

Heritage Month Speaker Uses Poetry and Pop Culture to Change the Latinx Narrative



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Winston's Diversity & Inclusion Committee and Latina/o Lawyers Alliance at Winston (LLAW) affinity group hosted a firmwide videoconference last month featuring Dr. Jose B. Gonzalez, an English professor, published poet, and Fulbright Scholar. Associate and LLAW member [Marcus Garcia](#) welcomed the 300 firm members, alumni, and friends in attendance and introduced Dr. Gonzalez, who was born in El Salvador and immigrated to the United States at age eight. He has made it his mission to change the narrative about the Latino population through his presentation *From Hispanic to Latinx: Stories of Perseverance*.



For over a decade, tortillas outsold Wonder Bread. For years, salsa has outsold ketchup. So the need to know the difference between “buenos noches” and “buenos nachos” is becoming greater and greater, said Dr. Gonzalez. “If you’re not sitting next to someone who is of Latino descent, you will be.” He began his talk with a primer on the many terms used to refer to this population.

The use of “Hispanic” was solidified during the Nixon years as a replacement for “Mexican” and “Puerto Rican,” he explained, in order to count individuals from Central and South America and Spanish-speaking countries. This turned out to be problematic for several reasons, including the fact that “Hispanic” is based on the word “Spain,” which has a negative association with the conquerors. “It’s not about whether you get it right or wrong but whether you have an awareness of these histories,” he said. While we now use the term “Latino/a” – and the more neutral “Latinx” – many groups are committed to the term that reflects their country of origin.



This is true among Puerto Ricans, who often have been portrayed through the lens of negative stereotypes. As an example, Dr. Gonzalez told attendees, the creators of *West Side Story* decided to portray gang members in the iconic play as Puerto Ricans after hearing about a killing covered in the news. “There’s no story there about perseverance,” he said. Think what it takes to rebuild an entire island like Puerto Rico that’s been decimated by hurricanes. “Now that’s a story of perseverance.”

Dr. Gonzalez read a poem about a time in his childhood when Hurricane Fifi struck El Salvador and took the lives of some family members. His parents were already in the United States, and he had sent them a picture taken by a national newspaper of him standing next to a cousin’s casket. “My father was born in the 1930s when 40,000 peasants were killed in El Salvador. Two years before I was born, an earthquake left 48,000 homeless there,” he said. “And yet, I can’t think of people whose story demonstrates more perseverance than my parents.”



In speaking about Cuban Americans, Dr. Gonzalez contrasted the image of business people coming to the United States on airplanes after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 with that of a rusted-out boat packed with refugees that were part of a mass emigration from Cuba in 1980. Similar to the use of Puerto Rican gangs in *West Side Story*, this event in the news prompted the creators of *Scarface* to portray the mobsters in the movie as Cuban. The real stories of perseverance are about individuals like Oscar Hijuelos, the first Cuban-American novelist to win the Pulitzer prize for fiction, and the many others who left everything behind and have succeeded in this wonderful country, Dr. Gonzalez said.

When we think about the debate over whether Mexican-Americans should be required to speak English, we need to recognize that “they didn’t cross the border, the border crossed them” when what had been Mexico became part of the United States in the Mexican Cession of 1948. Imagine growing up surrounded by signs reading “No Spanish or Mexicans” that were displayed throughout the southwest during this time, he said. “These are stories of perseverance.”



Dr. Gonzalez took attendees through a progression of magazine covers illustrating the development of an alternate narrative about Latino people, from “The new face of America” of the 1980s to “We are Americans, just not legally” of today. But they also tell a story “that has so much to do with persevering and with making sure that we succeed...as representatives of different groups.” He summed up his message about Latinx identity with a reading of his poem “Autobrownography of a New England Latino.”

This program was part of Winston’s annual series that celebrates the diversity that exists at the firm and helps foster an inclusive work environment. Visit our [Diversity & Inclusion](#) page for more information.

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