

# HOW CAN I HELP?

Arturo J. González

*The following are excerpts from Arturo González's remarks at his December 17, 2009, installation as president of BASF.*

I am honored to stand before you as the second Latino president of this organization—following the footsteps of my friend Fred Alvarez. I am hopeful that the first Latina president is not far behind.

By way of introduction, I would like to share with you a little bit about my background. My story is particularly appropriate in this setting because I suspect that there are many people in this room whose efforts many years ago opened doors so that I and others like me could enter this honorable profession.

My parents, who lived in a small village outside of Guadalajara, had only one day of school between them because of where they were raised. My father left this village as part of the Bracero Program, a program established during World War II that allowed Mexican workers to come to this country to work. In 1959, he found a rancher in Auburn who helped him complete the paperwork to bring his wife and five children into the United States. I was born the next year in Auburn, California.

I didn't see my father much as a child. In addition to

working in the fields, my father worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad for thirty years. He was part of a traveling crew that would repair and clear tracks in the mountains.

He would leave the house on Sunday evening and not return until Friday. During the summers, my family would work in the fields picking peaches and tomatoes.

My mother spoke only a few words of English; my father speaks and understands very basic English. Thus, my parents were unable to help me much with school. So how did I get here? There is only one way out for a poor young child—education.

I was admitted to the University of California at Davis through the university's equal opportunity program, which seeks to give opportunities to underprivileged students. When I arrived at UC Davis, I knew I wanted to be a lawyer. At some point while in high school, I had come to the conclusion that Harvard was the best law school. I painted "Harvard or Bust" on my 1963 Volkswagen Bug. That led to a lot of ridicule. But I kept my focus, and in the fall of 1982, I began my studies at Harvard Law School.

At first, Harvard was somewhat intimidating. I spent my first law school summer working for the U.S. attorney's



Photo by Jim Block

*Arturo González and past BASF President Fred Alvarez, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, at the Annual Membership Luncheon at the Hyatt Regency on December 17, 2009*

office in Sacramento sitting in the courtroom, watching other lawyers. I had done the same thing in college when working as an intern with the federal public defender's office in Sacramento. I have always thought that watching other lawyers is the best way to learn. The more I watched, the more confident I became that I could do what they were doing.

I wasn't sure if a large law firm would be the place to spend my career. When I told the woman in the placement office that I wanted to help people who could not afford a lawyer, she told me about "pro bono" work. She encouraged me to look for firms that allowed lawyers to do such work. There were two firms in San Francisco that seemed to stand out—Morrison & Foerster and Heller Ehrman.

I began working at Morrison & Foerster on September 17, 1985. Six years later, I became the firm's first Latino partner. I was only thirty-one years old.

There are some who believe that in order to guide or mentor a young lawyer, you have to be of the same race or gender. Not true. I have always believed that anyone can help a young person succeed, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious background.

I will be the sixth partner from Morrison & Foerster to serve as president of this bar. The most recent are Bob Raven, James Brosnahan, and Mel Goldman. They all devoted their presidencies to helping underrepresented groups in our profession and to expanding the scope of legal services that were available to help the poor.

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There were no Latino lawyers at Morrison & Foerster when I arrived as a summer associate in 1984; I was the only Latino in our summer program. I enjoyed my summer at Morrison & Foerster and received an offer to be a permanent associate. But I was still uncertain about whether that was what I should do.

My final decision was made after speaking with César Chávez. César had been invited by the Harvard Law Forum to speak on campus. When he arrived, he was mobbed by the students. I waited until the crowd cleared and introduced myself as a law student who had worked as a farm worker in California. I asked César what he thought I should do with my career, and his answer surprised me. I suspected that he might say, "Come work for us, I could use a Harvard man." But he didn't. Instead, he said, "Arturo, if you can, you should go work at one of those large law firms with no Latino lawyers, and you should be the best lawyer in that firm."

I am going to try to follow their great example by continuing to open doors for others. I have asked Krystal Bowen from Bingham McCutchen to serve as chair of the Judiciary Committee. I am told that she will be the first African American woman to serve as chair.

The theme for my presidency is a simple one—"How can I help?"

That is a question I want each of you to ask yourselves. How can you help someone who desperately needs a lawyer but cannot afford one? How can you help diversify your law firm or place of employment? How can you help guide a person of color or a woman in our profession? How can you help a low-income high school or college student who has dreams of becoming a lawyer?

One way to help is to continue to support the many good programs that our bar association sponsors, such as School-To-College, Destination Law School, and the

# PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Volunteer Legal Services Program. Your support today and annually helps to keep those programs running.

In addition to continuing to support the strong programs that are unique to this bar, I would like to address three specific issues during my tenure as your president, first, the status of women in our profession; second, the status of lawyers of color in our profession; and third, the issue of civility.

With respect to women, I have asked Patricia Gillette and Cara Lowe to continue to serve as cochair of the No Glass Ceiling Task Force. This year, the bar will be sponsoring a series of programs for women associates and partners that will seek to enhance the retention and promotion of women in our firms. I strongly encourage all female attorneys and law students to participate in these programs.

With respect to lawyers of color, the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity was formed earlier this year by corporations and law firms dedicated to improving diversity in the legal profession. I am hopeful that they will see the need for increased efforts on the part of clients to diversify our profession.

But we cannot wait for others to act. I have formed a committee called the Bottom Line Partnership Task Force. It is being cochaired by Angela Padilla, Nicole Harris, and Jennifer Shoda. They will be assisted by Barristers Club members James Mink, Avin Sharma, and Sharron Gelobter. This task force will interview every Latino and African American partner in San Francisco law firms with more than fifty lawyers; twenty-five Asian partners at those firms; twenty managing general partners; and a select group of corporate clients. Our goal will be to come up with three lists that we will publish: (1) what lawyers of color can do to help themselves succeed at large law firms; (2) what law firms can do to help lawyers of color succeed and advance at their firms; and (3) what clients can do to help lawyers of color succeed and advance.

And, while I am on the subject of diversity, I feel compelled to point out the following: in one of the most diverse judicial districts in the nation, we do not have a Latino district court judge in San Francisco, San Jose, or Oakland. That must change. Latinos are nearly 40 percent of California's

population. I strongly encourage Senators Feinstein and Boxer to recommend a Latino to serve on the U.S. District Court, Northern District of California.

We must endeavor to treat each other with respect at all times. I realize that many of our clients like to hire the "tough lawyer," but that does not mean that you have to yell and curse in deposition. Most of the quarrels that I have seen in my twenty-five years of practice have happened in deposition.

A decade or so ago I drafted a resolution dealing with a lawyer's conduct in deposition. It was a simple proposal that mirrored the changes that were made to the federal rules. After considerable negotiations with other bars, the proposal was passed by the Conference of Delegates.

I felt that I had accomplished something until I was told that someone in the Litigation Section of the State Bar had placed a "hold" on the resolution. As a result, the resolution was not forwarded to the California legislature.

As your president, I intend to try again. I am going to go directly to the legislature to ask that they adopt my resolution relating to conduct in depositions. In addition, I am going to seek an amendment to our superior court local rules pertaining to how lawyers should conduct themselves in deposition.

I close by thanking all of you. Thank you to those of you who have fought to open the doors of educational opportunity; thank you to those of you who have advocated for opening the doors of our profession to people like me; and thank you to those of you who have made the extra effort to help lawyers of color and women succeed in our law firms.

It is because of your efforts that a young boy was able to climb out of poverty, study at Harvard, become a partner in one of San Francisco's largest firms, and proudly stand before you as president of the nation's finest bar organization.

Muchas gracias.

*Arturo J. González is a partner at Morrison & Foerster LLP and is cochair of the firm's Litigation Department.*