

DAVID WELLSTONE

Take Back America Conference Campaign for America's Future / Institute for America's Future

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Thank you. It's hard, I can't see anybody out there and I like to see all the folks that my parents loved. My brother and I get invited to a lot of events and we go to some of them, but not to a lot of them. But this was one that we had to be at--that I had to be at, although my brother can't be here and he wanted to. I know my dad was here last year, I know both my mother and father were here. They didn't speak at your conference, I know that last year was not quite as large as this, but I know what my dad would be saying this year, with three times the members. He'd be saying, "Let's Go!"

I could start by saying thank you, although I don't think I can single out any friends. I want to say "thank you" to everybody for the hard work that you put in and to your dedication to the causes of social and economic justice that my mother and father fought so hard for. My dad would be fired up to know that we all came together tonight to rebuild progressive politics. I kind of like that word—rebuilding progressive politics! That's what we're here for, and that's why my brother and I decided to start Wellstone Action: to continue on the commitment to economic and social justice that both my mother and father and my sister Marcia had. We intend to train thousands of people and we intend to work with all of you to make the country a better place. And we intend to Take Back America with you. Speaking of Taking Back America, I'm very proud and pleased to be able to introduce tonight the first annual winner of the Paul Wellstone Citizen Leadership Award, Maria Elena Durazo.

When Maria Elena Durazo arrived at HERE Local 11 in Los Angeles in 1983, the union's problems were clear. As she testified before Congress, "I witnessed the union deteriorate right before my eyes. Seventy percent of the members are immigrants from Mexico and Central America, yet the meetings were held in English only. The publications were sent out in English only. And members rarely attended meetings. As a result of their exclusion, the members had no voice in their union."

As a young law student with a background in organizing, Ms. Durazo had only been hired as an organizer and arbitration specialist. But as the daughter of immigrant field workers, she knew the importance of real representation for the vulnerable people who come to a new country in search of work. And she set out to do much more than simply organize, as she has done now. In the twenty years since she was hired, Ms. Durazo has transformed Local 11 from a struggling union to one of the most active and successful rank and file locals in Southern California. In 1987, Ms. Durazo led a movement to democratize the union, and two years later she was elected president, becoming the first Latina to head a major local union in Southern California. She

immediately set out to end the policy of exclusion that had crippled the union, and she set in place bi-lingualism for meetings and publications and hired experienced bi-lingual organizers to reinvigorate the membership. Once revitalized, Local 11 has gone on to win increased benefits in wages for thousands of hotel and food service workers in the Los Angeles area, all the while building the broad based coalitions that drove the passage of the worker retention and living wage ordinances in the city of Los Angeles.

Ms. Durazo has since been elected as General Vice President of HERE International Union and appointed to numerous city boards in Los Angeles. Today she serves as National Director of the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, a national campaign dedicated to securing dignity and a living wage for hardworking immigrants who, like her parents, come to America to secure a better life for themselves and their children. For her courage and dedication, Maria Elena Durazo is awarded the first Paul Wellstone Citizen Leadership Award. I am so proud to be able to give that to you, Maria.