

INTERVIEW WITH SECRETARY JULIÁN CASTRO

Secretary Julián Castro has had a long political career, beginning in 2001 when he ran for San Antonio City Council at the age of twenty-six. He later ran for San Antonio mayor, winning the election in 2009 and serving until 2014, when he left to serve in the administration of President Barack Obama as the Secretary for Housing and Urban Development until 2017. In January 2019, he announced his candidacy for President of the United States in the Democratic primary, and stayed in the race until January 2020. He is a graduate of Stanford University and Harvard Law School.

In 2012, Secretary Castro was the first Latino to give the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, where he said: “The American dream is not a sprint, or even a marathon, but a relay. Our families don’t always cross the finish line in the span of one generation. But each generation passes on to the next the fruits of their labor. My grandmother never owned a house. She cleaned other people’s houses so she could afford to rent her own. But she saw her daughter become the first in her family to graduate from college. And my mother fought hard for civil rights so that instead of a mop, I could hold this microphone.”

This week when we were setting things up for this interview, we were looking in the office and we found Volumes 2 and 3 of HLLR from 1998 and 1999, and saw that you were an editor on them in your time at HLS!

There you go! Good to see the journal is still moving forward.

You have stated that you grew up in a very political household, with both of your parents involved in activism. How did this affect your upbringing, and your view of the political system and if that weighed on whether you wanted to be a lawyer when you grew up?

I would say it absolutely impacted my decision to go into politics. Growing up with an activist father influenced my choice to go to law school. In particular, I grew up hearing about the struggles of the civil rights movement and the Chicano movement. What especially hit close to home for me was growing up in the Edgewood and San Antonio School Districts, which were part of the landmark 1973 education and funding case [*San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*]. I grew up with a mom trying to make progress in our community, and in neighborhoods that had been directly impacted by the progress, or more like the lack of progress, made in the legal system to ensure people could have a good public education, no matter the color of their skin. As I started to understand that more and more in high school and college, that helped spark my interest in going to law school. I

also saw how my mother was trying to make progress in our community, and all of those influenced my decision to be involved in my community.

Did these early experiences you had with your community affect your quick shift to politics after leaving law school?

It definitely did. I wouldn't be in politics now if I didn't watch my mother be involved in activism in our community, particularly around education, for all those years. I really didn't start out liking politics — I was pretty cynical about politics for a while. But then I left home for Stanford [University], and it was there that I really saw the disparities between my peers at Stanford, who had higher income levels and higher education levels and seemed readier for the future, and the west side of San Antonio where I grew up, where I saw people with tremendous potential but not a lot of opportunities. I started to ask myself, how do I come back to San Antonio and change the conditions so more people who grew up like I did could have the opportunities that I was having at Stanford? But yes, the initial interest in politics and policy absolutely came from my mom.

How did your identity as a Latino, an underrepresented group in both the legal community but also at elite law schools, impact your experience at HLS and in your legal career?

Well HLS [Harvard Law School] definitely felt different from my previous experiences. I had gone to Stanford, but there are big differences between Stanford and Harvard. There weren't very many Latinxs at HLS, and I felt there was a larger Latinx community at Stanford, particularly since it was in California. Even then, I did think my time at HLS was better than I thought it would be coming in. At the same time, it did feel like people were still having to knock on the door to demand more opportunity, more representation, more progress from the law school itself. At that time, there was no tenured Latino professor. HLLR had just started a few years before, and there wasn't the institutional investment or recognition of the Latinx community that there could have been at the law school. It's still a work in progress, even today.

Even in the working world, there is still a disparity with Latinxs. I was fortunate because I came back to my hometown of San Antonio, where there is a higher percentage of Latinxs in the profession than in most places. But still, there is a disparity. It's one of the reasons my brother and I are both involved in politics, and also in trying to encourage Latinxs, young Latinxs, to chase their dreams and in doing what we can to help them achieve them.

You were the youngest city councilman in San Antonio history when elected in 2001, and the youngest mayor of a top-10 American city when you won your race in 2009. How do you think getting involved in politics

Spring 2020

Interview with Secretary Julián Castro

3

so young has changed your trajectory? What were some of the obstacles and benefits to doing it so early in your career and fresh out of school?

There are definitely advantages to getting involved in politics while you're still young. I think you're more idealistic when you're young, and I was able to combine that idealism with energy and a strong focus on what I believed we needed to do in San Antonio to offer greater opportunities. And people often like to see young people taking initiative and beating expectations in terms of how involved or democratically engaged they think young people usually are. The disadvantage is that people question your ability because you just don't have a lot of experience. The key, I think, is to try to have them assess you based on your judgment rather than just on your years of experience that I had. That was true when I ran for City Council in my 20s, when I ran for mayor in my 30s, and is generally true for young people not only in politics, but in other professions too.

How were you able to balance working as an associate at a law firm and your rule on the San Antonio City Council?

I was able to get the law firm to reduce my hours, which meant they reduced my pay so I could serve on the City Council, which only paid \$1,040 a year at that time. I was still making good money for a 26-year-old, so it's not like I was hurting.

I found that my passion was in public service. I knew early on that zealously pursuing the partner track was just not for me, and I found that I didn't have any passion for many of the topics I was working on at the firm, such as insurance defense, or in chasing billable hours. I left the firm because I really wanted to do more on controversial issues. At one point, I really wanted to vote against the interest of a client of the firm, and I decided it was important to leave the law firm for this topic. And I did—I left and I informed the client and got a waiver so I was able to vote on the issue and vote against the client. It was quite a saga early on in my career, but I'm proud of making the right decision in the interest of the public instead of the private interest.

So safe to say you will not be back at a law firm?

It's not likely! If I ever do, it'll certainly be in a different context.

You were the first Latinx to give the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2012, and also the serious Latinx candidate for President in the race this year. There is a current drastic underrepresentation of Latinxs in the US political system. What do you see as the biggest barriers to Latinxs in pursuing a career and succeeding in these fields? What has your experience been so far in the different roles you have served?

I take a lot of satisfaction in trying to better the lives of the people I serve, whether it's as councilman, mayor, or HUD Secretary. I believe it is a very fulfilling calling. But I also recognize that a lot of people are not interested in it – they think it's too nasty or divisive, and that the barriers to entry are high. I understand why people are reluctant to get involved. I encourage especially young people to get involved in politics, I believe we need more Latinos and Latinas to do that. Representation matters, and perspective matters. Perspective when making a policy decision, whether it be on big ticket items such as immigration or health care or criminal justice reform, or even smaller issues about how we ensure that neighborhoods in a community are equally served, is incredibly important.

We need to make sure that diverse communities have opportunities to get into the pipeline, and a large part of that means our communities must have better access to education, and access to jobs. One example of ensuring folks have access to the pipeline is by paying interns. It's very difficult for people to be a Congressional page or intern when you aren't getting paid, and same with a campaign. On my presidential campaign, I made sure that my campaign interns were getting paid — we paid them \$15 an hour. I'm glad to see other campaigns and institutions doing that. We have to focus on strengthening that pipeline in the future.

The first policy plan you laid out during your campaign was on immigration, which is obviously an issue that is important to many communities in the U.S., including the Latinx/Hispanic community. Why did you choose to make this your first issue on the campaign? This included a proposal to repeal the law-making illegal entry a crime – why was this a necessary first step in the policy?

We really wanted to offer a bold alternative and positive antidote to our community that countered [President] Trump's dark and cruel immigration policy. I fundamentally believe that the best way to take on a bully like Trump is not to cower and try to avoid an issue but, instead, to face it head on and make the case. I wasn't going to shy away from showing compassion and common sense in my politics instead of his cruelty. I think people are looking for a candidate that will lead, and not follow. I took the attitude of leading on the campaign and I do believe the proposal helped move the conversation forward on immigration policy.

In addition to immigration, what do you see as some of the key issues affecting Latinxs in the U.S.? Why?

The Latinx community has the same concerns as Americans everywhere, but they are impacted more by the nation's shortcomings on certain things, like healthcare, education, and certainly immigration. For instance, the Latinx community has responded well to proposals to make community colleges and state universities and job training programs more accessible. They view

Spring 2020 Interview with Secretary Julián Castro

5

current tuition at higher education institutions are being just too high, and parents are scared about what will happen when their children want to go to these institutions. It's similar with healthcare: our community is disproportionately impacted by things like diabetes. My grandmother suffered from diabetes, and it is challenging to be able to afford things like insulin – insulin costs 10x more in the U.S. than it does in Canada. We need leaders to make sure that communities have access to healthcare, and in these issues the Latino community is often impacted more.

When we talk about Latinx issues in this country, we tend to only talk about immigration, and issues affecting Mexico – the discussion around other issues affecting Latinxs and Latin America is essentially none, and knowledge of Latin American politics is low in the United States. How do you see this affecting the political climate and rhetoric?

First, we need to change the current rhetoric. We need elected officials to do their part and lower the rhetoric to speak to the better angels of the American people instead of using immigrants as scapegoats. Leaders need to speak realistically and in a common-sense way about immigrants and immigration policy. But we also need to improve our education system so that we learn about different backgrounds and the contributions of those from different backgrounds and cultures to our country. It's easy to one-dimensionalize entire cultures, and at its root I think that this is because our public education system isn't teaching our young people about the diversity of experiences in this country. We have not equipped them to appreciate each other as much as they could or should. At a structural level, I think we really need to move away from the model where only certain groups get to choose the curriculum and textbooks for public education in states. And lastly, we need to better enforce anti-discrimination and hate crime legislation, and to prosecute it.

As mayor of San Antonio, you started SA2020, meant to revitalize and push innovation in San Antonio, with goals to be completed by 2020. We're in 2020 now: how do you see the success of this campaign? Do you believe it is a model that could be used in other cities and around the country?

I am proud of SA2020. I think it was an ambitious effort and goal about the progress we could make in a decade on fundamental issues that affect the lives of San Antonians: education, health, transportation, infrastructure. The final report of SA2020 will be delivered on September 25, 2020, which will be ten years to the day since SA2020 was launched. I am looking forward to the report, and there will likely be mixed results. We'll see some successes, and some room for improvement, but I'm excited for what we'll see in September to see what we can redouble our efforts on.

What advice do you have for young Latinx students who are figuring out their careers and maybe hoping to enter the political sphere or the law?

I have three pieces of advice for young Latinxs. The first is always believe in yourself. You have a lot of talent and ability.

The second is, don't feel like you have to know what your entire future will look like at 25 – you never know how the world turns. Of course, you have to be intentional about finding your career, but you want to be open to opportunities as they come along. When I was getting out of law school, I never thought I would be running for President twenty years later.

And third, as a practical advice for law school, take as many clinical courses as you can. I think one of the shortcomings of American legal education is that it helps students learn to analyze and think, but it doesn't teach you how to actually practice law. You should get a running start if you are interested in working with actual clients.

Given the current socio-political climate and what we see every day, it is easy for Latinxs to feel pessimistic about the advancement of Latinos, and other folks of color, in the U.S. How do you respond to their sentiments? What gives you hope?

I really do think there are better days just around the corner. I believe we're going to make a big change in November [in the election] and usher in an administration that will try to bring the country together and try to bring about a greater sense of equality. And I feel good about the future of Latinx community. We're continuing to grow – we're sending more people to college and to graduate school. The barriers that our parents and grandparents faced are not gone, but they are getting weaker. And the Latinx community has a lot of talent. We're going to see more and more firsts and success in the years to come, in every field, and we are going to keep beating down those doors. I truly feel optimistic about the future of the Latinx community despite headwinds like Donald Trump.

What do you think is the next step for you in your career?

That's a great question! I'm not sure what's next. This really is the third time in my life that I don't know what comes next for me. The first was after I quit my job at the first law firm. The second was after I left the Obama Administration in 2017. And now, this is the third time. I know if you work hard and focus, things tend to work out, so I have no doubt things will work out. I'll keep you updated!