

A CITY OF PURPOSE

INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF LOS ANGELES MAYOR ANTONIO VILLARAIGOSA

JULY 1, 2005



ANTONIO VILLARAIGOSA

Fellow Angelenos, members of the City Council, City Controller Chick, City Attorney Delgadillo, Mayor Riordan, Mayor Hahn, Superintendent Romer, Vice President Gore, Governor Schwarzenegger, representatives of the Congress and the California Legislature, fellow mayors, county leaders, members of the consular corps, distinguished guests:

Today is a day for thanks. I want to thank all of you.

What a great country this is!

And what a great city this is!

Los Angeles has always led the way. You've always focused on what really matters. You've always disproved the doubters. When others said it couldn't be done, you elected the first African-

American mayor of a leading American city. And, believe me, early in our campaign, there were those who said it wasn't time for a Latino mayor. The faith you have placed in me makes me so proud to be an Angeleno today. And I promise you, I will be a mayor for all the people.

So, thank you, Los Angeles.

I want to thank my wife Corina and my four children, Marisela, Prisila, Antonio and Natalia Fe. With these five, public service is a family affair, and I can't adequately express how much I appreciate their support and their sacrifices—and they have all made sacrifices. I love you each. I love you all.

I want to thank Mayor James Hahn. Mayor Hahn, thank you for your decades of service to Los Angeles and for the graciousness

and professionalism that both you and your staff have exhibited throughout these transition weeks. Thank you, Mayor Hahn. We wish you well.

Today, before God, family and community, I placed my hand on the Bible and took an oath to faithfully discharge the duties of the Office of Mayor. Fellow Angelenos, I am humbled by the support and trust that you have placed in me, and I will do my utmost each and every day to affirm that trust. Honoring this covenant with the people of Los Angeles will be the heartbeat of my administration. It will guide every decision we make and every action we take. I want you to know that I will be a mayor who takes responsibility and leads by example. I will work as hard as you do every single day.

But the ceremony that we mark here today is far bigger than any single person. And it's about much more than the oath of one man. It is about an oath we all must swear:

Today, we come together. One city. Angelenos all.

We come together not just to conduct an orderly transfer of power. We come here to transcend our differences, to meet our collective challenges, and to define our mutual dreams, to take stock of who we are and what we stand for, to remember where we came from, and to decide where we need to go.

¡Que lindo es este país!

Yo soy prueba de que los estados unidos es un país de oportunidades y libertad.

¿En que otro país del mundo podría yo estar frente a ustedes como el alcalde de una gran ciudad?

Los invito que sueñen conmigo.

I will never forget where I came from. It may be a short way from City Terrace to City Hall, but fellow Angelenos, we all know what a vast distance it truly is. It's a distance that can't be measured in miles or calculated in terms of the achievements of any one person.

I want to pay tribute today to all those who began that journey before us, and on whose shoulders we stand. I want to thank those who walked with us, side by side, along the road. And I want to remember, with deep gratitude and love, the one person who set me on my way.

I am here today because of the indomitable spirit and the boundless faith of my mother, Natalia Delgado. A woman who struggled as a single mom, who sometimes worked two jobs to put her kids through college. A woman who went through unspeakable circumstances as a victim of domestic violence and a foster child in a home plagued by alcoholism. A woman who suffered more than her share of life's indignities, but who never, never surrendered her dignity.

I owe everything I have and everything I am to her.

My mother's story is a classic L.A. story. Not the stuff of scripts or movie fantasy. A true story, like those of countless Angelenos, past and present. A story of working hard, of loving your kids, of having a clear picture of a better future in your mind's eye and driving for it with a ferocious sense of purpose.

Stories like my mother's are all around us every day. We see them in the faces of people who clean homes and offices. Who work the night shifts and who empty bedpans. We see them in the faces of people who sweep the floors and load the freight. We see them in South Los Angeles and East L.A. and in the Valley and at the beaches. And even though we live in the entertainment capital of the world, it's not hard to see who the real stars are.

I said on election night that if my mother had been with me, she'd have said, with that vision of a better future still gleaming in her mind's eye, "Antonio, don't declare victory tonight, declare your purpose."

Fellow Angelenos, it's time to remember the values that got us here.

Let's swear a common oath today.

Let's make Los Angeles a City of Purpose.

And, to do that, I'm asking you to dream with me.

For more than a century, Los Angeles has been synonymous with big dreams. The Australian writer and critic Clive James said it this way. "Call Los Angeles any dirty name you like... The fact remains that you are already living in it before you get there."

Los Angeles is not only the one city that best embodies bold dreams. It's the destination of people's imaginations all around the world, whether or not they ever set foot here.

Fellow Angelenos, I'm asking you to dream with me, because our city not only represents America's greatest hopes. We also face many of its most daunting challenges.

Seen from the Hollywood Hills at night, L.A. spreads out like a field of diamonds. And it truly is. But we also know that this shimmering vision obscures a darker truth. We know that there is a whole world of frustration lurking in the shadows between the lights, where too many parents fear for their children's safety, where too many people are denied opportunity to fully develop their God-given talents, and where too many families are swimming against the tide of a declining quality of life.

Here in Los Angeles we have more museums and theaters than any other American city, but too many of our young people can't imagine life beyond the nearest street corner. Today, over one third of our students drop out before reaching graduation.

We are the undisputed commercial and cultural capital of the richest state in the wealthiest nation in the world, but we're also home to the largest homeless population of any metropolitan area in the United States.

We stand at the global economic crossroads of Latin America and the Pacific Rim and the great consumer markets of North America, but we also face the daunting task of educating the most ethnically and economically diverse population in America — and maybe the world.

In short, we stand poised between the promise of immense possibility, and if we fail to act, a future of profound uncertainty.

I am asking you to dream with me.

Dream with me of a Los Angeles where kids can walk to school in safety and where they receive an education that gives them a genuine opportunity to pursue their own dreams.

Dream with me of a Los Angeles that is the leading economic and cultural center in the world. As Venice was in the 15th century, as London was in the 19th century, Los Angeles can and will be the great global city of our century.

Dream with me of a Los Angeles where it doesn't matter whether you're African American, Latino, Caucasian, or Asian. Whether you're Jewish or Muslim, Protestant or Catholic. Whether you're from Watts or Westwood. Where every Angeleno is an equal stakeholder in our city's future.

Angelenos, we need to start thinking big again, and facing up to our biggest challenges. I intend to be a mayor who confronts those challenges. And I'll begin by leading the fight to make our neighborhoods safer.

Crime affects every Angeleno and every community. But it is nothing less than a plague on our society's most vulnerable. A plague on children drawn to the streets by the lure of gangs and drugs. A plague on the poor whose neighborhoods bear a disproportionate share of the burden.

I want you to join me in the battle against crime and gun and gang violence. Join me in working with Chief Bratton and the brave men and women of the LAPD. Together we'll finally give them the tools they need to get the job done. It is time once and for all to put the police on our streets that will keep our city safe.

Surely, in this city of boundless creative genius and incalculable wealth, we can find the resources and the political will to hire more police officers!

But we also have to recognize that we will never address the problems of gangs and crime unless we reach out and expand opportunity for more of our people.

I can't say it more clearly: Reforming our public schools is the central challenge facing Los Angeles. And it will be a central priority of my administration.

I'm a proud progressive. But it's time for those of us who call ourselves "progressive" to do more than just defend existing government programs. We need to be passionate advocates for change.

I will immediately create a Council of Education Advisors made up of our brightest education leaders, whose charge it will be to draft a comprehensive proposal to make long-needed improvements to the L.A. Unified School District.

We will be sending that Council to summer school, and we'll expect to hear some of their recommendations before school starts in the fall. Their work will be guided by these bedrock principles: That dramatically improving student achievement and graduation rates is the goal. That eliminating achievement gaps is the urgent necessity. That students should be free of any threat of violence. That parents should be encouraged and empowered to get more involved in their children's schools. That teachers should be well respected and well paid. That money should be spent in the classroom, not on bureaucracy. That schools should be neighborhood centers. And that no reform effort can succeed unless it's the product of honest and earnest collaboration and consensus among parents, teachers, principals and the community they serve.

I have no illusions. There is no quick fix or a single path. But the stakes are too great, the needs are too urgent not to start now. Public education is not just the best investment we can make as a society. It can literally change a person's destiny. You see, I know, because I married a great public school teacher who makes a difference in the lives of her students, every day. And because a great public school teacher named Herman Katz made just such a difference in my life—and in the lives of hundreds of other students, just like me.

You know, the people coming here in search of a better life today aren't any different from our grandparents and great grandparents. It doesn't matter if your family passed through Ellis Island or San Ysidro or whether they came from Malaysia yesterday or from Moscow a century ago.

The dream and the obstacles to that dream are the same.

In 1903, Rabbi J. Leonard Levy penned a fifth question for the ritual of Passover. "Where," he asked, "do we find civil, political, and religious liberty united today?" He offered this answer: "To us, the United States of America stands as the foremost among nations granting the greatest liberty to all who dwell here. Therefore, we grace our table with the national flag. That flag stands for equal liberty to all men. It means equal rights for all. It means free hands, free lips, self-government. It means universal education,

light for every mind, knowledge for every child. It means that the schoolhouse is the bulwark of liberty.”

Fellow Angelenos, we still need light for every mind, and while the Rabbi’s words are a century old, their meaning has never rung truer. The schoolhouse remains the bulwark of liberty.

I’d like to now turn to another matter that may not sound like the stuff of dreams, but is critical if we are to improve the quality of life of our city’s residents. And that’s traffic.

The time we spend stuck in traffic is time we do not spend helping our kids with their homework or being productive at work.

So, Los Angeles, join me in fighting for the investment in public transportation that is the hallmark of any great city. Join me in implementing the common sense traffic plans that have been bottlenecked for too long. Join me in transforming Los Angeles into a city that connects our communities and brings us all closer together.

And, because improving our quality of life means protecting the quality of the water we drink and the air we breathe, join me in making L.A. the greenest big city in America. Let’s provide the national leadership that’s lacking on conservation and recycling. Let’s show the nation that we can light a city with green power. Let’s fight together for tougher air and water quality standards.

Fighting crime and fixing schools and improving our quality of life are huge challenges. And there are many more.

We need to come together as a city to meet those challenges.

And we can’t do it without the effort and contributions of every neighborhood and every community of interest. We won’t succeed if people north of the Hollywood Hills feel like they are not equal partners in our civic life. And we can’t truly prosper if those living south of the Santa Monica freeway don’t feel fully invested in our economic success.

Join me, Los Angeles.

Dream with me, Los Angeles.

And work with me to fulfill our dreams.

I’ve lived here all my life, and there are many places I love around the city. But whenever I go through South Los Angeles, I always try to get a glimpse of *Nuestro Pueblo*, which is Spanish for “Our Town.” It describes a series of towers that rise over Watts like an improbable dream.

The Watts Towers were a thirty-three year labor of love, built by the Italian artist and immigrant Simon Rodia. He used simple tools and cast-off materials. He worked without the aid of scaffolding or the benefit of architectural designs. And he raised his towers from the ground up.

For over half a century, the Watts Towers have stood. They’ve withstood natural and man-made catastrophes. They’ve survived despite the efforts of critics and the ravages of earthquakes and the proximity of civil unrest. And they’ve stood. They’ve stood as both a tribute to individual imagination and as a monument to the power of difference.

Seen from afar, the Watts Towers rise like the spires of a great cathedral. But close up, you are immediately drawn in by the amazing complexity of their design. Embedded in those walls are thousands of cast-off objects, representing every imaginable color and shape and texture and form. They’re made from bed frames and bottles and broken glass—from scrap metal, pot shards and ceramic tiles. When I see those towers soaring over Watts, my thoughts always return to the pieces that make up that beautiful whole. To the value in those things that people, in their haste, are apt to cast away. To the awesome power of disparate elements working together to achieve such dazzling harmony.

Fellow Angelenos, I will never forget where I came from. And I will always believe in the value of every Angeleno. This is truly our town. And we all have a contribution to make.

Simon Rodia was asked late in his life to explain the meaning of his work, and he offered this simple reply: “I had in mind to do something big, and I did it.”

Let’s heed Mr. Rodia’s words today.

Let’s do something big for Los Angeles. Let’s raise our eyes skyward. Let’s imagine the pinnacles that we can reach together. Together, all of us, without regard to race or geography or language, without regard to age or religion or gender or sexual orientation.

Fellow Angelenos, let’s make Los Angeles a City of Purpose!

Let’s dare to dream!

Let’s dare to dream together!

May God bless Los Angeles, and may God bless the United States of America.

God bless you all.