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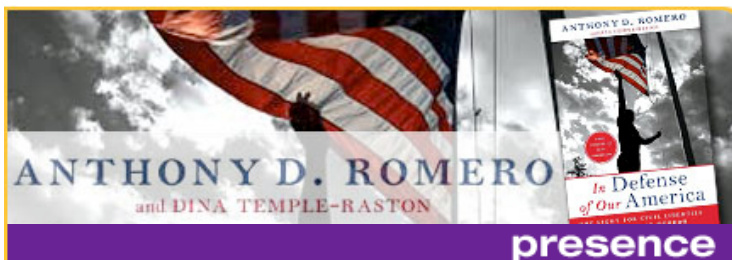
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**Online Extra. . .****An Interview With Anthony Romero**

Anthony Romero was the ACLU's sixth executive director, the first Latino and first openly gay man to serve in that capacity.

BY CARLOS J. QUEIRÓS
August/September 2007

AARP Segunda Juventud Online sat down with Anthony Romero and spoke openly with him about his new book *In Defense of Our America: The Fight for Civil Liberties in the Age of Terror*. In 2005, Romero was named one of *Time* magazine's 25 Most Influential Hispanics in America. We spoke of motivation, the fight for civil liberties, and grappling with sexual orientation in a Hispanic family.

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Q. How would you describe *In Defense of Our America: The Fight for Civil Liberties in the Age of Terror* to a potential reader of your book?

A. It's a book about America and about Americans. It tells the story of a handful of Americans who are in a struggle to live life with dignity. Often when we talk about civil liberties, the Bill of Rights, or the Constitution, they sound like abstract principles or paper guarantees. What my coauthor Dina Temple-Raston and I intend to do with this book is to make these principles come alive with real people, real stories, and real struggles.

Q. What brought you to write this book? Why now?

A. This is a critical time in the country for civil liberties because all the major issues have come into play. One of the overarching narratives in the book concerns how in a time of national tragedy—with the murderous events of 9/11—and its aftermath, the government pursued an aggressive agenda that curtailed our basic civil liberties and civil rights. But against that backdrop, there have also been changes that affected the lives of other Americans that have nothing to do with the war on terror. Hopefully this book will get people to really think about what it means to be American, why these values matter, and what we should do about them.

Q. What do you see as the main civil liberties issues affecting Hispanics age 50-plus?

A. For us as Latinos, clearly the questions around continuing discrimination and prejudice are enormous. That's why we write about Matthew Limon, who is part of a third-generation Mexican family who struggles with their kid, who is gay. There's a real sense of the ongoing hostility toward people who are different, whether you are Latino or gay. These are also a part of the Limon story because he's a boy who is developmentally disabled and not treated well by the law as a result.

Q. You are the first Latino and openly gay man to serve in the capacity of executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union. What was your experience with "coming out" to your Puerto Rican parents?

A. They were disappointed and sad when I came out to them. While my family has always been loving and supportive, this was something that took them a long time to comprehend and to realize I was still their same son. Before my dad died of lung cancer, we settled our peace, and I knew he always loved me, thought of me as *un gran hombre* [a great man], as he would say. My mom and I have the closest of relationships. She is someone I really believe in and who has really come a long way in that period.

Q. You write in your book, "I believe in the greatness of our America. And I am grateful to her. In any other country the world over, the son of a waiter with a fourth-grade education would probably be a waiter with a fourth-grade education." Do you think the American Dream is still attainable?

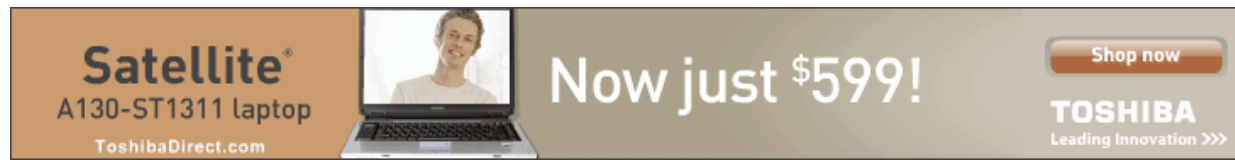
A. The American Dream is still attainable, but I think we have lost a bit of our commitment to opening up the opportunities to make that dream a reality. I get discouraged when the country seems to turn its back on programs to help people get on their feet. Part of what we have to remember is that we have to give people a leg up to succeed in this society and that's not something we ought to be embarrassed about.

Q. Why did you choose to end the book with your grandmother's words, "La luz de enfrente es la que alumbrá" [The light in front is the one that shines the way]?


A. My grandmother was a wonderful woman who worked on a factory line for many years. She was also a widow living with her children in New York—she had a very tough life. And yet, she was always optimistic. This woman made me believe in the possibilities. That saying from her stuck with me because it meant even in the darkest of times you can find the light and you can lead the way with the light. And hopefully that is what this book is about. Although there are moments when you read about sorrow, sadness, death, and broken promises, I do believe we have to remain optimistic and celebratory for who we are as a people and all we've accomplished. With that in mind, it seemed like the proper way to end the book was with the greatest optimist I ever knew.

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