



Sotomayor nominated for Supreme Court.
JOSHUA ROBERTS, BLOOMBERG NEWS



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Bazán serves on La Raza board of directors.

La Raza drawn into debate

Sotomayor is a former member

BY KRISTIN COLLINS, Staff Writer

Andrea Bazán thought she could no longer be surprised. As a well-known Latina advocate, she has received death threats and had her home vandalized.

But the nomination of a Hispanic woman to the Supreme Court has brought accusations that have blind-sided even her. Some conservatives say Sonia Sotomayor's membership in the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Hispanic advocacy group -- whose board Bazán has led for the past year -- should disqualify Sotomayor for the high court.

Former Congressman Tom Tancredo called the group "a Latino KKK without the hoods and nooses." And conservative political commentator Rush Limbaugh compared Sotomayor to David Duke, who is a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

"We are stunned to hear such rhetoric," said Bazán, who has served on the group's board since 2000. "It's outrageous."

NCLR, as the Washington-based nonprofit group is known, says its mission is to reduce poverty and discrimination and improve opportunities for Hispanics. It does that by lobbying and working with hundreds of organizations around the country to run charter schools, homeownership programs, health clinics, English classes and a host of other programs.

It also supports immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, and it has advocated for such causes as allowing illegal immigrants to pay in-state college tuition and get driver's licenses.

NCLR officials say Sotomayor paid the group's \$35 yearly dues and received its newsletters from 1998 to 2003 and has not been involved since.

The group was founded in 1968 and has since become a major player in U.S. politics. Both President Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain gave speeches to the group during their presidential campaigns.

NCLR gets about \$30 million a year in revenue, which comes partly from federal grants and support from major foundations and corporations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, PepsiCo, Wal-Mart and ConAgra Foods.

"People that have worked with NCLR know it as a leading group that works across races and across communities," said Bazán, who runs the Triangle Community Foundation in

Chapel Hill and is the founder of El Pueblo, North Carolina's largest Latino advocacy organization.

Despite its high profile in Washington, NCLR was largely unknown to many Americans until Sotomayor's nomination brought it to prominence. Now, it is seen in some circles as a voice for lawlessness and even "brown supremacy," as alleged in a recent news release from the Raleigh anti-illegal immigration group Americans for Legal Immigration.

Many focus on its name, La Raza, which can be translated as "the race."

"It's troubling to me that any group would have their name as 'The Race,'" said Ron Woodard of Cary, head of the anti-immigration group N.C. Listen. "They seem to play the race game and to be focused on their race because of their name."

Bazán said the literal translation of la raza fails to capture its significance and that the group's name could more accurately be translated as "the community" or "the people."

She and other La Raza officials say the name is rooted in the theory of "la raza cósmica," a Mexican philosopher's name for a future people who he theorized would transcend racial and ethnic divisions to form a united community. They say it's a commonly known concept in the Mexican-American community.

"It means a group of people that come from many different origins," Bazán said, "that all belong to the Hispanic community."

Other conservatives say they think the accusations of racism have gone too far. Still, they say they see Sotomayor's membership in NCLR as a problem.

"I'm troubled at organizations that say our borders don't mean anything," said state Sen. Phil Berger, an Eden Republican who is sponsoring a bill that would bar illegal immigrants from community colleges. "If she's a member of the group and she agrees with their policy positions, that would argue against her being on the Supreme Court."

Some say this attempt to characterize NCLR and Sotomayor's membership in it as radical or even subversive is a political strategy. Mark Dorosin, a senior attorney with the UNC Center for Civil Rights, said the NAACP and many other groups that participated in the civil rights movement were branded as extremist in the 1950s and 1960s.

"Playing on racial prejudice, and the country's experience with racial discrimination, it's a clearly developed tactic," Dorosin said.

"I think we should be looking at the Sotomayor nomination and discussing her qualifications as a judge," Bazán said, not discussing the organization's four-decade-old name.

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