

# RICARDO LARA



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## A Few Miles, and a World Away— the Journey of Ricardo Lara

**LONG BEACH**—The backdrop for the senator’s swearing-in was pure California: the Pacific Ocean and the sun sinking over it, the great harbor of trade, the Museum of Latin American Art with its cacti and rock garden out back and a pair of hummingbirds zigzagging in the spring air.

There stood Ricardo Lara in his crisp black suit, hair buzzed on the sides, faint shade of a goatee, electric smile, vowing to serve “all the people” of the 33rd Senate District, looking ahead but also, understandably, looking back.

As a measure of miles, he hadn’t traveled far. From his youth in East L.A. to the stage in downtown Long Beach where he stood to take his oath of office, it was only a short jaunt down the 710 Freeway. But the barrio was its own world, and not a particularly kind one for a Mexican-American kid growing up gay in a house of blue collar.

If he chose not to dwell on those

challenges, if this was an evening instead to celebrate his rise from an Assembly field representative to the chair of the Latino Legislative Caucus to the first openly gay person of color to serve in the California State Senate, he nonetheless wanted to underscore how far he and his family had come in only a generation.

His father, Venustiano, a bracero from Sinaloa, Mexico, had picked the fruits and vegetables of the San Joaquin Valley before finding factory work in Los Angeles. His mother, Dolores, was a seamstress in the garment district. Both of them had crossed the border without legal documents. They fell in love and married and logged overtime hours as their middle child became the drum major at Garfield High and then the first in the family to graduate from college.

“This guy from East L.A. comes from very humble roots,” Sen. Lara confided to the gathering of friends,

supporters and fellow politicians. “Only in the U.S. can the son of a factory worker and a seamstress serve in the state Senate of the eighth largest economy in the world.”

On this night, except for a brief reference to his work on behalf of LGBT kids, the senator did not mention his own complicated narrative of coming out. He did not talk about the shouting match in the kitchen of the family house on Olympic Blvd. two decades earlier when he proudly proclaimed to his father, dressed in his factory uniform, that he was “gay and glad of it.”

Unlike some of the other senators who make up California’s LGBT caucus, pioneers such as Tom Ammiano and Mark Leno, Ricardo Lara didn’t grow up on the other side of the country and flee to California in the Sixties to find his identity in the ferment of anti-war San Francisco. Lara grew up in the ravel of a Southern California immigrant

community whose inhabitants lived in shadows because of their own complicated identity—workers without documentation. He grew up in a place where a young gay Latino had no role models to speak of, and where the struggle over gay rights had become twined with the devastation of AIDS.

“I am what I am, and I’m very comfortable with it,” Sen. Lara says. “But in terms of identity, I didn’t have the privilege of knowing Harvey Milk or his legacy. Later in life, I had to learn the history of those at the forefront of civil rights for gays.

“If you grew up in the Eighties or Nineties and you were Latino and gay, you had no role models. The role models were all white. I didn’t look to West Hollywood for my examples. I felt alone in East L.A. So my journey was a different one.”

The border his mother crossed in 1970 on her way to work as a maid in La Jolla was the same border he crossed as an American kid, back to the pueblo where his mother’s mother lived. Her house was made of adobe. The huge trunk of a tree stood in the middle of the living room. He figured it was there to keep the house from falling. If you had to go to the bathroom, you’d walk past the chickens, cows and horses, and step inside the outhouse. “You’d open the curtains to let in a little sunlight and there’d be a horse’s head staring at you,” he said. “Yes, you could say that this city boy got a dose of country living early on.”

He spoke Spanish but not well enough to blend in with the village kids. To them, he was the foreigner from “El Norte.” “The border for me became something very real, and crossing it on the way to visit my grandmother left me feeling vulnerable. The kids would call me a ‘white boy,’ and I’d get bullied. I couldn’t wait to go home. But

then back at home, the kids and my teachers would call me a Mexican. So it was a double whammy. Identity became an issue early on. You have no sense of belonging to anything. And then I’m hit with the question, ‘Why am I more attracted to boys than to girls?’”

Father Venustiano—named after the Mexican revolutionary and president Venustiano Carranza—manned the graveyard shift at a plastics factory. He’d come home in



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the morning dead tired and sleep most of the day—there in body but absent most every other way. Ricardo became his mother’s emissary, dispatched on missions to see that his sisters came straight home from junior high and high school. When they went on dates, he was sent by his mother to chaperon them. “They figured out pretty quickly to give me a bunch of quarters and send me on my way to play video games.”

Because his sisters both dropped out of high school and married early, it was left to him, the one with an easy grasp of English, to

negotiate the outside world for his parents. Documents would come in the mail from the state and federal governments, and young Ricardo was called upon to make sense of them.

“When you have immigrant parents, you become the translator. You become their window. I remember very clearly having to translate tax documents for my mother. I didn’t always know what they meant, and she’d get frustrated with my inability to translate them to her satisfaction. ‘Why are we sending you to school?’ she would ask me. That’s a lot of pressure on a kid.”

Dolores would sit him down on the bed as she folded clothes and talk to him about her expectations. You have to better the next generation, she would tell him. You cannot waste this opportunity. This is why I am working two and three shifts as a seamstress. You will graduate from high school. You will get a college degree and become a professional. And remember, whatever you do, good and bad, will be imprinted on your two younger brothers, Marlo and Venustiano Jr., “Vinnie.”

“She would tell me her entire life story, and everything she had sacrificed for me to have this chance. Boy, she knew how to work it. She was a ‘Tiger Mother’ before anyone ever called it that. Jewish mothers had nothing on my mom when it came to guilt.”

Venustiano Sr. didn’t say much. If he got angry, he rarely yelled. He commanded respect with just a look in his dark eyes. A slender man, five feet eleven, he seemed ten feet tall to his oldest son. One day he pulled Ricardo aside and spoke of the humiliation he endured every day because he had to wear a uniform with his name on it. All I want, he told him, is for you to wear a suit and carry a briefcase.

“There came a point in junior

high where my parents couldn't help me with my homework anymore. I think that's when I really felt the weight of being the first in the family to have to graduate. I had no mentors. I was on my own."

The hard past was never far away. Their house became a safe haven for family members crossing the border. On her way to work, his mother would inform him that an uncle or perhaps a cousin, had made it safely to L.A. and would be staying over for a few weeks—weeks that sometimes turned into months. As he entered junior high, an uneasy time as it was, one such relative, began to prey on him.

"My mom's at work, my dad's at work, and he starts to gain my trust. It became a dreadful situation. I remember running home from school and locking my bedroom door to keep him out. Or I'd go to a friend's house and stay there until late at night. I was trying to protect myself in my own home. Why did he target me? I was vulnerable. Maybe I was more effeminate, and he saw it. I tried to hide it, but he picked me out as an easy mark.

"I don't want people to assume that molestation makes you gay. But being young and gay does make you a target."

He went days without sleep, and his grades began to suffer. "I was so scared of God punishing me that I couldn't find sleep. I became an insomniac." Telling his parents wasn't an option. His abuser belonged to the family. And admitting to a molestation would be admitting to an unforgivable weakness in the eyes of his father, who already suspected he was "different."

Unlike Marlo, who was a year younger, Ricardo didn't enjoy spending Saturdays under the car with his dad. He played the clarinet and became the drum major in the Garfield High marching band. In the backyard one

day, his father began to speak of the shame he would bear if any of his children turned out "that way."

"I remember it vividly. He said, 'If one of my sons or daughters were gay, I'd....' But he never asked me the question directly. If he suspected it, and I'm sure he did, he left it there in the air."

A year or two later they were standing in the living room and started arguing over something trivial. Maybe it was one of those times where father



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and son fight over one thing when it's really about another thing. And that's when it came out, both of them shouting at the top of their lungs.

"You never do your chores," his father said. "You're too busy with your guy friends. I never see you with girls. Why are you always hanging out with guys?"

"I'm gay. Do you hear me? I'm gay, and I'm happy I'm gay. Your worst nightmare has come true, and in your own home."

He could see that his father was

hearing his every word, but at the same time he could see that his father didn't understand. He was glad he was gay because it became his poke back at his father. But the words truly did not pierce him.

"I'm glad I'm gay. I'm glad I'm gay," he kept shouting. "And I'm going to be better than everyone else, and I'm going to set an example. I'm going to be someone."

His best friend in high school, Sergio Brito, lived next door. He was a fellow band member and straight. One day they were shooting the breeze, Ricardo sitting on the fence post bordering their houses and Sergio sitting on the bench in front of him.

"Hey Ricardo, I want to ask you something."

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Are you gay?"

Ricardo froze. Oh my God, he thought to himself. I haven't done a good enough job concealing it. But Sergio, to his everlasting credit, didn't wait for Ricardo to answer. He filled the pause with his own voice.

"Because if you are, that's okay. It won't change a thing for me."

He said he went into the house comforted that his best friend accepted him but also scared that if Sergio knew, others knew. He lived with that fear for awhile, and then it went away. For Lara, Garfield High became a sanctuary. He was Mr. Involvement. His straight friends accepted him without question. He cannot recall a single incident of bullying.

"That conversation with Sergio was the catalyst that allowed me to be who I was in high school. I didn't have to 'come out of the closet,' but I could be who I am. And if they knew, no big deal, and if they asked, I'd tell them honestly, and if they didn't ask, I didn't need to tell them. That was the equilibrium I found."

Brother Vinnie, though, was different. Where Ricardo was cautious,

Vinnie could give a damn about letting the world know he was gay. Vinnie joined the cheer squad, flaunted pictures of him and his boyfriend, dreamed of being a fashion designer. “Usually, it’s the older brother who carves a path for the younger brother,” Lara said. “But when it came to embracing our sexual identity, it was Vinnie who led the way.”

“As the oldest male, I wanted to make it safe for him. I was afraid for him, trying to cover up for him. But he’d tell me, ‘relax Ricardo.’ He was the first to bring his boyfriend to a family function. He put it in their face whereas I was always trying to be the perfect son and keep my identity separate from the family. So in reality, it was Vinnie who helped me.”

Looking beyond high school, Lara wanted to study journalism in college, and San Diego State offered a strong program, close to home but not too close. His mom and dad drove him down and dropped him off at the dorms. Okay, don’t screw up, they told him. We’ll see you at Christmas. And they drove off. For the first time, he met kids from other regions of the country—and other ethnicities. A white classmate from Chicago asked him if he was from the U.S. He started interacting for the first time with multi-racial and openly gay students.

“This was the first time it really struck me that, ‘Geez I really grew up poor.’ I had a few friends who were from La Jolla and when I saw where they lived, I said to myself, ‘Oh my God, I grew up in a rough neighborhood.’ That’s the beauty of ignorance.”

It wasn’t until he took his first Chicano history class and discovered the movement and its pioneers, martyrs such as slain journalist Ruben Salazar, that his eyes opened to the world that had shaped him. “My first Chicano Studies class changed my life. To learn that the movement was

born in my backyard, right there in East L.A. Ruben Salazar was killed next to the place where I played. I learned about the student walkouts and the late Sal Castro in the Sixties and how my junior high and high school were involved. This left me with a tremendous sense of pride. I was reading about my community in textbooks. I remember watching a film and the introduction was the Garfield High marching band in a parade. ‘That’s my band. I was in that band.’ So



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it was strange. I had to leave the ‘hood to learn about the ‘hood’s history.”

He joined M.E.Ch.A, the Chicano student political and cultural organization, and became its representative to the student council at San Diego State. At national M.E.Ch.A conferences, his political consciousness began to awaken. “My gay identity and the politics surrounding it weren’t part of who I was at that time. I set that aside. Instead, it was all about my rebirth as a Chicano.”

He learned about the rise of the farm worker movement in the Sixties, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, and the grape boycotts erupting out of Delano, the epicenter of the civil rights struggle in California. With the benefit of hindsight, he could see what went wrong back then, how the Chicano movement lost its steam when the people became too comfortable. “You had this schism between the old generation and the new generation. And once some people got their opportunity, they didn’t care so much about the others.”

He decided to run for student body vice president, leaning on a base of supporters—M.E.Ch.A., black and gay students—who were opposing the candidates put up by the fraternities and sororities. His brothers and buddies from East L.A., including Sergio, drove down to San Diego and spent a weekend helping him prepare.

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As executive vice president, he was in charge of all student-run facilities, including child care services, the aquatics center in Mission Bay and the new basketball arena under construction. Sitting atop a \$10 million corporation took some getting used to. He had to learn how to lobby and cut deals. He had to mediate between minority students and the campus Greeks. He found that nothing was more exasperating than assigning student office space. Who got what digs—now that was politics in the basest form. “It required a lot of negotiating skills; trying to build consensus not only among my

supporters but those who had opposed me. We had to learn very carefully how to cut deals.”

Working alongside student body president Carlos Razo (he grew up in Cypress Park and became a Long Beach educator) and Celinda Vazquez (she grew up in Inglewood and became Vice President of Public Affairs for Planned Parenthood in Los Angeles), Lara got his first taste of lobbying in Sacramento. At the same time, he was juggling majors in Journalism and Spanish with a minor in Chicano Studies and working part-time for a public relations firm based in San Diego. The job required him to wear a suit and carry a briefcase, and his parents were immensely proud.

Standing together on graduation day, he told his mother and father that his diploma might carry his name, but it belonged to them. “It remains one of the proudest moments of my life,” he says. “I was able to give my parents what they had worked so hard for.”

When the public relations firm assigned him to work on the 1998 campaign that sought to defeat California’s Indian gaming initiative, Proposition 5, he could feel the dictates of his job tearing at his moral code. “I had to work against something I believed in, and the ugly side of PR hit me in the face. This was a gut check. As a Chicano, you believe in self empowerment. How was I going to take that away from Native Americans?”

He called his parents and told them he was going to quit the PR firm. Their response did not surprise him. His father had worked for the same factory all his adult life. His mom was still sewing garments for the same sweatshop. “What are you thinking?” his mother pleaded. “You must be grateful.”

He resigned the next day. To make matters worse, he moved back home. He thought about law school.

He thought about becoming a cub reporter on a small daily. Neither prospect, though, excited him the way politics did. An old friend from San Diego State had signed on as district director for Assemblywoman Nell Soto, who represented what was then the 61st Assembly District based in Ontario. Soto needed a field rep, and Lara bounded into the job.

Soto was a fierce defender of the environment in the manner of her legendary husband, Phil, among the



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first Latinos ever elected to the state Assembly. He had recently died, and his widow was making plans to run for the Senate in 1999. Lara served as her field rep for a year and when she won the Senate seat, she brought him to Sacramento as a legislative aide. On trips to the district, he would carry her purse and drive her to and fro as she schooled him in local civics and history.

“Nell had been a councilwoman in Pomona for 11 years, and she knew everybody. I just drove and

drove and soaked up everything she had to say. She was very practical in her outlook. One of the laws we wrote required gas stations to offer free air and water for cars.”

Soto became a second mother to Lara. Naturally, she saw life and politics through the lens of an older generation, and Lara sometimes felt constrained by her vision. He began to look around for a Latino politician who shared a bolder outlook, and that’s when he came upon Assemblyman Marco Antonio Firebaugh, right there in East L.A. A protégé of then state Senator Richard Polanco, Firebaugh was everything he admired: fierce, young, intelligent, a child of Tijuana with a bachelor’s degree in political science from UC Berkeley and a law degree from UCLA who stood up for immigrants and working families.

Lara became Firebaugh’s right hand, rising from legislative aide to communications director to chief of staff. All the while, he was careful to keep his sexual identity separate from his work. Few in Sacramento, including Firebaugh, knew he was gay. If they asked, he’d tell them, but hardly anyone ever asked. “I didn’t want to be the quote-unquote gay staffer. I didn’t want to be the token or be pigeonholed. I wanted to be judged by a wide range of my work.”

Firebaugh served as chairman of the Latino Caucus, fighting to expand college access for all Californians, including the undocumented, and authored landmark air-quality legislation to improve the health of impoverished communities. As Firebaugh’s final term in the Assembly wound down in 2004, Lara tied up all the loose ends in Sacramento and moved back to Los Angeles to help Firebaugh operate a political consulting firm and prepare the ground for a state Senate run.

With the 2006 election heating

up, Lara noticed that Firebaugh, the clear favorite, was losing weight and having a hard time campaigning. As he became more gaunt and his skin began to yellow, Firebaugh went in for more tests and learned the terrible news. At the age of 39, he had been stricken with terminal liver cancer. With so much of his political career in front of him, it seemed unthinkable that some health problem would cut it all so short.

Lara watched as his mentor faced death with uncommon courage, telling the press that his hard living had taken its toll. Soon after, Lara got a call from Sen. Richard Polanco. They needed to get ahead of the curve, Polanco advised. It was time to make arrangements for the funeral and write the press release. Lara knew the logic of being in front of the news, but he told Polanco he was too numb to act. As long as Firebaugh was alive, there was hope.

Lara drove to the UCLA Medical Center where Firebaugh had a room. He could see the end was near. Hooked up to a machine, Firebaugh could no longer talk. His mother told Lara that her son could hear everything, and if Lara had something to tell him, he should say it now. The mother and brothers left the room so that Lara could have his moment alone. He leaned over Firebaugh and whispered into his ear. “Boss, I’m here and whatever you need me to continue, I’ll do. And I want you to know something. I’m gay, and I appreciate all the work you’ve done on behalf of those who are Latino and gay.”

Firebaugh died that night. “It didn’t feel right, given how progressive he was when it came to gay rights, to have never told him. I knew he knew, but I wanted to tell him myself.”

After the funeral, Lara wanted nothing more than to get away. He bought a one-way ticket and boarded a plane for Ireland. Alone in a pub in Dublin, drinking a cold beer, he

contemplated a future outside of politics. “I had some money saved up and thought ‘What the hell. I’ll live for awhile in Europe, and see what life brings me. Frankly, I was disillusioned with politics. I was ready for a change.’”

Then a phone call came. It was Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez. Where are you, brother? What are you doing in Ireland? I need you back home. I need you to be my district director.

Lara flew home and joined



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Núñez’s accomplished legislative team that authored AB32, which created the nation’s first cap on greenhouse gas emissions, and a law that increased the minimum hourly wage by \$1.25. By 2010, after serving a stint as communications director for Assemblyman Kevin de León, D-Los Angeles, and then as a member of the Los Angeles Planning Commission, Lara stood out as one of the more seasoned Latino legislative staffers. It’s your time to run for office, Núñez told him. Your time to build on

Marco’s legacy.

There it was for the picking—the 50th Assembly District, Firebaugh’s old stomping grounds, which included the communities of Bell Gardens, Bell, Downey, Lynwood and South Gate. Still, he had his doubts. He did not want to run as a closeted gay man. At the same time, he worried how coming out in an intense campaign would affect his parents.

“This wasn’t a district in the heart of West Hollywood or Silver Lake. I knew being gay would play out as a campaign issue, however subtle the attacks,” Lara said. “I didn’t want my parents confronted with that. But I also knew that times were changing, and others had gone before me. So I went back and forth for a while. One week I was in the race. ‘Yeah, I’m running,’ the next week I was out.

“Fabian kept pushing me. ‘Are you going to be a staffer all your life?’ I told him that the life of a staffer was pretty good. The pay, the benefits. He said, ‘I’m going to give you a month to get over all your hang ups, and then we are opening your campaign committee.’

“So I decided to go for it. I never would have had the courage if not for Marco. I wanted to continue his legacy.”

Núñez helped him work out a strategy. For the first time, Lara had to raise money, meet voters and walk precincts on his own behalf. Each day, he reported to Núñez how many households he covered, how much money he put into the kitty. Lara’s family became fully engaged in the campaign. His father walked precincts until his knees ached. His mother worked the phones like an old pro. Brother Marlo cooked hamburgers for events. Sisters Jaqueline and Mireya served food and cleared tables. Brother Vinnie designed the campaign logo.

In the Democratic primary, a

four-candidate race featuring the mayor of Downey and the city clerk from South Gate, Lara received nearly half the 15,000 votes cast and easily won. The general election was a foregone conclusion, and he trounced his Republican opponent, 46,676 votes to 13,452 votes.

“It took a few days for the reality to sink in. I was going to be on the Assembly floor and now represent an institution I had worked a good part of my life for. The last time I had been on that floor was when I addressed the Assembly at Marco’s memorial service. To step on that green carpet for the first time as a member, I can’t explain what that meant.”

He may have been a freshman legislator but Democratic leaders, having witnessed his expertise and tenacity over the years, didn’t treat him that way. They named Lara chairman of the powerful Joint Legislative Audit Committee and awarded him important posts on Appropriations, Banking and Finance, Higher Education and Water. The 23-member Latino Legislative Caucus then voted him its chairman. Perhaps his most touching recognition came from the janitors and other blue collars workers, many of them Latino, who worked the night shift at the Capitol. Many of them came up to him personally to say how proud they were of his accomplishment.

“Because I knew my way around the building, there were no excuses,” Lara said. “There was no ‘learning curve’ for me. I had no choice but to go right to work.”

He read about the plight of Pedro Ramirez, the student body president at Cal State University, Fresno, who had waived his \$800 a month stipend because he feared it might reveal his status as an undocumented student. Like so many families lured to the San Joaquin Valley by farmers needing a labor force to pick the

orchards and fields, the Ramirez clan had crossed the border when Pedro was three. Only in high school did he find out about his illegal status. Ever since, he’d been trying to conceal it, even as he excelled in college and became student body president.

California already had passed its version of the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) and Lara sought to shore up the law with a bill that would answer the dilemma of students such



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as Ramirez. AB 844 required UC, CSU and community college student governments to pay students their stipends, reimbursements or benefits, regardless of their immigration status. It was signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown along with the second part of the California DREAM Act, which granted undocumented students access to state financial aid.

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By 2011, a new Senate District, the 33rd, had been drawn in such a way—heavily Latino, encompassing Long Beach and many of the smaller communities he already served—that it practically begged Lara to run. Standing in the way was the formidable candidacy of Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, ex wife of then state Senator Alan Lowenthal.

This time, it was Lara who swiftly lined up the early and influential support, including the endorsements of Congresswomen Lucille Roybal-Allard and Linda Sanchez, the California Nurses Association and, not surprisingly, the Latino Legislative Caucus. All Lowenthal needed to consider was the burgeoning reality of the communities along the 710 Freeway—the Latino hue that had come to define, if not yet dominate, local politics. With 48.7 percent of the households in the 33rd District calling themselves Hispanic, it spelled doom for even a politician as popular and respected as Lowenthal.

When an early poll then confirmed the demographics—Lara already enjoyed a six percentage point lead—Lowenthal bowed out and decided to seek re-election to her Assembly seat. “I was not looking forward to running against Assemblywoman Lowenthal,” Lara said. “Not only was she an imposing candidate, but I have a great deal of respect for her and her ex-husband. Together, they had done so much for the communities they’ve served.”

Lara pretty much waltzed to victory, beating his Peace and Freedom Party opponent by a margin of four to one, making history as the first openly gay person of color in the California State Senate.

And now he was standing in the

setting sun glow of Long Beach, about to be sworn into office by Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe, a Republican whom he considered a close advisor and friend. The Lakewood High School Madrigal Choir had sung the National Anthem, and a Cambodian-American teenager from the Khmer Arts Cultural Center had performed the royal “Blessing Dance.” In the rock and cacti garden of the Latin American Museum of Art, Lara stood tall and raised his right hand. As he recited the words, even fumbling a sentence with a smile, he seemed a man at ease—comfortable in power, comfortable in his own skin, comfortable knowing that his father, who was working the night shift at the plastics factory, and his mother, who was back in Mexico attending a wedding, accepted him fully.

“My parents’ story, our family story, is just one of the stories that keeps repeating itself in California,” he told the crowd. “We have ten Christmas parades in Long Beach, that’s how diverse we are.” Then he turned to his staff. “I’m proud of the work we’ve done. Last year, twenty three of our twenty four bills were signed into law. We need to keep working to protect our most vulnerable—seniors, the disabled, immigrants and LGBT youth. I want you to continue to dream big and do the best job as your Senator.”

Back in Sacramento, the youngest senator in California was looking ahead. What were the battles that

would demand his engagement? What public service would the future hold? In the year 2013, it was hard measuring how much of the gay rights struggle remained to be fought. Safe to say that much of society, following California’s lead, had made a genuine turn toward recognition and acceptance. The proof was that a majority of Americans now supported the full right of marriage for gays—a position inconceivable only five years before. As for the Latino community, opposition remained in the Catholic Church and other traditional quarters, but even that was changing.

“I’ve been fortunate to witness society’s growing acceptance of homosexuality. We’ve come so far in the last decade that sometimes it’s hard to grasp the change. That said, the struggle remains as long as some members of the LGBT community still feel the very real need to conceal their sexual identity because of job or safety reasons.”

Sen. Lara said he was proud to have been named by the White House as one of ten recipients nationwide of the “Harvey Milk Champion of Change” honor in 2013. This didn’t mean, though, that he planned to rest on any laurels. He recently introduced a bill to revoke the tax exempt status of the Boy Scouts organization because of its practice of discriminating against LGBT youth. “We’ve made tremendous progress, both on the LGBT front and the integration of

minorities into American society,” he said. “But we can’t afford to stop being vigilant. Things progress, yes, but things can also erode. So we need to continue keeping guard.”

His workaholic ways has made it tough to bring a partner into his life, he said. Edging near 40, he was still single. While wedded to politics, he could see a time in the near future, say five or ten years, when he would start a family. One of the things I’ve been thinking about a lot lately is fatherhood. That seems the last piece that’s missing.”

As for higher office, perhaps a run for governor someday, he sounded ambivalent. “Sure I could run for higher office, I’d definitely consider it, but I also have other goals and dreams. Politics isn’t the end all, be all, for me. Someday, before I become a ‘viejito,’ I want to travel and live abroad. I truly believe we appreciate what we have at home when we experience the way others live.”

Someday, too, he would like to earn a PhD and teach at a university. This would give him a chance to inspire young adults to pursue public service the same way he was inspired. “It’s fascinating how people come into your life for a reason. I was lucky to have role models along the way who helped develop in me a strong sense of public service.

“Maybe I can provide that same opportunity for some future leader.”