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## NOT JUST ONE MONTH, ALWAYS!

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By Mario J. Paredes

Every year, from September 15 to October 15, we celebrate **HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH IN THE UNITED STATES**. A National celebration established by presidential proclamation, Hispanic Heritage Month recognizes the influence and contributions that the community of men and women of Hispanic origin have made to the development and progress of this Nation.

This celebration, in addition to the well-known celebrations across the United States, is an important opportunity for us, within our Hispanic communities, to ask ourselves about the present of our past and, more importantly, about our future in the United States. We should reflect on our rich heritage and on the preservation of the history, culture, customs, beliefs, values, and language that we have received from our ancestors and countries of origin and that we brought to this great Nation for the continuation of this legacy that we are affecting right here and now. But, above all, we must ask ourselves about the present and future of our Hispanic identity—our heritage—that we are building in the United States.

Data from this Nation's latest population censuses show the numerical strength of our Hispanic presence in today's North American society. But the numerical growth of our Hispanic community should correspond, simultaneously, to an increase in the quality of our political, cultural, academic, religious, sports, and economic presence and in our participation in the institutions and spaces where this Nation's destiny is decided.

The analyses emerging about what happened during the pandemic—which continues—show the fragility of the human condition, the weaknesses of the world and North American community, and, for that matter, the enormous fragility of the Hispanic community in the United States. Our conditions of poverty, overcrowding, and lack of knowledge and resources paint us as a very vulnerable community and one that has been impacted by the pandemic. Amidst the dominant society and culture, Hispanics and Latin Americans show the highest rates of contagion and mortality.

In addition to the important lessons that the pandemic leaves to all humanity, Hispanics in this Nation must awaken from our resignation and lethargy and ask ourselves about our real personal and community living conditions in this country. We must ask ourselves about what has been achieved and our common goals that have yet to be reached, what we have built and what we lack, our current existence and our will and what should be, our daily lives and our dreams that we have carried to this point and that should continue to inspire our daily lives.

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In addition to the pandemic, our current context historically and socially, politically and economically is conditioned by internal political conflicts (especially the conflict between the traditional political parties) and by large and very serious external shifts and conflicts (such as Russia's invasion and war against Ukraine). These are great social changes and serious internal and external conflicts that shake all humanity and that, therefore, cannot leave us unmoved.

All of this demands that the Hispanic community in the United States embrace the best of its heritage and values. The current situation in the United States demands of Hispanics identity, cohesion, training, work, effort, clear goals and leaders who—well-trained in all fields of social and academic areas—are worthy representatives of Hispanic interests in this Nation.

Hispanics cannot remain second-class citizens. And if this is who we are, it is because we allow it. The Hispanic community cannot continue to be part of the national political chessboard that dominant minorities use politically and electorally at their whim and convenience. Our destiny can no longer be defined, conditioned, and determined by others. Hispanics must become—at last—the agents of change, protagonists, and builders of our own present and near-future of this Nation.

Enough with ephemeral and short-sighted struggles and conquests. Enough with electoral deception, passivity, and resignation. The present and future of our Hispanic heritage must live up to and correspond to the greatness of our origins and our past and to the very greatness of this Nation in which we now live and in which—with all our deeds, words, achievements, and attitudes—it is incumbent upon us to show the pride of our Hispanic heritage, not just one month a year, but always.

*Mario J. Paredes is the CEO of SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 independent physicians — mostly primary care physicians — who care for nearly one million of New York City's most vulnerable Medicaid patients.*