

**Gateway Community College
Nineteenth Commencement Exercises
May 26, 2011
Woolsey Hall
Yale University**

Commencement Speech

By Raymond Torres

President Kendrick, members of the Board of Trustees, members of the faculty, elected officials, parents, family and friends, and especially, the graduates, it is truly an honor to be part of this momentous occasion, and to share my thoughts with you this evening, as you mark this milestone in your lives.

I fully appreciate the significance of your efforts, challenges faced along the way, and ultimate successes being commemorated by this graduation ceremony. I congratulate every one of you on this important achievement!

I had the pleasure of visiting recently with Dr. Kendrick, members of Gateway's Administration, Student Body President, Nancy Touba, and Treasurer, Kimberly Grant. I learned about the deep commitment this college makes to you, and I also learned that many of you are the first in your family to graduate from college; a number of you came to America seeking a better life, and had to struggle with a new language and culture; some of you have worked part time or full time, while pursuing your studies at night or

during the day. And those who are parents had to be there for your children while holding down a job and going to school.

The stories vary, but what you all hold in common is the commitment to enhance your knowledge through education. Again, congratulations, Felicitaciones! And while your journey may be very different from the person next to you, every one of you will receive a college diploma today. I would like to talk with you about what that means – what it means for you and what it means for the greater community.

Put another way, “What are you going to do with the degree you’ve earned? The door to your future is in front of you. Before you open that door, this momentous occasion, I think, bears reflection. Because the truth is, no matter what your individual story, you’re here, at least in part, because others have paved the way and made sacrifices. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us and opened doors of opportunity that might at one time have been locked to us.

To illustrate, I would like to share with you some reflections of my personal story.

I was born in a small, rural town in Puerto Rico: Peñuelas. My father moved me, my two younger brothers, and my mother to Spanish Harlem in 1967, when I was twelve. My father moved us because he wanted to keep us together, and he felt we would get a better education in New York City. From the mid 50’s to the mid 60’s, he had been a migrant worker, picking crops anywhere from Buffalo, New York to Fort

Myers, Florida. Over time, he took jobs working in factories in New York City and, ultimately, he was able to get full-time employment in the hotel industry there.

My dad worked several jobs at a time to make ends meet. Growing up, we seldom saw him, as he was always coming from one job, sleeping a few hours, and heading off to the next.

Without consciously knowing it at the time, my dad was a consistent, positive role model for me and my brothers. His actions spoke louder than the words he didn't say: Choose your priorities wisely, work hard, be responsible, and most important, act with humanity and humility.

I would hardly have dreamed as a boy that I would be standing before you today, as vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the 13th largest foundation in the United States and the largest in this country dedicated to improving the lives of disadvantaged children and families. In this capacity and as executive director of Casey Family Services, I have learned to appreciate the importance of family, mentors and positive adult role models for young people. These mentors and role models who influence us most don't have to be parents or family members. A teacher, counselor, family friend, coach, or a member of your faith community might have influenced you to take a particular path in your life.

Perhaps the illustrious civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired you. His "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, helped forge a vision of unity, equality and

common purpose for the citizens of this country. Like so many other civil rights leaders before and since, King and the subsequent civil rights movement opened the door for me and millions of other youngsters to dream for a better tomorrow and turn that dream into a reality.

The point is, we all share in the success of the pioneers who went before us. They helped to shape who we are and their lessons will continue to influence who we will become. Now, the knowledge that your diploma implies gives you the opportunity to be the influencer. So what will you do with that opportunity?

I am reminded of a young woman from the Lakota tribe in South Dakota who spoke at a recent Casey event. She eloquently shared her passion for the role she chose as an advocate for youth in foster care. She described the Lakota concept of the, quote, “outer” family – the family we create by our shared humanity and cultures. She told us that, as part of her outer family, she felt her responsibility to speak for those who do not have a voice. To help strengthen the community by working on behalf of the whole – not just what benefited her individually.

So as you prepare to open that door to your own futures, you must decide: Will you pave the way for someone else?

Today you are graduating as part of a global world – a world connected by advanced communications and technology that is unprecedented. What that means is that your diploma gives you an opportunity to have an influential voice in that world. As

you approach the door to your future, I ask you to think about how you might use that voice for change. To think about those who don't have a voice in your community.

Your intelligence and drive were critical to your success in college. But with compassion in addition to know-how, you have the ability to change the world for the benefit of the many – not just the few. And that, I think, is the great need and the great opportunity of today's world. Whether you've been in the workforce or seek another degree, or want to begin a new career, we all carry a responsibility – just by that human connection we all share – to give voice to the voiceless, and power to the powerless.

As we track the news, it feels sometimes as if that human connection is all but lost – lost in the competing voices of the right and the left; the rise or fall of the stock market; reality television; wars and the never-ending struggle for power; and all too often, lost in the vitriol of the latest scandal.

But, your presence here today is a beacon of light. This occasion *is* Hope – Hope with a capital H! Because your achievement says that you care about improving your knowledge. You care about your future. And you, ladies and gentlemen graduates, ARE the future. Your sensitivity to the larger community and your willingness to engage in your world is what ultimately will change it.

The choices you make will determine whether that change will bring harmony or discord; prosperity for the whole or just the few; a society in which we share responsibility and “have each other's backs” or one in which no one is accountable and

it's "watch out for Number One."

Today, there is much pain and suffering in our world. It's in the tears of teen mothers too young to parent; in the cries of one in five children in the United States who go to bed hungry; in the yearning of a foster child who's moved from place to place, school to school; and in the desolation of the working poor, who can't afford health care for their families.

One of the most revered men in history, Nelson Mandela, said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." You hold the symbol of that "weapon"— your diplomas. I invite you – no matter what work you do – do something to stop the pain. For, our human connectedness binds us into one family. Create a legacy that will open doors for others. Make a difference so that those who follow can stand proudly on your shoulders. And, eventually, you will be a part, not only of changing the world, but transforming it. **THANK YOU AND CONGRATULATIONS!**