

RITA MORENO

SPEAKS UP

Words Lea Thompson
Courtesy Photography
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Rita Moreno could have retired as a legend at many points in her 70+ year career. She made history as the first Latina to win an Academy Award for her performance as Anita in 1961's *West Side Story*, and is among just 15 people to ever EGOT, or win an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony awards for her work. But the 87-year old Puerto Rican actress is determined to break down barriers to education and advocate for Latinx people.

Moreno will speak about importance of education and her own life experiences during the sold-out 2nd Annual SAC Fiesta Brunch fundraiser in San Antonio on Wednesday, April 24. All proceeds from the event benefit students at high-risk of dropping out.

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San Antonio Current



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There's a lot of excitement surrounding your visit to San Antonio—

I'm thrilled to be going back [to San Antonio], I love going there. It's beautiful, just a beautiful town. I'm looking forward to [seeing the Riverwalk] and all kinds of good stuff.

Your presence, and the brunch event, is geared at raising funds for local students that are at high risk of dropping out. Why is education an important cause to you?

Oh, gosh, I mean, just looking at the headlines these days should give you the answer. I think the youth in this country [are] in desperate, desperate trouble, and I don't think we're taking good enough care of them.

I have the opportunity to speak on [education] and speak on their behalf. Whenever I have the opportunity to help out, I do. It's part of what I do, actually. It's part of what I do at Christmas time, and it's part of what I do when it's not Christmas. I try to help out with the Alameda County Food Bank when I can, you know? It's important—

Hang on a second. [Long pause] Oh, my God. They're singing next door. You know, I'm at the [movie set] for the West Side Story right now.

Are you serious? That's amazing.

I'm going to do the movie you know, or do you not know?

Yes, I just didn't realize you were on set right now. I just knew I heard something in the background.

I just heard the boys, the Puerto Rican boys, singing our national song, a Puerto Rican song. I can't believe it. I guess they have to learn it for this movie! Oh, I've got to ask Steven [Spielberg] about it. I'm so excited. Anyway, I'm a person who tries to serve.

Well, now I'd love to hear more about what it's like being on set and being part of this movie.

I met the cast this morning for the first time, and it was just almost like [a reunion], except I didn't know any of them. Yet I did know them. We talked and they asked questions, and I was funny and I told them anecdotes about the making of the original movie. I met the girl who's going to play Anita, which was my role, and she was very shy and very nervous and adorable. She's about as big as a minute. The wonderful thing is that all of the actors who were playing the Sharks [the Puerto Rican gang in the film] are in fact Hispanic. And that's thrilling. It wasn't that way before.

You won an Oscar and recognition for your role as Anita in the original West Side Story, but for many years only a few quality roles were offered to you. Have things changed for Latinx actors and actresses?

I think it's gotten better in my profession, but actually, we are still severely underrepresented in [media], and I mean really underrepresented in film. I mean, [just because] Jennifer Lopez is in a movie does not mean that we are doing so hot. That's Jennifer Lopez, and that's that. We do have to try to get our act together and make [more opportunities] happen.

I'm a good friend of Gina Rodriguez, the lead actress on TV show Jane, the Virgin, and Gina is, oh boy, gung ho. She has a production company. She's got two shows that she's going to produce and they're going to be with Hispanic [actors and actresses]... She's really, really going all in. That makes me so happy, and we just need more people who can do that, and who are capable of doing that. She's a strong person. I just did a guest spot in the final episode of Jane the Virgin this week... We just have to work very hard. That's all. It's going to be difficult for us. But then, you know, what else is new? It's never been easy.

That's true, I know many fans were disappointed about One Day at A Time's recent cancellation. I know it was really exciting to see people that look like and sound like my own family. What can people do to improve and diversify representation?

I really think that the public needs to get more involved in what is going on in [our representation in media]. I think they need to write in. I know that we've got a lot of response from Hispanic families about the cancellation. They were really, really really unhappy, and I think we just need more of that. I think we need to let the networks know that they have an audience out there, they just need to tap them. Thank goodness for Norman Lear. Everybody loves that show. Everybody who sees it adores it.

What is something that young people, particularly people of color, need to hear right now?

They need to finish their education because there is no guarantee. There are so many kids who want to be in show business, but there is no guarantee they're going to be even a working actor, let alone a successful one or a star. You have to have a skill that will help you pay for your lessons, pay for your rent, pay for your mood and your clothing. It's not going to happen by itself. You must have another skill.

You've had such a prolific career, and you've accomplished so much. What drives you to continue working and creating?

It's not like it's a job. It's what I love doing and I actually get paid for it, imagine that. And, you know, age has nothing to do with it. I'm one of those very energetic and alert 87-year-old people.

Well, obviously. You are goals.

[Laughs] Definitely.
