

University of Michigan School of Social Work

Keynote Speech - 2006 Graduation

I'm deeply honored to share this special day with you, your families and your friends. But I'm also a little bit surprised to be here. Because actually, I'm not a social worker. In fact, when I first received the invitation to speak to you, I was sure someone had made a mistake. I couldn't understand why such a well-respected Social Work program, at such a prestigious university, would invite me, of all people, to speak at this commencement ceremony.

But after a while, I began to understand. Because although my job title is different from yours, our goals are the same. And I can't think of any higher goals than the ones we share. In a few minutes, you will walk out of this building committed to creating a better world. You will dedicate your talents to attaining a dream that goes far beyond the usual preoccupation with money and status – and it's a dream you share with the finest names in human history. As you leave here today, you will embark on a path walked by Ghandi, Cesar Chavez, and Martin Luther King. Your daily work will be based on the values they embraced: creating a world where people of all cultures and ethnicities can come together in true community, sharing the blessings of equality and peace.

Of course, you already know this. After all, these are the ideals that attracted you to social work in the first place. In fact, right now you're probably more eager to begin this work than to listen to me talk about it. But before you do, I'd like to share with you two vital pieces of advice. This advice can make your work – and your life - both productive and satisfying. And it's something I'd never have learned if I hadn't immigrated to America.

I am Mexican, and I came to the United States 6 years ago, joining millions of my fellow Latinos. I came here for the same reasons they did: to seek opportunities that my home country could not provide. I was a veterinarian, and my dream was to earn a degree in animal production and international trade, then return home to help my fellow campesinos. I knew this dream would be hard to achieve – like most immigrants, I had little money and no English. But I never could have imagined where this dream would take me.

When I came to Ann Arbor, I was totally lost. I couldn't communicate with people, and the weather was freezing. Mexican pesos don't go far in America, and I soon found myself looking for a job. I became one of the country's 11 million undocumented workers, washing dishes in a local restaurant. I worked at least 10 hours a day, six days a week. Like my Latino co-workers, I never asked for overtime or vacation days, because I was afraid that complaining might endanger my only source of income. If I lost my job, I might have to give up my dreams of a better education. But for my Latino co-workers, the well being of their families was at stake.

In that restaurant's kitchen, my co-workers and I would dream about how life would be if we didn't have to live in the shadows. But our real situation became clear when one of the Mexican workers injured himself at work. The manager told him that he couldn't receive workers' compensation because he wasn't officially on the payroll. This manager also advised him not to complain about the situation - unless he wanted to be deported.

It was also in that kitchen that I began to understand the American people. I realized that many Americans shared the same struggles we immigrants faced. I remember when an Anglo American co-worker needed a day off to take care of her sick child. She couldn't get permission from the manager to go to the hospital, but she went anyway. And she was fired. I realized that minorities and people of color are not the only ones who face social injustice and poverty.

Looking back, I can see the value of my early experiences in this country. But after my first few months here, I was becoming frustrated. Like most Latinos, I spoke Spanish all day at work, and was learning little English. Getting a university degree seemed like an impossible dream. That's when I met Ms. Cecilia Castano Paas, an amazing social worker. She gave me information about ESL schools in the area, and introduced me to the owner of one. Since I didn't have the money for tuition, I offered to clean his school at night in exchange for free classes, and he accepted.

Two years later I'd learned enough English and saved enough money to start a Masters' program at Eastern Michigan University, and shortly thereafter I got married. The experience totally transformed my life. Along with the love and support my husband gave me, I was now able to work legally, and I soon started my current career as a medical interpreter at the University of Michigan Health System. My American dream was coming true.

But somehow, I couldn't completely enjoy my new life. I kept thinking of my former co-workers, our happy and sad experiences together, our struggles to avoid deportation, our lack of information. So four months into our marriage, my husband and I started La Voz Latina Newspaper, the Voice of Latinos in Washtenaw County. A bilingual newspaper, La Voz Latina had two main goals: to help new Latino immigrants adjust to life in the U.S., and to help non-Latinos learn more about this growing community and its culture.

In many ways, La Voz Latina was my introduction to social work. My husband and I were amazed by the community's positive response to the paper. Of course, one of our biggest supporters was the social work community right here at the University. Both students and practicing social workers contributed articles to the newspaper explaining how immigrants could access community services, ensure their legal and civil rights, and deal with other common challenges. Together, we worked to encourage undocumented Latinos to come out the shadows and utilize the services available to them.

But we wanted to do more. So in 2003, we called upon the contacts we had met through the newspaper, bringing them together to organize the first Festival Latino. It was amazing. Thousands of people came - Latinos and non-Latinos - eating, dancing, and

enjoying the diversity of our culture together. And best of all, we had over 40 local service organizations on site, offering free information and services in both Spanish and English. Since then the event has gotten bigger and better, and this September 17th we will celebrate our fourth annual Festival Latino.

To our delight, the small group of dedicated volunteers who helped us organize the first festival stayed together. We formed a non-profit organization called Latinos Unidos, Inc., to advocate for the local Latino community. The organization, like the community it serves, is diverse and growing. I can't tell you how proud I am to see how much we've achieved in a short period of time.

As you can see, I've found my passion in life: to serve my fellow Latinos as best I can. At work, I sometimes interpret for former co-workers from my early years in America. Seeing them gives me a feeling of unity, solidarity, and hope – they are still here, still working very hard for their families – and still smiling. I had the same feeling recently, when I saw thousands of people of all ethnicities, marching in the streets in support of undocumented workers' rights. It's true that undocumented immigrants violated the law by coming here without visas. But we are not criminals, and shouldn't be treated like them.

And when we see Americans supporting laws that would allow us to work legally in this country without fearing deportation; when we see people like you recognize the courage it takes to leave our countries looking for a better life for our families, it fills us with HOPE. Hope that in the near future we will all witness an act of profound social justice: that undocumented immigrants will be allowed to work legally and take part in American society openly.

As social workers, you're likely to work with diverse groups of disadvantaged people, facing a wide variety of challenges. Undocumented Latinos will certainly be part of that group. But my advice to you today doesn't just apply to your work with Latinos – it applies to everything you do. Here it goes:

My first suggestion: Follow your passion – even if it takes you in directions you didn't expect. You all have a passion for service – without it, you wouldn't be here. But what will you do with it? Where will you concentrate your efforts? Who will you help? I came to America a veterinarian determined to help Mexican farmers. But after living as an immigrant, I realized that advocating for them was my true calling. It may seem impossible to put aside a long-standing goal, and people may call you impractical or irresponsible. But if you find a passion – even if you stumble into it in a restaurant kitchen – don't let it go. It will take you far.

My second suggestion is this:

No matter what you do...

You cannot do it alone.

You feel confident in your knowledge and abilities, and well you should.

But you cannot do it alone.
You have dreamt for years about changing the world.
But you cannot do it alone.

You have ambitious plans and unlimited potential.
You've learned how to solve any problem, and overcome any obstacle.
But your real success will depend on how much you get others involved.

That includes, of course, the people you'll be serving.
Your ultimate goal is to make your service unnecessary.
And your effectiveness can only be measured by your ability to help others help themselves.

But your clients are not the only people you should involve in your work.
The community around you is your greatest resource – even if they haven't realized it yet.
Master the ability to inspire others to join you, and any initiative you envision will become a reality.

If there's one thing I have learned in my life, it's a lesson this community showed me: there is no power greater than dedicated people working toward a common goal. Tapping this power is not easy. You may need to give up some control. You'll have to manage several egos simultaneously – especially your own. And you may be surprised – and not always pleasantly – by the direction your community takes. But you will bring results, and you will learn. And it will get easier. And soon you'll realize that you have become what you always dreamed of becoming: a catalyst for change, a force for good, and a blessing to your community.