



## **JOHN AMAYA**

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### **SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA KID SAYS YOU CAN CONTROL YOUR DESTINY**

Growing up in Southern California in the 1980s and 1990s, John Amaya saw racism and violence. He chose to be part of the solution. “Community service was always a motivating factor for me,” says Amaya. “If you weren’t serving your community, you were on the sidelines—and if you were on the sidelines, you were part of the problem. Even as a little kid, I felt being a prosecutor was a way to serve my community.”

Amaya had high aspirations for himself, but he also had plenty of self-doubts. “I had reservations about being prepared,” Amaya recalls. “All I had heard growing up was people saying that Latinos couldn’t succeed in college. They would claim my brain capacity was not great enough. As early as first grade, classmates would say I was less than they were.”

Amaya says he was blessed to have strong parents who raised him to believe in self-determination. In college, mentors like Dr. Myron Apilado, Vice President of Minority Affairs at the University of Washington, increased Amaya’s resolve to make a difference.

“As a minority, you have the right to defend yourself and fight back, to combat stereotypes,” says Amaya. “Instead of using your fists, fight back intellectually. You can have the power. You can combat the lies by educating someone with the facts. Education is the ultimate equalizer.”

After working for the US Department of Justice, the drive to combat negative stereotypes compelled Amaya to join the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, or MALDEF. “Hearing the inaccurate and venomous anti-immigrant speech on the radio or television and seeing the lies being spread, I couldn’t help but fight against it,” Amaya says.

At MALDEF, Amaya executes legislative strategies related to civil rights and immigration policy, working internally and collaboratively with organizations and Congress to fight injustices against all Latinos and correct legal misconceptions and factual inaccuracies.

### **SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER**

To Amaya, a law degree is a life skill that no one can take away. “Law provides the keys to the kingdom of our society,” says Amaya. “Minority populations are underserved and underrepresented in professional areas and overrepresented in our prison systems. Until there are people like us who understand the laws and are representing our interests, we can’t mitigate the situation or draft legislation that changes our lives.”

Amaya encourages young people to combat negativity. “You don’t have to be bound by stereotypes,” he says. “You can control your own destiny; you can achieve. We don’t live in a caste system and you are not bound to an economic ladder for the rest of your life. You have a role to speak truth to power and serve your community.”