

Testimony of
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Hearing on pending legislation including:

**S. 500, To establish the Commission to Study the Potential Creation of
the National Museum of the American Latino**

Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks

United States Senate

March 20, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to submit testimony on the record on behalf of the Mexican Heritage Corporation (“MHC”) in support of S. 500, a bill to establish a commission to study the potential creation of a National Museum of the American Latino. The measure was introduced by Senator Salazar and cosponsors include Senators Feinstein and Boxer of California. We greatly appreciate this Committee’s commitment to the recreational and cultural needs of our nation, especially those efforts that seek to celebrate our nation’s diverse heritage by supporting culturally relevant institutions, such as the proposed American Latino arts center.

I serve as the President and CEO of MHC. In that role, I oversee the management of the Mexican Heritage Plaza (the “Plaza”), California’s largest Latino multi-disciplinary arts center, serving Silicon Valley, the San Francisco Bay Area region, the State of California and the nation. The Plaza is a seven-year old, \$35 million multi-disciplinary visual and performing arts venue located in San Jose, California. The mission of the Mexican Heritage Plaza is to affirm, celebrate and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Mexican community and showcase multicultural arts within the region and nationally. The Plaza presents and produces artistic and cultural events in several venues — our theatre, gallery, performing arts pavilion, gardens and central plaza. The facility itself is owned by the City of San Jose.

As the major Latino arts center located in the state with the largest Latino population in the United States, the Plaza provides a critical cultural alternative to

mainstream arts programming — it enjoys a unique status as the only multi-disciplinary Latino and inter-cultural regional arts center serving general audiences and the more than 1.4 million Hispanics in the San Francisco Bay area, providing the state's diverse community with the best in Latino and intercultural music, theatre, dance and educational programming.

The Plaza realizes its mission through a multi-disciplinary artistic program that celebrates Mexican culture and illuminates and explores both the diversity within Mexico and the influence of Mexican culture on other communities worldwide through the visual, performing and media arts. MHP programming illuminates the passionate cadence of Mexican music, the complexity of Mexico's history and diversity, and the unique contributions of a culture which both literally and figuratively form the underlying architecture of present day American life.

Inter-cultural centers such as museums, theatres, and performing arts centers play a key role in society. They are a powerful engine of economic growth. They impart values and skills which uplift and strengthen our community. Finally, they transmit and help determine our connection to each other in a common language of artistic expression. At the Plaza, audiences encounter programming that attempts to understand how institutions serve as catalysts for changing the way our community views the links between art, culture and community building. We uphold expression unconstrained by traditional notions of ethnic representation, so that the diverse prism which comprises the US Latino community may sing openly.

In conceptualizing the structure, design, and service to the nation of the first US Latino arts center in our nation's capital, I invite the committee to imagine a world in which art and culture are not viewed through a prism of demographics, of observer and observed, or even held notions of meaning within the traditional concept of that reference. Rather, I invite us all to think, in words of the philosopher Stanley Cavell, "Must we mean what we say?" In other words, to envision the creation of a national cultural arts institution in which notions of cultural separateness become instead an innovative path for the celebration of creativity which, in turn, acknowledges our common humanity.

As part of our mission to celebrate Mexico's culture and showcase multicultural arts, the Mexican Heritage Plaza presents, produces and collaborates on visual and performing arts events by celebrating a universal language of creative expression. We might work with a Latino curator to reveal a shared understanding of diasporas as expressed through the palate of an African abstract expressionist, or present modern mariachis performing traditional Mexican music with a new contemporary beat, or new interpretations by a Chicano theatre group of classical plays that stretch the boundaries of satire. Our center is a unique "instrument" whose music transcends borders and familiar notions of meaning. Experience American Latino heritage and culture and you will feel

and taste not only an aspect of our nation's past, but also the present contributions of the many artists, writers, musicians, directors, and producers who together comprise the singular "sabor" — flavor — of the US Latino cultural landscape.

And so as we contemplate, as a nation, the opportunity to showcase the rich culture of the US Latino experience we must also ask ourselves — how do the colors and music of Latino heritage translate? How does our common human experience inform creative interpretation? Can we hear culture? Does it sing a familiar tune? In asking and attempting to answer such questions we engage in curiosity, we go outside ourselves, and into another experience of heritage. The journey will be delightful, challenging, and multifaceted. But if we gain an understanding of the aesthetic voice of our uniquely American Latino experience, then we may come to understand one another.

Mr. Chairman, we urge that the Subcommittee support S. 500 and its goals, and we look forward to working with you and Members of the Subcommittee on this important matter. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.