

## NECC - Commencement Speech

May 21, 2016

To President Glenn, the college board, to the distinguished members of the faculty: it is an honor to be here at NECC along with my fellow honorees, the diverse alumni, special guests, family members, and friends who are gathered here today. Most of all, it is an honor to be here with you all: the class of 2016.

This moment is so surreal to me! What an honor it is to be asked to come back and speak to this amazing graduating class. And to think I once sat right where you are seating today.

When asked to be this year's commencement speaker, I was thrilled (I thought to myself, wow what an honor!), I thought well this will a blast, no problem, I can do this! but when the announcement appeared in every social media venue, every local paper, not to mention the front page of the Eagle Tribune, ... Ufff. Talk about pressure!... I got so many phone calls, text messages, facebook messages and face to

face congratulations that it was overwhelming at times. At one point I dreamed of receiving a text from my deceased grandmother congratulating me from her grave, just imagine!

At the beginning, I had a difficult time writing the speech, I am not going to lie. But the more I thought about what I was going to say, it appeared obvious, I was selected to be here for a reason... It is about my own personal journey, a story that many consider to be inspirational.

My goal here today is not to change your future with some smart remarks nor is it to provide you with a map to a successful and happy life, my goal rather is to inspire you to follow your dreams, like I once did.

My story is like so many others in United States of America. I am an immigrant that migrated to this country at the age of 13 and not knowing a word of English. I am the youngest of 9 children. I was born in a little town called Tenares in the Dominican Republic. When I was 3, my mother migrated to United States with my four oldest siblings, leaving the five youngest kids

behind in the Dominican Republic, the oldest being 15. I had a very difficult time growing up without my mother. We grew up alone. It was rough!. But like many immigrants parents that have to leave their children behind looking for a better future, my mother had no other choice. I realize that my upbringing gave me great resilience. I always look at life as the "glass always being half full." It was my attitude and determination that helped me reach my goals. "Today, I am living the American dream" thanks to this wonderful country of opportunities, the United States of America!

I attended Lawrence High School for my four years of high school. I completed my high school years after receiving a bilingual education. Meaning, all my classes were taught in Spanish [yes, in Spanish!... even though I lived in US, I took all my core courses in Spanish, my native language] while taking English as a second language classes at the same time. I graduated high school with many dreams in my head but very limited abilities to move on to a four year college. Despite my limited English, I was accepted to U-Mass Amherst. And I was thrilled by the opportunity of attending a four year college without thinking what that really meant. I attended U-Mass

Amherst for one year. I sat in classrooms held in auditorium with over 300 people. I was lost most of the time. I didn't understand half of what the professor taught in class.

After a year of complete struggle, I was kicked-out of U-Mass. That was my biggest well-kept secret for a very long time. I was ashamed to be kicked out of college. I really didn't share the secret with anyone because I was so embarrassed. But as I grew older, I understood I simply wasn't ready for such challenge. My English was certainly not good enough to attend a school with over 30 thousand students and

very large class settings. At the end of U-Mass journey, I came back to Lawrence. By the time I returned to Lawrence, my mother had retired and had moved back home. I was back in Lawrence feeling defeated, lost and alone.

Shortly after moving to back Lawrence, my boyfriend and I had the brilliant idea of moving in together at the age of 17 and 21. At the age of 18, I was already pregnant with my newborn Alex. But before I gave birth to Alex, I was already legally married to my high school sweetheart and became Mrs. Estrella. While pregnant, I started working at Northern Essex Community



College, Lawrence Campus, and attending classes all at the same time. I never missed a beat even though I was wicked pregnant! [Alex, however, is now 23, he is seating in the front row along with other two children Gabriel, Javier and my husband Jose and I am happy to announce that Alex graduated for college just a week ago, congratulations my son, we've made us all proud].

I can tell you that Northern Essex Community was "a game changer." Coming back defeated from what I thought at that time to be my biggest failure, NECC helped me regain confidence. I started taking all

basic courses in order to improve my English, writing, reading and communication skills. Not to forget that while this was happening I couldn't be more pregnant!

NECC gave me so much. I know I might sound like a broken record already because every time I get interviewed or asked about my story, the biggest highlight of the story is "NECC"... Thank you Northern Essex for that opportunity! Yes, I've attended other wonderful colleges like Merrimack College where I obtained a bachelor degree in business and Massachusetts School of Law where I obtained my juris doctor's degree but it was NECC that gave me that

empowerment to think I could do anything in life.

As a kid I dreamed of being a "licensiada" (as attorneys are often called in D.R.). But coming to United States, getting married a young age with many responsibilities and a big thick accent, I never thought I could reach my ultimate goal of becoming an attorney. It was not until I went from job to job that I realize where my true passion lied. That's when I decided to look into going to law school. I still remember my husband's reaction to that new idea. Having already two children and plenty of bills to pay, I decided to quit my job to pursue my

dream of becoming an attorney. Like every single personal decision I made, Jose was there to support me. Despite his initial shock to take this new challenge, he was there the entire way. And before you know it, I was on my last year of law school when God blessed us with our last and youngest child Javier. Boy, that's when I realized I can't do anything the normal way, I was either 18 and married, having a baby, going to school, working, all at the same time! Who said wonder woman couldn't be Dominican?

As I look back at my journey full of challenges, I realize I would do it all

over again. Ladies and Gentlemen..... I am living the American Dream. I am doing what I love to do. This dream however, wouldn't have the same result had it not be for the support of one amazing guy. The man God blessed me as my husband. One time I said and I will repeat it again, I wish I could add Jose Estrella's name to every single one of my diplomas. Jose was instrumental in everything that I've accomplished in life. And after nearly 24 years of marriage, we are still going strong! Jose could very well be up here telling his personal story, that's how amazing this guy is. Jose, mi amor, thank you for being not just the love of my life, the best father

to my children, an amazing husband but the best business partner one can ask for. Jose and I have accomplished so much together despite getting married so young. Aside from putting each other through school while raising a family, we have been able to grow a real estate investment business that has transformed our future for the very best!

As Tim Cook once said, "For the most important decision in your life, trust your intuition, and then work with everything you have, to prove it right." As I reflect on my life, I lived with that principle in mind.

I did in fact have many fears of failure and feeling lost. Coming to a new country was difficult and very scary. Going to school at the beginning was no easy task as I fear every day of being rejected.

However, I never stopped dreaming of one day becoming someone and I followed that intuition and continue to do today.

My story is not unique! Because like Jose and my story, there are so many stories in our communities that are worth recognition. There are so many immigrants that come to this country and do great things. Our

communities are full of successful individuals and I would like to recognize them here today.

My education, though took me years to complete, set me up for success. Without an education I wouldn't be up here telling you about challenges and most importantly sharing my story.

As soon as I passed the BAR, I decided to open my own law practice in Lawrence. I am happy to be able to serve a community that needs my services. That's the reason I now concentrate in getting involved in the community. If I can give you a piece of



advice today is to always remember where you came from. Give back to your community. The better your community does, the more it can provide to you. Today, I serve in many boards where my presence can make a difference as a female Latina. My community involvements have resulted in meeting great people and create incredible connections. I have the great honor to serve as a Trustee of this great institution. I serve this board with amazing successful individuals whom I've had the opportunity to learn from and develop great friendships.

Thank you NECC for helping me transformed my future. Thank you for this great opportunity of coming back to this college and share my story. I hope one day I'll have the opportunity to hear many of your personal stories as you too may experience the privilege of getting invited to do so. I hope my story inspire many, if not all, to keep going and not look back. I consider myself to be a happy person. I believe happiness lies in doing what you love to do. Find your passion and work hard to get there. My story proves that no matter how old you are, whether you have children, you are married, or have obstacles to overcome,

it is never too late to get an education and reach your goals.

To finalize my speech, I would like to leave you with a quote by Jimmy Iovine who once said "Don't be afraid of fear. Because it sharpens you, it challenges you, it makes you stronger; and when you run away from fear, you also run away from the opportunity to be your best possible self."

Now graduates go and face every single one of your fears because I can assure you it will take you places you never dreamed to be at!

**Congratulations to the class of 2016!!!**