

NEA Interview With Dr. Juan Andrade, Jr., Educator, Leadership Development Maestro, and Voter Registration Expert



Dr. Juan Andrade is the president of the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute (USHLI) and a legend in the Hispanic community. Under his leadership, USHLI has registered 2.2 million voters, trained 750,000 present and future leaders, and awarded more than \$1.3 million in scholarships and internships. USHLI sponsors the largest Latino leadership conference in the nation.

You grew up in Brownwood, Texas. What was that like?

Well, Brownwood is, as the song says, ‘deep in the heart of Texas.’ The Mexicans lived in Brownwood’s barrio where the streets were unpaved, the public amenities were few and indoor plumbing was rare.

So the barrio shaped you?

Oh, yes. Most of the people there were poor. They worked hard in the fields or factories, and they had very little formal education. And yet one of the most indelible memories I have as a boy is of adults rubbing the top of my head and saying, ‘Juan, stay in school and get an education.’

USHLI is headquartered in Chicago, and you’ve spent over three decades of your life working in the windy city. Do you ever go back to Brownwood?

I do. In fact, I helped organize the Mexican voters in Brownwood, and they voted overwhelmingly for a mayoral candidate who was committed to getting the roads paved and curbed in the barrio. This effort was complicated by the fact that many of the property owners in the barrio are absentee landlords who were not interested in being assessed for these improvements. But we got it done with the power of the ballot! We also had a very nice park created. That was all very satisfying for this homeboy.

Tell us about your education.

I attended the public schools in Brownwood and earned my B.A. in Education from Howard Payne University, which is also in Brownwood. I went on to earn five advanced degrees—a MEd from Antioch College, an Ed.S and ED.D from Northern Illinois University and a post-doctorate MA from Loyola University. You know, the whole time I was an elementary and secondary student in Texas, we were forbidden to speak Spanish in school. What’s more, I never had a Hispanic teacher, not one—that’s one of the big reasons I went into education.

We understand you had a very short career as a classroom teacher. Can you tell us about it?

Well, I was teaching civics in a high school in Crystal City, Texas. It was my first day in the classroom. I was teaching the students the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights. I immediately noticed many of the students didn't have a clue what I was talking about. So I switched to Spanish. I soon developed a system where I'd teach the English speaking students in English and the Spanish speaking student in Spanish. It made sense.

But there was a problem, wasn't there?

You might say that. At the time in Texas (1970), there was a state law that prohibited a teacher from speaking any language other than English in any class other than a language class.

What happened next?

Well, I ended up being handcuffed and taken to court to face the charges. My lawyer and I decided I'd plead 'not guilty' so that we could appeal and challenge the state law. Eventually the charges against me were dropped, however, because those in power figured out what we were up to.

So you returned to the classroom, but you soon found yourself in hot water again. What did you do?

I showed a film in class about the Mexican American struggle for their civil rights in the United States.

Did you get fired?

No. Thanks to Mexicans exercising their voting muscles, the school board was now four Mexicans and three whites. The administration wanted to fire me, but the four Mexicans on the board had my back.

And yet, at the end of your first semester of teaching, you left your job and Texas. Why?

Because rumors started to circulate that our house was going to be firebombed. It never was, but given the atmosphere in Crystal City, my wife and I decided it best to move. And I landed a job in Wisconsin as an education specialist in the Farm Worker Program.

And this is why you are a Green Bay Packer fan to this day.

Yes it is.

Today in public education we see that the population of Hispanic students is rising much faster than the number of Hispanics going into the teaching profession. What do you think can be done about that?

I think we should subsidize the college education of Hispanic students who are committed to going into teaching. We have to make teaching more attractive. We know how expensive college has become and how much debt college students must incur. I also think that we should send our best Hispanic teachers into schools to tell Hispanic elementary and secondary students why they should think about going into teaching.