

## NABPAC Leaders Speak Series

NABPAC is committed to building understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion amongst our stakeholders. From September 15 to October 15, we recognize Hispanic Heritage month, an annual celebration of the history and culture of the Latinx and Hispanic communities. We commemorate how those communities have influenced and contributed to American society at large.

In this installment of *Leaders Speak*, we hear from **René Muñoz**, Strategist at **Federal Street Strategies**, a NABPAC partner. Rene tells us about his unique trajectory into political affairs and how culture and lived experience can impact your career.



### **Tell us about your current role and what you do.**

I work at the consulting firm, Federal Street Strategies. We consult with organizations and companies, corporate non-profits in helping them navigate policy, politics, and Congress. We come from diverse experiences, and we try to put our heads together and provide a good base of knowledge to be helpful to clients. I was in government for almost 20 years and just left less than two years ago to join the private sector.

### **What was your career journey? How did you get into political work?**

It was like I tripped and fell and landed on it. I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to teach high school. I played baseball in college. I was a college athlete. There's a rule in the NCAA that by the seventh semester, you need to have 50% of your degree complete.

I got a call and they told me, if you don't take 20 hours this semester, you're going to be ineligible to play. It's also very hard to put 20 hours together. And at the very end, my advisor said, we can change your major, and you can become eligible just like that.

I had an education degree planned with an emphasis in social studies and government. I was taking government courses, political science courses, at a higher level. So literally, she pushed a button and changed my major to government, and I was instantly eligible to play.

I changed my major to political science. And again, the math was off, and I needed literally three more credits to complete my degree to graduate. My advisor said if I completed an internship that checked all the boxes, I could graduate.

I didn't know the difference between a state rep and a city rep. And I called everybody, left messages. The only person who called me was the local congressman's office. The guy put me to work the second I walked in. I did that for two months, then I wrote my paper, and I graduated. I offered to stay longer until I started grad school. Instead, he offered me a job and for the next six, eight months, I worked there doing constituent services, case work, meeting with constituents who need help, calling federal agencies on their behalf and doing cool stuff like that.

### **Your journey involved significant cultural change. How did you navigate that change?**

In 2000, somebody in the D.C. office left to go work on the presidential campaign and decided that he wasn't coming back. I was offered an

## **NABPAC Leaders Speak Series**

opportunity to move to D.C. to take that job. I had never been east of the Mississippi river! I'm from Texas. I moved to D.C. in January – nineteen degrees with the wind blowing in your face! I didn't have gloves, scarf, all that stuff that people were wearing. It was brutal. I got here and I was like, I don't know. I made a mistake. But I was working in a good place with good people and doing some good stuff, cool stuff.

The congressional office helps people, and I enjoyed it. And I learned it was learning about people, their needs, and then learning about what a member of Congress can do to help.

I tell people that working for your home congressmen intensifies your work, and you definitely enjoy it more. When something goes down, you know the impact. You think, “Oh, that's right by the little league field where I played, or I drive that way all the time. We should definitely expand that road or whatever.” You have a more personal perspective.

### **How has your upbringing and culture contributed to your success?**

I was a legislative staffer, and we were having a policy meeting, talking about the Head Start program, Head Start legislation.

I'm the new guy in the back. I'm mostly listening. And I forgot what the context was, but I said, “When I was in Head Start, I did blah, blah, blah, blah.” And I could just see their eyes; it was just a shock to people that I could have gone to Head Start. To them, it was like a program that some other folks do. And I thought everybody went to Head Start! But apparently not. I was the only one in the whole office who had been to Head Start. And these people are good folks, supporters of Head Start. They just didn't have that experience. I felt like that kicked the door open for me to have a different experience than other folks in the room.

When I moved to D.C., I could've told you the names of all the Hispanic staff members working on Capitol Hill. It seemed like there was about 15 of them. I knew them all, and they all worked for Hispanic members of Congress

But even amongst the 15, we have folks that went to Harvard, and I went to community college. I felt even within my people and without my crew, I was a little bit out of place. I hadn't been east of the Mississippi. I had only been on the airplane handful of times.

But I worked with some really cool people, good people, still my friends. Maybe there was a mentorship or role modeling that helped me fit in.

It's a rough environment, and so high stress, a high-pressure job. I saw plenty of Ivy Leaguers crash and burn in that environment. And I saw the opposite: community college folks really tearing it up. They did good in that environment, and there was plenty of Ivy Leaguers that did well also. People who succeeded were a lot like me: They enjoyed the work. They liked the good camaraderie and wanted to do good by our community.

My parents were born in Mexico, and they had three kids born in a rough neighborhood in LA. They left for Texas to find better community for their kids. My dad didn't speak English, so it was hard for him to find a job.

My mom is the hardest working person I know. She had three boys and because my dad was working, she had to cart us all off to baseball practice and do all those things. My mom is definitely the role model I want to grow up to be like.

I had a baseball coach who was a big storyteller. He'd say, “if so-and-so walked in the door right now, dropped a giant suitcase of money on this table and told me I needed to start a successful business tomorrow by noon. My first order of

## **NABPAC Leaders Speak Series**

business would be to hire baseball players. You're sitting around here with 15 other kids and your success is based on how well the guy next to you does because you're a team. You're learning to work, depend on somebody else and somebody else depending on you. And if you do well, then the other guy's going to do well."

And then he talked about the stress or working under pressure. He'd say "I guarantee that 9 out of 10 kids in your English class have never stood on the mound with two strikes and two outs. You have that experience under your belt now."

And you don't know that you're picking up these skills. But when you're, 25 years old and working, you realize that was an asset that you picked up along the way.

I've told those stories to folks I've worked with back in Capitol Hill, we're going to do good if we're all sort of rolling in the right direction.

As an athlete, self-motivation is important. We knew we got better if we were taking extra batting practice on weekends or playing catch with our friends in the off season. I think that's fair in the professional world. If I want to get better, I need to be getting better outside of 9:00 and 6:00. I need to be doing something if I want to get better at whatever it is I'm doing.

### **Professionally, what are you most proud of?**

I have small things like the new federal building in my hometown, that I helped shepherd through. And it's a physical something that when I drive by Interstate 10, I can point at it and say, I had a little bit to do with that.

I think I'm most proud of the challenges that I took on and, the opportunity that was given to me. I've done a whole bunch of stuff here and there, and I helped get federal money to help build this or that. That's all fun and great and productive. But I go back to my story: I dropped

out of grad school and moved to D.C., and I think that I made the most of it. And my mom is proud.

### **Why is NABPAC so important to the diversity conversation and to the Latinx community?**

It's the voice, right? You need to have a voice. You need to have the ability to voice your opinion and to be heard. That's how advocacy works. That's how in Congress, one person can come and knock on our door and say, "There's this problem. Can you help me with it?" And the response is "we'll do our best." But if 100 people come and say, hey, we have the same problem, same issue, they're going to get right to it.

You can kind of make that correlation with what NABPAC does. They help people voice their opinion. That's what PACS do. I'm only one person, but if I can join these other 100 people, my voice is loud. And I think that's a very misunderstood thing in politics date. It's sometimes viewed as a bad thing, or it's sometimes underappreciated. It's how you get listened to. That's a big deal for communities and voices that don't always get heard.

That's something NABPAC brings to the table for whatever, whoever is needing to be heard.

And the people are great. It makes the work better when you know you're working with good folks.

It makes it easier.

It's almost like you're not working.