing the HNBA's important work continued when Advocacy Day activities were formally launched in 2007. Since then, HNBA leaders and members travel to Washington D.C. each May, to fulfill the mission of being the voice for the concerns and interests of Hispanics living in the United States. Respecting and carrying on the foundational principles that the founders and pioneers established years earlier, the HNBA Board of Governors and members address issues of concern before members of Congress and White House officials.

Over the years, the HNBA's programmatic focuses address different areas of need and opportunity. For example, the organization was one of the first national affinity bars to establish an LGBTQ+ Section. The LGBT Section grew and developed into the current HNBA LGBT Division, providing a space to advocate for its LGBTQ+ members and the large Hispanic LGBTQ+ community. The HNBA also established a Young Lawyers Division in 2008, giving law students and new lawyers a designated forum within the organization's structure. Other programs that were created to support Hispanic law students and young lawyers, and which continue to have great impact today, include the Annual Uvaldo Herrera Moot Court Competition, now in its 28th year, and various training, mentoring, and scholarship programs that aim to create a strong pipeline into and within the legal profession and to support law students and young lawyers as they progress in their educational and professional paths.

As the organization grew, the areas of programmatic focus expanded to support the professional growth and success of its members. Latina lawyers were and continue to be the least represented group in the profession, at less than 2% of all attorneys in the United States. To identify and work to remedy the unique challenges Latina lawyers experience, the HNBA created the Latina Commission in 2008. The Latina Commission produced the only two studies conducted on Latinas in the profession to date: "Few and Far Between: The Reality of Latina Lawyers" (September 2009) and "*La Voz de la Abogada Latina*: Challenges and Rewards in Serving the Public Interest" (September 2010). Following recommendations from the 2009 study and other research on women in the profession, the Commission delivers multiple programs and events each year that support students and Latina attorneys at all stages of the profession, including the Latina Leadership Academy, Pearls of Wisdom Series, and the Latina Executive Leadership Program.

Another example of an HNBA program designed to address critical areas of interest to the membership and the Hispanic community is the Presidential Appointments Project, created in 2008. The creation of the Project was critical to the objectives of identifying and supporting the confirmation of well-qualified Hispanic judges to accomplish the mission of diversifying the judiciary. When the Hon. Sonia Sotomayor was nominated to serve as an Associate Justice on the United States Supreme Court, all the living HNBA past presidents prepared a statement of support, urging the U.S. Senate to confirm her. Justice Sotomayor was indeed confirmed on August 6, 2009.

The presence of the first Hispanic American on the Supreme Court is the epitome of what the founders aspired to achieve. Today, the HNBA continues to advocate for a diverse judiciary. In fact, the Judicial and Executive Endorsements Committee vets and endorses Hispanic candidates each year, supporting them through the process of securing positions to the Executive and Judicial branches of the U.S. government. The HNBA continues to be a zealous advocate for endorsed candidates, frequently meeting with elected officials and other stakeholders to spotlight the talent in the Hispanic legal community.

Throughout the years, HNBA has designed programs and events that advance the HNBA's important work. Signature events like the Corporate Counsel Conference, which was launched in 2008 to support Hispanic attorneys and to provide meaningful connections between in-house and outside counsel, successfully continue to this date. Similarly, the Intellectual Property Law Institute (IPLI), launched in 2013 to increase the number of practicing Hispanic IP attorneys, continue to benefit Hispanic law students every year. Working with the program's corporate and law firm partners, the IPLI is one of the HNBA programmatic crown jewels with approximately 70% of the IPLI scholars who have graduated law school now practicing intellectual property or tech law.

We are stronger when we work together. Internal and external collaborations are key to successfully delivering the many programs, events, and initiatives that are carried out by thousands of volunteer members across the nation. The HNBA diligently works to increase outreach and programming with other minority bar associations and affinity groups as well. For example, the Collaborative Bar Leadership Academy (CBLA) was established in 2012. The program is a joint initiative of the American Bar Association, its Commissions on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the profession and Disability rights, HNBA, National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, National Bar Association, National LGBT Bar Association, National Native American Bar Association, and South Asian Bar Association of North America. The Academy's goal is to create and strengthen the pipeline of diverse bar association leaders by providing leadership training and professional development programs. To date, nearly 500 diverse lawyers have attended the program.

Working together as an empowering philosophy is at the heart of the HNBA's structure. The organization partners with over 20 local Hispanic legal organizations as Affiliates, who are members of the HNBA Board of Governors, and over 30 Associate Organizations that include multiple Hispanic law student organizations—collectively working together to advance mutual goals for the benefit of all.

MOVING FORWARD. . .

Through the growth and development of 50 years, the HNBA continues to lead the way in supporting and promoting Hispanic law students, legal professionals, and community members. As the voice of our community, the HNBA gives its members the opportunity to change lives, to advocate on critical issues on behalf of those who need a voice, and to improve the legal profession. The HNBA is a vibrant, national community with a common sense of purpose and shared experiences. The organization continues to work towards providing educational and career opportunities. It will also continue to advocate for the dignity of each individual and each of the many ethnic, racial, and linguistic groups within the Hispanic community, while also promoting public policies and private endeavors that permit the Hispanic community and all Americans to reach their goals.

The theme of this 50th anniversary year is "Lift as You Climb." As we continue forward and look towards the next 50 years, the HNBA will remain a space for all Hispanic legal professionals to gather—and to create a sense of family that defines our culture and our community.

Daniel R. Hernandez, Esq., *is the Principal and Managing Attorney at NextLevel Law, P.C., where he primarily practices family law. Daniel serves as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Illinois School of Law and as a Commissioner for the Chicago Commission on Human Relations. Daniel has been a member of the HNBA since 2014 and was recently recognized as a Top Attorney Under 40.*

Alejandra Escobar *is an Associate at NextLevel Law, P.C., where she primarily practices family law. Alejandra is an enthusiastic litigator, completing multiple trials and hearings within her first two years of practice. Alejandra serves on the Board of Directors for the Medical Association for Latino Advancement.*

Julia Massari *is a student at the University of Illinois College of Law in Urbana-Champaign. She interned at NextLevel Law, P.C. in the summer of 2022. She hopes to continue her legal career in litigation.*

Alba Cruz-Hacker *is the Hispanic National Bar Association's Chief Operating Officer & Executive Director, and the President of the HNBA VIA Fund, the HNBA's 501(c)(3) charitable arm. Prior to joining the HNBA in 2013, she served as Senior Director of Development & Special Projects for the General Consulate of the Dominican Republic & the U.S. Western Region. She also worked as Adjunct Professor at the University of California Riverside and Visiting Assistant Professor at the UCR Palm Desert Campus.*