

# Inside Philanthropy

## Five Questions for Miguel A. Santana, President and CEO of the Weingart Foundation

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Miguel A. Santana is the president and CEO of the Weingart Foundation, a Los Angeles-based grantmaking foundation dedicated to advancing racial, social and economic justice. Santana took the role last year, after longtime president and CEO Fred Ali retired.

Santana served as L.A.'s city administrative officer under Mayors Antonio Villaraigosa and Eric Garcetti. In addition to his work in the public sector, Santana has also worked in the private sphere. We spoke with Santana about his career and how his personal life has impacted his work.

Here are some excerpts from that discussion, which have been edited for clarity and length.

**In our last conversation, you mentioned that you worked for many years in the public sector before transitioning to the private sector. What made you decide to make this change, and how has the transition been for you?**

When I graduated from Whittier College, I did a little bit of work for Pomona College in admissions, but when the civil unrest occurred in the early '90s, I decided really to focus on issues of our community, so I made a career change in public service. And my first job in that was working for MALDEF, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. It was a time in Los Angeles when everyone was trying to understand the underlying issues that contributed to the civil unrest and how do we start coming together as a community to deal with those underlying issues, much in the way COVID has exposed that in 2020 and 2021. I worked directly with Antonia Hernandez, who now runs the California Community Foundation. She was the president and CEO at the time. She was my boss.

It was also an exciting time in the Latino community because there was a growth in the number of Latino elected officials. And it was from there that I got to meet [Los Angeles County Supervisor] Gloria Molina, and we were working on responding to the anti-immigrant rhetoric that was taking place at that time, which had led to [Proposition 187](#). She asked me to join her

team, so I did, and I worked at the county for 16 years, worked with the supervisor in various roles, overseeing virtually every issue during the time that I was there.

I ended up being her chief of staff over a period of time, then I took a sabbatical to get a master's degree at Harvard. So I went to the Kennedy School and got a master's degree and then came back to the county, and ended up working on the executive side as deputy chief executive officer reporting directly to the chief executive officer, where I oversaw social services and homelessness under my portfolio. So children's services, senior issues, issues facing veterans.

Then I was in that role. The economy collapsed with the recession that we confronted over 10 years ago and I was asked by then-Mayor Villaraigosa in the city of L.A. to literally cross the street from one side of Grand Park to the other and work for the city of Los Angeles as the city administrative officer. I was there during a very difficult time in the city's history. The first four years of my tenure were really about helping the mayor and the city council develop strategies to strengthen the financial well-being of the city. I reported to both the mayor and the city council, so I had 16 bosses, and when Mayor Villaraigosa's term expired, Mayor Garcetti asked me to stay on and I did that for about four years and then transitioned into running a social enterprise in the San Gabriel Valley—Fairplex.

I served on the board of the Weingart Foundation and the California Community Foundation during that time and was able to learn a little bit more about how philanthropy works, and so when my four-year contract at Fairplex expired, I had decided I was going to transition into a different career. Fred Ali had informed the board that he was stepping down as the long-term serving president of the foundation, and so the board asked if I would be interested in taking on this role, and I said yes. So that's how I ended up where I'm at.

### **Who has been the greatest influence on you as a professional?**

I've been very fortunate that I've been exposed to very ethical and community-oriented leaders throughout my career. Of course, starting with Antonia Hernandez, who gave me my start in public service, always placing the community's interest at the forefront, willing to take on the most difficult issues, unapologetic about confronting racism when it rears its ugly head, and using whatever is necessary to advance the community. And so I've learned and I continue to learn from her.

And, of course, Gloria Molina, who gave me my first job in politics, again very ethical always. For her, the most important way of defining success is how it impacts the community. Most of us who worked for the supervisor grew up in the district or lived in the district. Our families were there. So it was more than a job. It was really sort of a mission and purpose. And what I learned from her is the way you can influence government to do the right thing, to service people, but also about ways that government often doesn't benefit community. And she was, and continues to be, very vocal whenever she sees injustice or sees government failing its responsibility, failing to place the interests of community at the forefront.

I also learned that it was important to be fiscally minded, to know that you have a fiduciary duty when you serve in these roles, to make sure that budgets are balanced, that you act responsibly

with the public's dollar, that you always want to make sure to make you look at the effectiveness of programs, to make sure that they're being run efficiently and are outcome-driven. I also learned from her that sometimes, you have to be outspoken to push on the hardest issues.

I learned a lot from Mayor Villaraigosa, who is a visionary for what can be, who was always pushing the city to do better, to think bigger, to think on the bold ideas of the day, whether it's to modernize the airport or to take accountability in our school district or to make tough decisions that may not be politically popular but are decisions that are about doing the right thing. When I was the city administrative officer under Mayor Villaraigosa, I had to present him with some very difficult choices—reductions that had to be made, restructuring that had to take place—and he always rose to the challenge and was willing to do those things that are not politically popular, but he knew they were necessary to right this ship, and the city's better for it.

**Thus far, what have been the worst and best experiences of your life, and what did those experiences teach you?**

I don't know if I would call it the worst, but I would give the same response for both. I feel that my own story as a son of immigrants who were undocumented for most of my childhood, where we experienced poverty, discrimination, racism, when I was often underestimated or disregarded—those experiences, as painful as they were growing up, are very relevant to the work that I do today. In some ways, my own lived experience is more important than my fancy degrees and resume. It really defines who I am—it gives me a sense of empathy and understanding and appreciation of the communities that we serve. And it reminds me that there's still inequality and institutional racism in many of our communities.

This foundation, under Fred Ali, established that its mission and purpose is to confront racism and to help support the community in building a more just experience for everybody. You have to understand what injustice feels like and looks like to really know why that's so important. And so as the first one in my family to go to college, having started a family very young—I was 19 when my first daughter was born—having to rely on public services like food stamps and welfare to make ends meet early in my adulthood, I have a real-life experience and understanding of what poverty looks like, but at the same time, what communities need to be able to thrive and be in charge of their own destinies.

So I actually feel very blessed and I feel that those experiences are actually a gift that helped me in the work that I do today. I'm very proud of my background. I'm proud of my community. And so I carry that with me in the work that I do, leading this foundation.

**What, if anything, keeps you up at night?**

I'll tell you, I do worry that we're at a point in our history as Americans, as Angelenos, where the structures that we put in place to respond to the inequities in our community through government and the nonprofit sector are failing, and that we're not asking the harder questions about why they're failing and giving ourselves permission to get away from those systems to reinvent them so they actually work for people.

Instead, there's sometimes a tendency to double down on what's already broken. We saw that during the pandemic, in our response to the pandemic. Our government created a response system around testing that benefited the privileged and not those who were disproportionately being impacted by COVID, by relying on technology, by using messaging that doesn't resonate with many communities of color, by not understanding how in a family... there's multi-generations living in a household, that people have to work, and so not everybody has the privilege of being behind a computer screen at work—and that the rest of us relied on people working so that we can be in front of our computer screens.

And so our systems that we used to respond to that crisis failed to prioritize the way our communities actually do work and the unique challenges that exist in our communities because they relied on the failed assumption that everyone had the same access to information, the same access to transportation or technology. And so the outcome of that is that communities of color, our Latino community, our immigrant community, our African American community, experienced an unprecedented impact of death and crisis that a few miles away, folks didn't feel.

So the pandemic really exposed the systemic failures that contribute to the inequities we're confronting, and the government, instead of working on addressing those inequities, understanding them and trying to create systems to respond to them, assumed that everyone had the same access and the same set of issues.

We saw the same thing around the distribution of the vaccines. Priorities were given to mega-sites when a lot of people don't have the ability to take half a day off work to make an appointment or to stand in line at Dodger Stadium to get vaccinated. Meanwhile, our communities that were disproportionately impacted didn't have access to the vaccine. The information wasn't communicated in a way that was accessible to many of our communities.

So what keeps me up at night is that while there is a general understanding that as a society, we have to support communities of color and specifically find ways to deal with those inequities, oftentimes, the folks that are making those decisions don't understand our communities intuitively or even from lived experience, so programs and initiatives are designed that completely miss the mark. I worry that we're continuing the inequities that exist. What keeps me up at night is that we still haven't figured out how to respond to the needs that are out there in a real way that's meaningful to the communities that need them.

**If you could snap your fingers and change one thing about philanthropy, what would it be?**

I think the most important thing that we could do as a community in philanthropy is to not limit our impact to the revenue that we have access to based on what's generated from the corpus, but that we actually think about the corpus as a vehicle for good in the kind of investments that we make, in the kind of investments that we don't make.

And we [should be] much more intentional to be mission-aligned, to create a strong agenda around building capacity, using both the corpus and our philanthropy to advance our mission and purpose. And so at the Weingart Foundation, we take that very seriously and we've made some significant inroads, but there's more that we have to do. And if I could just change one thing

about all of philanthropy, I think about the huge impact we would have to use the billions of dollars that we access to fulfill objectives for the common good in our investments, not just in our philanthropy.