

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Recently, I attended the Aspen Latino Business Summit in Washington, DC where I met a variety of experts in economic development, business ownership, and policy to get an idea of how the next generation of Latino entrepreneurs can increase economic opportunities for all. This series for WorkingNation features interviews with those leaders.

This week's guest is Henry Cisneros. You may know him as the former mayor of San Antonio and the US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President Bill Clinton. Now he's the chairman of the investment firm, American Triple I, and chairman of San Antonio's entry into the Aspen CityLab program. We talked about how Latino communities throughout the country can be the drivers of economic growth.

He started out telling me what he's doing through CityLab.

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Well, the way it started was Domenika Lynch, who heads the Latinos in Society Initiative at Aspen, was trying to find the place where she could intervene and put Aspen in the best position to move the Latino community forward using its traditional vehicles of convening and leveraging and networking. And she hit upon this idea of picking six Latino-oriented cities, that is to say large and robust populations, and particularly large and robust small business sectors to test ideas about how interventions with Latino small business could actually move the needle in economic development.

She picked Miami, Chicago, San Antonio, El Paso, Phoenix, and San Bernardino. I volunteered to, as a former mayor, head the San Antonio committee, and it's been exceedingly successful. We have eight initiatives underway in areas from outreach to small business, investment in economic corridors, upskilling of the workforce, changing the narrative of the Latino community, the principal core of the Latino community, it's called the West Side of San Antonio, focusing on community development, housing, and protection of the neighborhood, et cetera.

So that's what we're about. That's what it means. And in short, in one sentence, it's an effort to create economic momentum in the West Side of San Antonio, a marginalized, disadvantaged neighborhood, and do it in a way that helps the people, not hurts the people who are presently there.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I just did a story recently about Texas and clean energy and the whole revolution there, and the woman I spoke to in Houston said, "We want to be the clean energy transition capital of the world."

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Well, Houston has the capacity to do that. It, of course, is frequently mentioned as the energy capital of the world, but that has been in the era of fossil fuels. And I think they're very smart to jump ahead of the curve and look at renewables and futuristic energy fuels and techniques and materials to stay ahead as the leader of energy and not be bypassed as has happened in the past when a city is the hub of something and then that economic sector shifts. So Houston's doing a good job.

San Antonio and Austin, I'm proud to say, are two cities with municipally owned power companies that are very substantially committed to wind and solar. I think some of the largest percentages of wind and solar in the country are the Austin and San Antonio systems.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, I just spoke to for that article, Mike Ramsey, who's the head of the...

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Ready to Work in San Antonio.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yes, absolutely. And so he and the mayor and what you're doing there is really great because it is part of what you have described as the next economy.

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

So I think. I think that we at least understand the shape of the future economy. Austin certainly on that score is ahead of San Antonio and almost everywhere else because of their strong commitment to technology companies, startups, investment in them, and companies now coming to Austin. Everybody who's anybody in the sort of the tech lingo is there, Google, Amazon, Tesla. Dell is there and bringing more resources because they have access to the research capabilities and manpower resource that is the University of Texas at Austin.

San Antonio, a different slice of the future. Heavy on biosciences, heavy on cybersecurity, heavy on the next generation of automotive technologies. Tesla has a presence, but more importantly, due to scale, Toyota manufactures 240,000 Tundras and Sequoias in San Antonio every year. And the company that was International Harvester making trucks is now called Navistar, and they're in San Antonio. So it's this amazing, phenomenal development of massive technology descending on Central Texas.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So your investment, so now in this private investment that you're doing in infrastructure...

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Correct.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... that is another very, very big part of the economy that we have now, and it's just growing.

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Absolutely. The company that I chair, American Triple I, focuses on a series of investment targets in the transportation field, in the energy field, in what's called social infrastructure, which means schools, higher education, hospitals, and also in digital. Our greatest success has been raising capital for JFK Airport Terminal 6, the new Terminal 6 at JFK, which is principally JetBlue, but we'll have international airlines. And we raised \$400 million of a total 1.3 billion equity private investment piece to do a public-private partnership at JFK Airport.

So that's what we do is invest in those targets that I mentioned. Sometimes in public-private partnerships of large scale, like JFK, and in other cases, buying portfolio companies but in these fields of emerging infrastructure.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And we're here at the Aspen Latino Business Summit talking about the opportunities for the Latino workforce, the Latino business owners, and the community, but they have been locked out of a lot of these opportunities. How can we unlock that?

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Well, you phrased that in a very, I think, appropriate way. We know that Latinos have been locked out of the economy and are characterized by smaller businesses. Most of Latinos are employed in one-person businesses. But this is a point of inflection for the entire American economy, and it suggests that if you've been locked out before, you don't have to be locked out in the new economy.

So I think it's very foresighted of Aspen to create a conference focusing on the next economy, the new economy. And Latinos can be an important part of that. We're younger than the national average. A whole lot of young people getting trained in good schools. There's no reason why we can't have a inordinately larger role than we've ever had before in the American economy as it transitions in my field of infrastructure. I can tell you, we're at a point of inflection where the next generation of infrastructure is not going to be the same.

It's not going to be just wider roadways. It's going to be roadways with technology embedded in them to guide traffic. It's not just going to be fossil fuel-generating plants and power, but it's going to be solar and wind and hydrogen and a lot of other new fuels. It's not going to be just traditional communications, but it's going to be broadband into the neighborhoods that have been left out to this point. It's not going to be just traditional airports, but fantastically different airports with space for vertical takeoff and landing aircraft with different passenger experiences.

So everything about the country is changing. It's one of those moments when if you can dream, if you can imagine, if you can train yourself for the future, then you can play in the new economy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's where some of the challenges come in too, because I just published a story today that I wrote about how there was a survey, I think it was 52% of the Latino community they have no or little digital skills. And there's access to broadband, access to devices. So there feels like there needs to be a concerted effort for communities and government and nonprofit and corporations to all get together.

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

There clearly does need to be a concerted effort. And you're right, I mean, it would be just a terrible thing to have this moment of transition to new fields where we're not locked out, but for lack of training, for lack of skills, for lack of preparation, for lack of knowledge, be left out again. It's absolutely critical that the community be able to make that transition.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Did you say some of your investment is in some of that workforce development?

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Not directly, but yes, because for example, when we did JFK, that is really important to the local community in Queens, New York. So we've had to really create a special capacity to focus on workforce training, workforce recruitment, education in the local schools, awareness in the community, all of those things that allow people to take advantage of the fact that there's going to be \$4 billion spent on one terminal at JFK Airport. There's an immediately adjacent community called Jamaica in Queens, and I mean, if we don't make that integration, if we don't bring people into the better jobs, if we don't create the new incomes for families, we've simply missed out on a fundamental purpose for why those investments were made.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It feels like corporations and the government, they're making a better effort because that whole infrastructure has a supply chain, so they're making a better effort to increase underrepresented groups in those contracts.

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Well, I'd like to think that companies are working hard at it, and I think the best of them are. I'm very impressed with the efforts of people like, for example, Bank of America, like JP Morgan in the financial sector, but then many other construction companies and others. And part of it is just a fundamental practical reality. If you don't hire from the population that exists, who are you going to hire from? So you have to recruit and you have to train, and you have to do it in a serious way or you don't have a workforce that's capable. And that's a real challenge for the country.

I do think that some of the best companies are doing that, but I would also say right now we have in America this really self-destructive moment when people are saying retrench on affirmative action and retrench on attention to diversity and equity concerns when at this very moment the future of the country and its economy depends upon integrating those populations. I mean, it's a direct correlation there, which we somehow seem to be letting our prejudices get ahead of us when it will be self-damaging over the long run. It doesn't make a lot of sense.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What is your own experience growing up and your economic, I want to say your experience just in the economy?

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

I'm a fortunate human being, and I should thank the Lord every day for giving me a place to grow up in a neighborhood and with a family that was very much motivated, driven to education, committed to hard work for a lifetime. And so those have been the values that have been my values, and I believe they're the values of a large part of the American Latino community, let me say.

I lived in a neighborhood which was something of a cocoon because it was all Latinos, many of them veterans from World War II raising their families in the way they had experienced military service and the war. And so it was all about work and it was all about community. And I never knew discrimination because inside that cocoon there was not discrimination. It was just patriotism and hard work. And I think it's true in a lot of Latino communities.

But I obviously graduated to the larger world. I was able to get a education at a state university and go on to some of the best schools in the country, have a doctorate in public administration. But I saw with my own eyes the intransigence of segregation and prejudice and worked hard as a city council member

and as a mayor to change the narrative in San Antonio, change the narrative to a more inclusive city, a city where our goals were economic development and growth, but a growth that could be harnessed to work for people who had been marginalized before and focus equally on training and education and inclusion. That, in my view, is the American idea.

I served as a cabinet member with President Clinton, and I discussed with him personally many times. It resonated with him, which is why he brought me into his cabinet. But the point is, I always said, "We have to hit with two fists. One fist is the practical things that we need to do to grow the economy. They're pretty traditional and practical. The other is we need to create the pathways and the education and the training and the motivations to make this a two-fisted fight." And I haven't changed my view of... It may sound simplistic, but I haven't changed my view in 40 years.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And as the population continues to increasingly...

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

It becomes more important.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Much more important.

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

I mean, can you imagine the logic that says take your largest population, leave it uneducated and marginalized, and expect the future to be better? Hey, what's wrong with this picture? That's just crazy logic.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

This is an economic issue for the entire country.

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Absolutely. It's everything about the American future. I'm an American first. I love this country. And as I try to work for its best interests, I see the education and training and integration of minority populations as essential to the American future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you very much for your time.

Henry Cisneros, American Triple I chairman and co-founder:

Absolutely.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was my interview with Henry Cisneros at the Aspen Latino Business Summit in Washington, DC. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.