

ANTHONY ROMERO

Adding the verbs

ANTHONY ROMERO has spent the morning shepherding potential philanthropists through a Manhattan housing court. He wants them to see the scene: children crying in the halls, benches full of poor people waiting, a mother telling a judge about backed-up sewage in her apartment, one eviction case after another. Here are the individual faces of poverty in the city, revealing obvious human need coupled with the stark inability of the judicial system to meet that need. Romero explains his analysis of what would make life better for those tired mothers and their children; what interventions could make a difference. It takes money, he concludes. Not just charity, but funding for the kinds of programs that enable people to help themselves.

By the end of his talk, his listeners are not only convinced of the efficacy of well-placed philanthropy; they are also filled with curiosity about their guide, a charming young Latino whose pale gray, European-cut suit hangs with casual elegance from his thin frame. He looks white, but his second-generation New York Puerto Rican accent, which he also wears with casual elegance, marks him unmistakably as the other. He seems to know much about how poor people live, yet he seems to his audience so different from them — so articulate, so accomplished, so dynamic. “What about you, Anthony?” one woman finally asks. “How did you make it to where you are?”

Anthony Romero smiles his wide, generous smile and replies, “Two words: affirmative action.”

“Oh, no,” the woman replies quickly. “Not you, Anthony. You’re so smart, so special . . .” as though she wishes to redeem him from a negative label.

"And," he replies, still smiling, "I needed affirmative action."

Anthony Romero is one of the highest-ranking Latino foundation officers in America. Currently the director of the Human Rights and International Cooperation Program at the Ford Foundation, he supervises a large staff and numerous grants with budgets totaling millions of dollars. How did he get there from his childhood in a Spanish-speaking home in a Bronx housing project?

His parents were immigrants. His father, Demetrio Romero, grew up working on a sugar plantation in Puerto Rico, attending school only until the fourth grade. As a consequence, he was never comfortable with writing. His son describes the strained hand with which he signed his children's financial aid applications. "Ironically, in his shirt pocket — he always wore a proper dress shirt — he would always have a gold Cross pen and an Ace comb," Anthony recalls. Demetrio Romero was gregariously friendly to all, never afraid to approach someone simply because of his limited English or perceived lower social status.

Shortly after coming to America, Romero went to work as a "houseman" at the Warwick Hotel. He stayed for thirty-nine years, loyal to the union, and waited for a promotion to banquet waiter, a higher-paying position. He knew his long wait was a result of discrimination. He was known to all as a good worker, but Latinos were rarely promoted. The excuse of limited English made little sense, since many waiters were European immigrants — Greek and Italian — for whom English was a second language. Furthermore, speaking perfect English was hardly a central requirement for banquet servers, who had little or no need to converse with customers at large hotel functions where everyone was served the same meal. After many years, the banquet job was made available to Demetrio Romero, and he took pride in doing that job well.

Anthony describes his mother, Coralie Romero, as "the brains in the family." Her own mother was a widowed factory worker, struggling to support her four children. Coralie dropped out of school to help support her family, abandoning her chance for betterment through education and leaving behind embarrassing schooldays when her shabby clothes marked her as a child of poverty. Determined that her children would have more, she told her son he must study: "That's the way people make it in America." When she noticed his early interest in reading, she encouraged him, all the while planning and scheming to make a better life for her children.

The Romero family lived in a low-income housing project, walking up and down twelve flights of stairs because the elevator never worked. It seemed that nothing worked. Anthony recalls winters with no hot water or heat, going to bed at night wearing a knit hat and gloves. Crime was out of control. An entire family was murdered in the apartment next door, and young Anthony and his sister were not allowed outside to play. Spending long hours in the apartment alone, they developed a special closeness, which has lasted into their adulthood.

Every night Demetrio Romero would ride the subway back home to the Bronx and call from the station to announce that he was beginning the walk home. The family would wait anxiously until he came through the door. The reality of crime meant they were never sure that he would make it. Years later Anthony recalls this ritual with the sense of humor and pathos that mark much of his commentary on the state of human affairs. "What were we going to do if something happened? But I think it made him feel better to call."

When asked how the *New York Times* would describe the neighborhood he grew up in, he replies, "The same as I do — horrible social problems, crime-ridden. But the *Times* would fail to understand that there were many families like mine that lived in such places."

In a family like the Romeros', "people were venerated [and] there was never fear of laughter." Frequent visits from friends and family, his mother's quiet passion for books and prayer, his father's aggressive embrace of humanity — all created a rich and festive environment that eclipsed the squalor of the high-rise project.

By the time he reached high school, the family — mostly as a result of his mother's persistence — had managed to move to a working-class neighborhood in New Jersey. They exchanged the crime and poor schools of their exclusively Black and Latino Bronx neighborhood for the explicit racism of a nearly all-white environment. Anthony and his sister were called racist epithets for the first time, and classmates shared an endless litany of racist jokes and stereotypes, sometimes adding that the cruelty was not meant to include the Romeros, who were "not like the rest of them."

The Romero kids chose the classic response to this kind of marginalization: excellence. Anthony was salutatorian of his high school class, and his test scores, along with the checkmark in the "Puerto Rican" box on the PSAT application, brought recruiting letters from many of the top

universities in the country. No guidance counselor or teacher knew or cared about the opportunities available to him; no one in his family had had any experience with American higher education. The recruiting letters would have gone into the trash if the older brother of a friend had not explained patiently to Anthony that these schools would offer financial aid as well as admission because they were embarrassed that they had no Puerto Rican students; he didn't have to turn them down because his family was poor.

Some of the Ivy League schools wanted to send interviewers to the Romero home as part of their affirmative action outreach efforts. Although these efforts made it possible for Anthony to learn about the best schools in the country, he does not recall them positively. The visits seemed like inspections. It felt as though, Anthony recalls, they couldn't believe that someone with his background could really have those grades and test scores. The Yale recruiter was obnoxious to his family, he remembers, so, on the basis of some pretty pictures of Princeton and that school's proximity to home, he accepted admission there. He had little sense of what Princeton represented in the world of power — nor of how bereft he would feel once there.

When he and his family arrived on campus the first day, all the Romeros were dressed in their Sunday best. He remembers his roommate's family arriving in Bermuda shorts and T-shirts. "His father was a Yale-educated lawyer. We were obviously visiting; this was obviously their home." Across vast gulfs of class and culture, Anthony and his roommate, "the Baltimore preppy," became lifelong friends.

Worried that he didn't really belong at Princeton, Romero worked with what he now sees as unhealthy desperation. He earned straight A's that first semester. Looking back, he says with regret that he was driven by a sense of shame over his family's humble roots.

He worked summers at the Warwick Hotel, in service jobs that seemed at the time "below" his status as a college boy. He bristled when the managers called his father Chico, a made-up generic name for a Latino worker. "This the family never knew until I worked there . . . To friends and family he was Mecho, never Chico. When I went to the hotel and was known as 'Chico's son,' I had an incredible argument with my dad. I gave him my 'race analysis' of this naming, and he told me to keep my university education out of his job."

Many years later, Anthony describes his father as a man whose dignity "came from within," who could let the bumbling prejudices of others roll off his back while he did what he had to do to earn a living. Having grown beyond the vulnerability that plagued him at Princeton, having lost to an early death the father he adored, Anthony now says he learned more by working at the hotel than he did in Princeton classrooms.

From Princeton he went on to get a law degree at Stanford and then took an entry-level job as a junior staff person at the Rockefeller Foundation. He quickly developed a reputation for excellence, and moved on to Ford, where he was soon promoted to the supervisory position he now holds. "I feel I represent organizations and issues like a lawyer with a client," he says of the matters he specializes in: the rights of racial minorities and other oppressed groups. Unlike most of his colleagues in the elegant foundation offices, Romero feels a strong identity with the racial minorities, the poor, the "target populations" the grants are intended to uplift. He works in places where people wear suits that would take the better part of a hotel worker's yearly wage to buy; where grants are discussed over restaurant dinners that cost what a family in the projects is expected to eat on for a month.

In the beginning, this atmosphere made him lose his grounding. He remembers one sunny day early in his career when he was on the way to a meeting to make a critical presentation urging top foundation officials to issue a public statement in favor of minority scholarships. Up ahead, he saw picket lines from Local 6 of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union — his father's old union. The group he was supposed to meet with had picked as a lunch spot a hotel where workers were on strike, and he had to decide whether to cross the picket line of a union that had made it possible for his father to earn a wage that would feed his family, or to abandon a meeting at which he would be the key advocate for the kind of scholarship that had made it possible for him to go to college. "The scene was spinning like a sixties' movie, where the camera goes all around the room." He made a split-second decision to join his superiors inside the hotel and to decline to order a meal as his concession to the strike.

It is a decision he reports with painful regret. As a newcomer to a world that was not his, fighting what felt like a losing battle to save

affirmative action scholarships at a time when judges, politicians, and key foundation insiders were willing to abandon them, he believed he couldn't start out with a disruptive move.

There is no affirmative action beneficiary who doesn't know that dilemma. It is a function of trying to work within institutions that have never had anyone like yourself; sometimes your survival instincts trump your principles. There are few like Anthony Romero, willing to talk about that feeling in an open way. "I am much more secure now in my career, and would like to think that I could get the entire group to not enter," he says with quiet reflection.

Anthony Romero has grown from tentative outsider to insider critic. He has risen in the foundation world because of multiple talents that superiors quickly recognized. On any given night, the light is on in the window of the high-rise office he occupies. Here, as at Princeton, he works harder than anyone else. He also uses charm; co-workers report that he is liked and admired by everyone from the janitors to the board of trustees. A former professor recalls, "People don't just like Anthony. They meet him and they fall in love."

His humor and his obvious devotion to the human family draw others to him. He knows all the workers behind the cafeteria counter at the Ford Foundation by name. They call out to him in Spanish, teasing him about his vegetarianism. "Antonio! Arroz con pollo today. What kind of Latino are you, anyway?"

He now heads several programs, grouped under the title Human Rights and International Cooperation, within the Peace and Social Justice division of the foundation. His goal, he says, is to "put the verbs in — to *secure* human rights, to *ensure* peace, to *establish* international cooperation, to *achieve* social justice. We could spend the rest of our lives identifying issues. I want to *do* something." Then he adds, "How you do it is as important as what you do." He wants his division members to work with a "zealotry that doesn't know any bounds, and in doing that to have a great deal of fun. We should enjoy it, be gnawed, irritated, angered — a total obsession."

This sense of urgency has also drawn Romero to volunteer work. "I was losing my soul," he said. Administering large grants from the lofty plateau of foundation offices distanced him from the community he came from. He joined a mentoring project, hoping to make an immediate difference in one person's life, and took on a Puerto Rican high

school student. Over mild resistance on her part, he went with her to museums and cultural events, and he conceded to her *quid pro quo* demand: an outing to a hip-hop roller skating joint. He laughs a characteristic, self-deprecating laugh. "There I was, this pale, skinny guy, rolling along with the homeboys and homegirls."

He helped her with college applications, using his position to get more information about the admissions process. Unlike his own college applications, typed on a manual typewriter his father had brought home from the hotel, Laura's went out laser-printed on cotton bond paper. Yet even with his help, she ran into barriers. A financial aid package collapsed over the school's demand for her father's income tax returns, documents impossible to obtain from an absentee parent. By the time the explanations for the missing returns were submitted, the scholarship money was gone.

Anthony Romero was angry. He had worked hard to help this bright young woman overcome barriers and slog through the complicated college application process. Now her first-choice college, which had already accepted her for admission, was beyond her grasp. He knew there were hundreds like her out there — gifted, ambitious, with no one to tell them what they needed to do to get into college and out of the projects. He wrote an angry but judicious letter to the Hampshire College financial aid office, suggesting that they re-evaluate their procedures. How many students in need of financial aid are able to provide tax returns from absent fathers? Often they are poor precisely because their fathers are gone. In his characteristic manner of treating every problem as a mutual problem, he explained how Laura's aid application had fallen through the cracks, how extra effort is called for on behalf of minority students who are unfamiliar with the process: "There are many things I wish you — and we — had done differently. Next time, we both need to try a little harder."

There is in all his work a sense of urgency, as though he sees in Laura and in the clients his grants are supposed to serve someone who is family, someone who is the defenseless teenager he was, arriving by grace on a campus where everyone seemed rich, competent, and comfortable with privilege, surviving challenges to his sense of self, leaving bruised but nonetheless a *gran hombre*, the honorific his father used on his deathbed to describe his precious son.

A woman waits on a bench in housing court. The heat is off again,

and her baby is recovering from pneumonia. When Anthony Romero pushes through a grant for a tenant's rights project, he knows the immediacy of that mother's need. There are things we must secure, today, putting the verbs in, making justice real. For her, for the grant makers who will understand her need through his translation, Anthony Romero is the *gran hombre*, brought by affirmative action to a place where he can make a difference in people's lives.