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From foster homes to White House

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It wasn't until Mickey Ibarra moved with his younger brother from Utah to California at age 15 that he routinely heard his name pronounced correctly.

But hearing "eye"-barra instead of the correct "e"-barra was a relatively minor annoyance in a childhood with its share of obstacles. Ibarra was just 2 when his teenage mother gave custody of him and his 1-year old brother, David, to the state.

The boys' father was a Mexican immigrant who came to the United States at 15 with a sixth-grade education on the Bracerro program to work in farm fields during World War II. He had split with the boys' mother and was in the Army overseas when she gave them up.

When he came back, the brothers were reunited with their father. He was by then married to another young woman, who had two children of her own. Space was limited, and their stepmother young and inexperienced, so the Ibarra boys were given up again — to the Smiths, an older couple in Provo who'd had a relationship with both of their parents. They had in fact given foster care to Ibarra's mother.

"Some of those hurts and those memories are of just the smallest things," he said. "'So you're Ibarra. Why are you living with the Smiths?'"

But Ibarra's story is not one of abandonment or lingering resentment — he and his brother later reconciled with both parents. Though they shuffled among a few foster families, Ibarra and his brother spent eight years with the Smiths, who provided a loving and stable environment.

"It was tough," Ibarra said, yet he would grow up and out of those humble and difficult beginnings to work in the West Wing of the White House and to open a boutique lobbying shop specializing in Hispanic outreach.

Blessed with a disposition sunny enough to overcome unusual circumstances and racial taunts in mostly white Utah, Ibarra flourished under the Smith's care. His brother, though, wanted to move to Sacramento to join their father, who had relocated there and opened the Mona Lisa House of Beauty after using his GI bill to attend cosmetology school.

Ibarra had settled into a comfortable life in Utah, where he was a member of the freshman football team and was reluctant to leave. Still, Sacramento proved a good move and Ibarra now considers it a crossroads, especially for his brother, who grew up to be a successful businessman.

It was in Sacramento that Ibarra was first introduced to politics; Luther Burbank High School gave extra credit to students who attended political events.

"I was looking for every way I could pad my score. So, man, I was all over it," he said.

Ibarra heard his first presidential campaign speech in 1968. It was Hubert Humphrey at Sacramento Memorial Auditorium, and, "I tell you," he says, "I was hooked for life."

At his foster parents' request, he returned to Utah to enroll at Brigham Young University. But out of money after one year, Ibarra joined the military, like his father before him, for the benefits of the GI bill, a risky move in the midst of the Vietnam War.

Initial orders to go to Saigon were changed at the last minute, and he spent two years in Frankfurt, Germany, before returning to Utah to graduate, cum laude, from BYU with a bachelor's degree in political science.

Ibarra then spent five years teaching, including at an alternative school for troubled teens in Spanish Fork, Utah. He went back to school at the University of Utah for a master's degree in behavioral disorders.

"Both degrees have served me well in our nation's capital," he jokes.

While a teacher, Ibarra volunteered with the local branch of Utah Education Association, an outgrowth of the powerhouse political lobby, the National Education Association.

From there he made a jump in 1984 to a permanent spot in Washington as a "political education specialist." He helped organize local chapters of NEA.

He had made $7,500 his first year as a teacher. In Washington, his salary grew to $42,000.

"It was like my ship finally came in," he said.

After a brief move to Denver to open an NEA field office for the Western states, he came back in 1990 as political affairs manager — a position that put him in charge of coordinating national campaigns and political activities.

That put him in touch with a young governor from Arkansas, who won an early endorsement from the NEA that helped him separate himself from the crowded group of Democrats running to be president.

Years later, during President Clinton's second term, Ibarra was asked to direct the Office of Intergovernmental Relations. In that role, he was the liaison between the White House and Democrats at the state and local levels and manager of a staff of nine.

"The president was the one who got to say yes. I was the one who got to say no," he said. But he expanded his list of contacts among local and state politicians, which was already extensive from his work at NEA.

Ibarra was at the White House during the impeachment. In fighting those charges, Clinton expended a lot of political capital. One consequence, Ibarra believes, is that the AmeriCorps program, a domestic Peace Corps especially popular with local officials, was never fully supported by Congress.

When the second term was over, Ibarra toyed with the idea of moving back to the NEA but decided to branch out and find his own niche on K Street.

He wondered whether he could make a living helping the Hispanic community and non-Hispanic community, particularly in Washington, get acquainted with each other.

A new census report found that Hispanics had become the largest minority group in the United States, which set off a rush by corporate executives and political candidates to court the community.

Politicians, Ibarra said, see Hispanics "as the winning margin more and more and more in their communities and it is a voting bloc they need to speak to, and not just in Spanish. They've got to learn how to engage them."

In the five years since opening, Mickey Ibarra & Associates has grown to a staff of nine, including a team of five lobbyists. The firm represents both corporate clients such as Verizon and Pfizer and nonprofit groups such as the National Council of La Raza and the League of United Latin American Citizens.

In large measure, Ibarra still serves as a liaison to local officials, this time helping clients reach out to Hispanic leaders from all levels of government. He also serves on the board of advisers to the Hispanic Strategy Center at

the New Democrat Network, a group started by Simon Rosenberg to promote progressive candidates, and runs a quarterly lecture series called the Latino Leaders Luncheon.

One particular area of interest for Ibarra is to help Democrats craft a message attractive to Hispanic voters, who are increasingly pulling the switch for the GOP. Only around 21 percent of Hispanic voters voted for Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.) in 1996, but some 45 percent voted for President Bush in 2004.

One potential fault line that Ibarra believes could help Democrats is immigration reform. Ibarra favors the bipartisan McCain-Feingold bill, which seems to have more Democratic support, that provides for guest worker programs like the one that brought his father to the United States and within one generation put an Ibarra — pronounced “e”-barra — in the White House.
