

Edwin Meléndez's Remarks

For La Casa de la Herencia Cultural Puertorriqueña Gala

October 27, 2012

Buenos Días.

Distinguished members of the board of directors of La Casa de la Herencia Cultural Puertorriqueña, distinguished honorees, dear friends.

It is a great pleasure to be here today and to share this event with our community leaders.

First, I would like to thank Leticia Rodríguez, Executive Director of La Casa, for her generous invitation to be here with you.

We are here today honoring a group of Puerto Rican men and women who have distinguished themselves by making a difference in our communities. And by doing so, they embody the mission of La Casa de la Herencia Cultural Puertorriqueña of

“promoting, enriching and preserving our rich cultural heritage.”

We honor our leaders tonight because preserving our cultural heritage and making a difference in our communities is today more important than ever.

Our communities are changing because the growth and dispersion of Puerto Ricans in the United States. How many of you are surprised to hear that since 2003 there are more Puerto Ricans residing stateside than in the island of Puerto Rico?

Of the total 8.3 million Puerto Ricans identified by the census in 2011, 57% (4.7 m) reside stateside while only 43% (3.6 m) reside in Puerto Rico.

How many of you are surprised to hear that stateside Puerto Ricans are one of the fastest growing population groups in the United States?

The recently released American Community Survey estimated that the stateside Puerto Rican population grew by 4% in 2011. By comparison, the total and white population grew by less than one percent and Latinos as a whole by 2.36 percent

Puerto Ricans after the Great Recession look very different from how we looked before.

Though the majority of Puerto Ricans still reside in New York State, Puerto Ricans in Florida, with close to a million residents right now, are projected to equal or exceed those in New York by the end of the decade.

In 2011, eight states exceeded the average 4 percent rate of population growth among Puerto Ricans: California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

Another important development is that Latinos grew to an estimated 52 million in 2011, enhancing their status as the largest minority group in the country. Latinos are also growing in the Northeast, although a lower rate than in the past, and even in some Southern states where Puerto Ricans are growing as well.

Puerto Rican organizations are rising all over the country. Last year, for example, more than forty parades and festivals were organized to promote national awareness and appreciation of Puerto Rican culture and its contribution to the culture and society of the United States.

Why is this data important? We are at a critical juncture. For those of us who value our culture and share a passion for preserving our heritage, we need to account for these new developments.

Our events are one way in which we affirm our role as a **bridge community**. We are a bridge community to the extent that our historical legacy, the institutions that we build and maintain, constitutes a bridge to new migrants from the island, and to younger generations developing their identity and values.

We are also a **bridge community** because in New York City, as in many other Northeast cities, Puerto Ricans were the pioneers that built the infrastructure of community organizations that welcomed other Latinos in these cities. Along with other minorities across the nation, we opened roads in higher education, industry and government, and political participation.

Despite all the good things that we do to preserve our culture and heritage, we need to do more. Who is going to know how we served as a **bridge community** to our youth and to other Latinos if we do not preserve our history? Who is going to appreciate our contributions to the culture and society of the United States if we do not tell the stories of our pioneers?

One way we can do this is by collecting the documents and oral histories of our pioneers.

The Center for Puerto Rican Studies, along with many historical preservation partners has inaugurated what we call the 100 Puerto Ricans Campaign. And I am pleased to say that La Casa de la Herencia Cultural Puertorriqueña is one of our partners in this initiative. We aim to add 100 new collections to our archives of individuals or organizations that have made a difference in our communities and will contribute their papers to the Centro Library and Archives

The Centro Library and Archives has been serving the faculty and students of Hunter College and CUNY, as well as the Puerto Rican community, for almost 40 years. These new collections will broaden the scope of our archives in areas currently underrepresented in our collections, such as the military, civil rights, gay and lesbian, health, women and others. We also expect to broaden

the scope of our efforts by engaging with partners across the nation to encourage and support historical preservation in Florida, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C, and other parts of the country.

So far we have received nominations for close to four hundred individuals and organizations. We have sent letters of invitation to over fifty candidates inviting them to join the 100. We need to do more, collectively, individually.

That's where you come in. Sitting right here in front of me, there a men and women who should be part of this great collection. As contributors to the archives, you will be among the greatest, among other pioneers who helped build our institutions and communities, among others who have also changed history. Your legacy will be preserved for generations to come. Scholars will study your legacy and younger generations will appreciate their heritage.

Please join La Casa de la Herencia Cultural Puertorriqueña and Centro in this important initiative to preserve our history and to tell our story. Donate. Volunteer. Contribute.

Be proud, celebrate Puerto Rican!

Muchas gracias.