

Latina author tells tales to spellbound library audiences

By Kevin Milliken, La Prensa Correspondent

April 21, 2015: Latina author and activist Sandra Cisneros gave a unique perspective on Latino life in the U.S. today and her own travels through life during a three-day stay in Toledo, which included at least three appearances—at a tea fundraiser, at the McMaster Center of the downtown main library, and a talk before 450 fans at the Stranahan Theatre Wednesday evening, April 22.

The latter appearance is part of the *Authors! Authors!* lecture series put on by the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library and The Blade.

“Every story is medicine, every book is medicine,” Ms. Cisneros told the crowd. “A part of them is born in you, not immediately, but eventually, gradually. Even sadness has its place in the universe.”

The 60-year-old Chicago-born author, who now lives in Mexico, read parts of her works and lectured for about an hour. Ms. Cisneros first gained fame for *The House on Mango Street* (1984), which was followed by *Caramelo*. She has also written several books of poetry and fiction and was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, a five-year, no-strings-attached reward given to individuals who show exceptional creativity and the prospect for more in the future. Recipients are permitted to pursue creative, intellectual, and professional activities.

She read excerpts from *Have You Seen Marie?*, a story in which she verbally assumed about a dozen characters. Her books have been translated into more than 20 languages and published internationally.

The evening before, Ms. Cisneros made a special appearance at the main branch of

the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library, an event attended by Latino leaders and librarians alike.

“I thought I was an activist attorney, but she’s greater than her books explain that,” said Jesús Salas from *Advocates for Basic Legal Equality (ABLE)* in his introductory remarks. He was among a Latino delegation who picked her up from the airport. Attorney Salas was recently selected to be a member of the Board of Trustees for the library.

“This woman is a conspiring person,” joked Baldemar Velásquez, founder and president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), who has known Ms. Cisneros for almost two decades.

The two first met during a MacArthur Fellowship event in Chicago. Ms. Cisneros convinced him to help organize a reunion of all Latino winners of that fellowship in San Antonio. The group planned events all over the city—at universities, high schools, and libraries. Ms. Cisneros is credited as the founder of the *Latino MacArthur Fellows*, or “*Los HYPERLINK*” www.sandracisneros.com/community_macarturos.php “*MacArturos*.”

Velásquez related a tale of when the pair was part of a group inside the Alamo—and Velásquez was telling what he called the “true history” of that battle, which was slavery. The FLOC founder recalled telling a group of people that Texas wanted the Mexican territory to add it to what would become a slavery state, while Ms. Cisneros kept warning him that Texas Rangers were standing behind them.

The author later clarified the group was

part of a “peace circle” praying for that “true story” to come to light because “it cast such a dark shadow on so many people’s lives.”

“He was my guest and I didn’t want him to get arrested,” she said to laughter from the crowd.

“She’s always getting me in trouble anytime we’re together, but it’s a good kind of trouble,” said Velásquez. “It speaks to her life as a kind of person whose heart really goes out there. She’s really renowned and she could very easily glide by the literary circles on all these accolades and prizes and awards. But she uses that prestige to call attention to people who are struggling and suffering. That’s why she captured my heart the first time I met her.”

Ms. Cisneros paid homage to librarians and others who work in libraries at the start of her presentation.

“This is such a violent time, where communities who haven’t been in contact with each other are coming into contact and without the right perception in a time of fear,” she said. “People are making wrong decisions and reacting from this place of fear. I think we need to remember there are people who are working toward knowledge and peace-making. I think anytime you allow people to read a book or come into a beautiful building like



Sandra Cisneros

that is a safe place, a refuge for the mind—that is an act against violence, a peacemaking act.”

Ms. Cisneros called herself “a product of the Chicago public library” system, who saw value in books “because she had no idea you could buy a book.” She sought refuge in libraries as a place she called “a quiet house” from the noise of her own home and the trauma and troubles of her neighborhood. She recounted how her

mother always took her to a library on Saturday and a museum on Sunday.

“I thank you for the work you do every day to make peace,” she said to the librarians in attendance.

But the McMaster Center event did not start without a bit of drama. Earlier in the day, the downtown library branch closed due to a bomb threat. A 17-year-old student left a handwritten note beside a computer. He was later arrested by Toledo police on felony charges.

Ms. Cisneros also appeared at a “high tea” put on by *The Campaign for Migrant Worker Justice* at the Sweet Shalom Tea Room, 8216 Erie St., Sylvania, on Monday evening, April 20. 30 people paid \$200 per ticket to attend the exclusive event. Proceeds will help fund the *FLOC Homies Union program*, which seeks to help train at-risk youth in life and job skills, as well as develop them as leaders within the Latino barrios of Toledo.



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SO YOU'RE AGAINST IMMIGRATION? SPLENDID! WHEN DO YOU LEAVE?

500+ attend CHIP's 20th Hispanic Leadership Conference and Gala

By Kevin Milliken, La Prensa Correspondent

More than 500 Latino leaders and those who work with the Latino community received a call to action at the 20th annual Hispanic Leadership Conference held Saturday, April 25, 2015 at Lorain County Community College's Spitzer Conference Center.

The annual conference went beyond the normal aspects to re-energize and refocus the crowd. Co-organizers Mike and Dina Ferrer wanted their final conference to "connect people to causes they care about."

The leadership event is hosted each year by the Lorain County-based PAC—Coalition for Hispanic/Latino Issues and Progress (CHIP). The conference theme was "Abriendo Puertas," or "Opening Doors," according to CHIP President Tim Carrion.

The day commenced with saluting the colors by Lorain HS's Army JROTC, the national anthem sung by Angelica Davila, and invocation by Dr. Mildred Figueroa (Christian Tabernacle Church).

That morning conference participants received an earful from some of the event's main speakers including: Enrique Morones, executive director of the Border Angels; Baldemar Velásquez, founder and president of the Toledo-based Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC); and Dr. Celia Williamson, a University of Toledo professor who also serves as president of the National Research Consortium on Commercial Sexual Exploitation and director of UT's Human Trafficking and Social Justice Institute.

Speakers also included Dr. Nelson Soto (Provost & VP Academic Affairs, Union Institute & University; theme was Education); Dr. Raquel Ortiz Rodriguez (Professor Author, Boricua College; theme was 'Establishing Identity'); Toinette Parrilla (Director, Cleveland Public Health; theme was



Dr. Celia Williamson

Latino Health); and Lilleana Cavanaugh (Exec. Director, Ohio Commission on Hispanic/Latino Affairs; theme was Latina Empowerment).

All seven also presented afternoon workshops.

Of the seven, Morones, Velásquez, and Dr. Celia Williamson brought a different facet to the immigration debate during their Saturday morning speeches—deaths in the desert, human trafficking, and labor exploitation. Each presenter challenged the crowd to make a difference in the "human face" of immigration.

"The person who is going to make the difference in this world is each one of us," Morones told the audience. "Youth are not the future. They are the present. They are the ones showing the way today. They're the ones who stepped out of schools to talk of the need of the DREAM Act, for immigration reform. They're the ones risking it all in front of authorities, saying we're not afraid. They're the ones showing us the way."

The Border Angels founder told the crowd his group started in 1986 with just one person, but now numbers 5,000—working in every U.S. state. The group got its name in 2001, when he was introduced as "The Border Angel" by a Miami TV host. That was also his last year as an executive with the San Diego Padres major-league baseball team.

"Border Angels would like to start a club here in Lorain, here in Ohio," he said.

Morones spoke of Operation Gatekeeper, an effort by the federal government to build a wall between San Diego and Mexico in 1984, the same year President Reagan issued the famous words: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," a reference to the Berlin Wall.

He stated that 11,000 immigrants have died trying to cross the border there, referring to it as "The Wall of Death." That prompted the Border Angels in early 2006 to take a cara-

van of cars to travel 10,000 miles across the country, stopping in 40 cities on the way to and from Washington, D.C., to tell the nation what was happening to undocumented immigrants.

The effort led to huge protests in several U.S. cities and effectively stopped federal legislation that would have stopped education and social service benefits to the children of undocumented immigrants.

"We said let's rise up in protest, peacefully, and let our voices be heard," he said. "We have to continue with that spirit, because people are being persecuted every single day. Every day, two people die because they have no legal way of entering the country."

Morones invited young Latino leaders to join his group in such activities as placing water in the desert for immigrants, visiting day labor camps where people hope to get work, and veteran's activities. He continuously cited a theme: "The Power of One."

"Many of these veterans are now deported. People who fought for this country—World War II, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan—broken tail light, no papers, deported," he said matter-of-factly. "It's hard to believe, but this is happening now."

Morones told the group he had to leave immediately after the conference to fly back to San Diego for a Sunday event, where children would line up in Friendship Park to be able to hug their deported parents. In closing, he asked the group to stand and bow their heads for 43 seconds for the 43 students missing in Guerrero, Mexico.

"I want you to also think for those 43 seconds about the people crossing the border right now, simply looking for a better life," he said. "They cannot get a visa because we don't have humane immigration reform. Congress keeps blocking that bill. So we need to get out and vote."

Morones pointed out 250 million undocumented immigrants seek a better life for their families worldwide each year, most of them not trying to cross the U.S. border. He stated US-America's immigra-



Enrique Morones

tion problem pales in comparison to many countries across the globe.

Dr. Celia Williamson and human trafficking

Dr. Williamson called human trafficking "one of the human rights and social justice issues of our lifetime." She stated the crisis can take two forms: women trapped in sex trafficking as a slave trade or labor trafficking where immigrants work for little or no wages at all.

Dr. Williamson stated 800,000 people are taken across borders worldwide each year, an estimated 17,500 of those brought into the U.S. annually in the sex and labor trafficking trade. 300,000 US-American children are at risk of being lost to sex trafficking. One-third of those youth will be sold into the sex trade.

"Labor trafficking victims are looking for a way to take care of themselves and their families," she said. "They're often vulnerable and have very little skills, other than the will to work and an opportunity in the United States. Many think they're coming here to be a nanny or a maid or to work in a restaurant. Many end up becoming a domestic slave for no or little pay."

Most of those immigrants end up trapped in a factory working 12-hour

(Continued from Page LP1) shifts every day, working in nail salons, engaged in door-to-door magazines, or

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forced to work in strip clubs or massage parlors. Some are only paid in drugs.

"No one even knows they're here. Victims have to earn their freedom, so they have to pay their debt to a trafficker. It's called a debt bondage system," she said. "You may work seven days and get \$50 and some of that money sent home to your family, which thinks you're working in a restaurant, with only \$10 put toward your debt of \$10,000. It's designed for you to never really pay off your debt and earn your freedom."

Dr. Williamson related a Toledo incident last year of a woman trapped in a home as a domestic servant who tried to send money home to her children in another country. The labor traffickers were on their way to kill her five children when she was rescued, while the FBI was on the way to the airport with her children to get them out of their home country and on their way to the U.S.

"That's when we're notified the kids are coming to this country. They need clothes, they need food, they need housing, they need a van, they need pencils and pens, and they need to be enrolled in school," she said. "So we go to work trying to find all those things, so that when they come to the U.S., they can feel welcome and they can heal."

Dr. Williamson and her supporters also had to work at the state and federal level to get laws passed that see trafficking victims as true victims, not undocumented immigrants, prostitutes, or criminals. Now a federal law recognizes those victims if they've been involved by "force, fraud, or coercion." But she pointed out a lawyer and social worker both are needed to prove that claim.

Dr. Williamson pointed out human trafficking victims are trapped through fear "and are not allowed to quit" because of threats from their captors to their lives or those of family members. She stated research shows victims suffer "trauma bonding" or "Stockholm syndrome," where captives form a bond with their captors and start to see life from their perspective instead.

"You become isolated and the only voices

you hear are your traffickers. So you become very interested in them being happy and satisfied. If they're happy, you keep breathing," she said.

"So when the police kick in the door to rescue victims, those victims often are not relieved, they are not happy," said Dr. Williamson. "In fact, they think you've made a horrible mistake, because you as a police officer could not possibly understand all the layers and levels and complexities of the threats they are under."

Ohio has set up task forces specifically to deal with the psychological and other damage done by human trafficking rings. She stated organized crime, mom-and-pop shops, and even legitimate businesses are involved in those "underground networks." Entire rings must be broken up all at once so a raid is not just a temporary setback, only to be set up again the next week.

"So we're asking you to put this issue on your plate, to be cautious, to be the eyes and ears and understand that this is happening in our community," said Dr. Williamson. "I challenge you to educate yourself, your grandchildren, your nieces and nephews, and to make this a priority."

Baldemar Velásquez on slavery, boycotts, racial profiling, NAFTA, and workers' rights

"I guess I work on both ends of these people's work, because the time for action for me was not today, it was yesterday," said Baldemar Velásquez, founder and president of the Toledo-based Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC). "It has always been yesterday. For the Mexican people who are fortunate to get across the desert, even when they're thinking about coming across, those are the people I'm organizing."

Velásquez called the situation facing Mexican immigrants one of "corporate design" that he stated dates back to 1848.

"It's always been about money. It's always been about resources. It's always been



about land. It's always been about water—and the rich wanted to capture the entire West," he said. "The Republic of Texas—the fight over those territories was always about whether those were going to be slave territories or not slave territories. That was the fight. Mexico had already outlawed slavery when the battle of the Alamo took place."

The FLOC founder and president told the crowd legendary Alamo heroes like Jim Bowie sold 39 slaves in Louisiana in order to buy a tract of land in Texas.

"That's why he was fighting. Let's get history right," said Velásquez. That was a rotten trade deal with Mexico. It was a rotten trade deal then. It's a rotten trade deal now. To heap more misery upon a heap of misery, add the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)."

The FLOC president blamed NAFTA for placing "mechanized and subsidized" U.S. farmers against "dirt farmers" from Mexico in a competitive trade situation where the U.S. dumped corn crops across the border without tariffs. He stated his belief the Mexican farmers didn't stand a chance under NAFTA, which displaced those farmers and only made the immigration worse.

"You displace three million people. Where do you think those three million people are going to go? They have to go someplace to

live," he said. "They had to go somewhere they could feed their kids and send money home to feed, clothe, and educate their kids. In Mexico, they don't have social welfare programs. They don't have food stamps. If you don't work, you don't eat."

While recalling FLOC'S victories with Campbell's Soup and other companies on behalf of migrant farmworkers by using the boycott, Velásquez outlined his group's current battles with worldwide tobacco giants, such as RJ Reynolds, who buy their products from the fields of North Carolina and southern Ohio.

"You know we've got 1,000 small tobacco farms in southern Ohio? 90 percent of the workforce on those tobacco farms is undocumented," he said. "They were all trafficked. They all paid money to get sneaked across the border. The ones who were lucky to get a (guestworker) visa, that's a slave-labor program."

Velásquez stated he even had to argue with national AFL-CIO union leaders about the situation, because most labor groups were against the guestworker visa programs. He also briefed the crowd on the original fight with Campbell's Soup and the philosophy behind that eight-year effort for better working conditions, because it's still relevant today.

"The stoop labor that we do, we should be

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able to feed, clothe, and educate our own families. We shouldn't have to be begging at clinics and other places for a handout," he said, his forceful voice rising with passion. "We're hard-working people. The welfare should go to the disabled who for an unfortunate reason cannot work. We're talking about hard-working people in those labor camps—and by God, if I have anything to say about it, they're going to get a fair day's pay for a fair day's work because we don't want charity, we want justice!"

Velásquez invited the crowd to participate in FLOC's third annual shareholder's protest at the RJ Reynolds headquarters in North Carolina May 7. He stated the second call to action would come June 16, with a protest outside the federal courthouse in Toledo to mark the start of a trial involving a lawsuit FLOC and other groups filed against the U.S. Border Patrol alleging racial profiling of migrant farmworkers.

"Here in Ohio, we have the same border problem as they have in the South—Arizona and Texas," he said. "Those cops up there are not profiling Canadians coming across the lake. They're looking for brown people."

Velásquez also asked for help with a labor-organizing campaign in the Norwalk, Ohio area, involving undocumented immigrants and farmworkers who hold a guestworker visa in that area of north central Ohio.

The FLOC founder will travel to London, England next week to meet with British American Tobacco (BAT) leaders, who are now putting pressure on Reynolds to settle their differences with the migrant farmworkers' union. BAT owns a 42 percent stake in Reynolds tobacco operations in the U.S.

Velásquez called it a five-year struggle to get their attention, but told the audience both tobacco companies will now sit down at the negotiating table.

"We'll go everywhere we have to in order to knock down those doors," he said. "We're not going to knock on the doors to open those doors of opportunity. We're going to kick the doors down and say we want justice for the people here in America. We're going to stop the exploitation of the undocumented people!"

The above described presenters drew massive rounds of applause for their speeches and the work they have done for nearly 30 years apiece to fight and draw attention to their causes. The speeches were followed up by more in-depth workshops that afternoon.

Over the past two decades, more than 14,000 individuals representing hundreds of organizations have attended the annual *Hispanic Leadership Conference*. Afternoon workshops featured topics included education, disease prevention and Latino health, as

well as establishing identity and Latina empowerment. The conference is meant to help attendees learn how to join in actions and connect with those working to improve the lives of the Latino community.

The day had also featured a few surprises. Local students painted a 7-foot-by-2-foot canvas portrait of U.S. Supreme Court Justice *Sonia Sotomayor* under the watchful eye of

New York City muralist *María Domínguez*. Students also performed a surprise flash mob dance routine for the night program. They had practiced the routine earlier in the day.

The evening Gala at DeLuca's Place in the Park included entertainment by *Karen Paz Labra* (mariachi), comic relief by *Bill Santiago*, and music by *Sammy De León y su Orchestra* of Cleveland.



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