

High School Winner: **Jezzmariah Almodovar**
Notre Dame Prep of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield

Hispanic Heritage Month Essay Contest Submission

Sembrando Sueños: The Story of Pura Belpré

Heroes are always the ones on stage or in the spotlight. They're not always athletes, politicians, or singers making headlines. Some heroes quietly change the world in ways that last generations. This is why I chose Pura Belpré, the first Puerto Rican librarian in New York City. While she may not have experienced millions of followers and the attention of the media, she had something much more powerful: the ability to make every Latino child (specifically Puerto Rican children) feel seen, proud and celebrated.

Born in 1899 in Puerto Rico, Belpré moved to New York when the Puerto Rican community was growing but often invisible. At the New York Public Library, she noticed something obvious: the shelves were full of stories, but almost none reflected the lives, voices, or traditions of Latino children. Instead of whining about it or shrugging, Belpré rolled up her sleeves and reimagined it. She became a storyteller, author, and translator, bringing folktales from Puerto Rico and the Caribbean into classrooms and libraries. She started bilingual story hours and wrote books bursting with life, color, and culture.

Being Puerto Rican means embodying a vibrant culture, rich stories and a deep sense of pride wherever you go. It means hearing family tales, tasting arroz con gandules at family gatherings and singing along to reggaetón like it is a language of its own. Yet, it also means sometimes feeling like your culture doesn't fit neatly into the world around you. Pura Belpré taught the world that our traditions, our language, and our stories hold profound value and timeless beauty. Learning about her determination to fight for cultural representation makes me proud of being Puerto Rican and inspires me to share my own voice and heritage confidently.

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Pura's work wasn't just about entertainment, it was about belonging. Through her stories, Belpré told Latino children, "Tú importas. Tu cultura importa. Tus historias merecen ser contadas" (You matter. Your culture matters. Your stories deserve to be told). At a time when many kids were pressured to hide their language, traditions, and history, hearing this allowed them to be proud. This moves me because I've felt like an outsider when my culture wasn't represented anywhere - not in books, lessons, or even someone to talk to. A hero who says "You belong. You matter. Your story counts." - that's the kind of hero I want in my corner.

Belpré's legacy over the last century has been transformative. Today, Latino authors are celebrated, and diverse books are considered essential for all readers. I've had the opportunity to meet a Hispanic author at Barnes & Noble, and I realized how much easier it is now for kids like me to find stories that reflect our lives. But, let's not forget: Belpré started this movement decades earlier, when bilingual stories were considered "unusual." The American Library Association created the Pura Belpré Award in 1996, honoring Latino/Latina writers and illustrators who best portray the Latino cultural experience. Belpré proves that real change often starts with one person brave enough to take the first step.

What inspires me most about Belpré is her courage. She didn't have political power or wealth, but she had passion—and she used it like a weapon. I admire her determination to stand up for kids who deserved to see themselves in books. She wasn't afraid to dream boldly. "El que no sueña, no vive" ("He who does not dream, does not live"). Belpré motivates me to use my own love of writing to inspire others. Like her, I want to create spaces where people feel seen, where voices, no matter how small, have pride, hope, and maybe a little bit of "watch out, world" energy.

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As we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, Pura Belpré deserves to stand shoulder to shoulder with the icons everyone already knows. She was a librarian, yes, but more importantly, she proved that stories have the power to change lives. Her legacy challenges me to embrace my heritage, trust in the magic of words, and dream boldly. Because of her, even the quietest voices - yes, even mine - can roar across generations. That's exactly the kind of hero I want to be.

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