

KEYNOTE ADDRESS; October 2020
AURORA FOUNDATION

I want to thank Jennifer Steadman, executive director of the Aurora Women and Girls Foundation and her colleagues for inviting me to give today's welcome. Of course, I would have truly enjoyed seeing each of you in person, and spending some time face-to-face, breaking bread and learning how you are doing good work in your communities. It is wonderful to be with you today for the 15th annual fundraising luncheon for the foundation, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary. Let's make this one special!

While we continue to stay safe and meet remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, I choose to see these virtual moments as opportunities to stay connected through the marvels of technology.

I look back now on my career — it's been almost five decades — and I feel blessed by the opportunities that I have been given. I was born a farm girl in the western hills of Puerto Rico before my family moved to the United States. I later learned to survive the housing projects of Newark, New Jersey at a time when my family were the only Latinos in our community. Since that time, I have continued to work hard, but I also have been lifted up and given opportunities and support by many people.

I am no different from the girls and young women in Greater Hartford who the Aurora Women and Girls Foundation supports. They too are willing to work hard in pursuit of their dreams. They just need an opportunity. You are giving them those opportunities.

I am honored to be speaking during this 20th anniversary year of the Aurora Foundation, which has raised and distributed upwards of one million dollars and provided opportunities for 1,000 young women through the College Success program. As Jennifer tells me, the small investments made in a variety of programs can make all the difference for countless girls and young women. Through access opportunities, mentors, role models and other assistance, your financial support can be a life changing force in a young person's life.

We have far to go, but each step is a success story. You have seen the data, but it's worth repeating. Last year on average, women were earning 79 cents for every dollar earned by a man doing the same work. For minorities, the numbers were worse. African American women in executive positions earned only 63 cents on the dollar compared to men.

I have spent my entire career in higher education, because I believe that a college degree can serve as the difference maker in a young person's life. That was my story—I earned my bachelor's degree at Montclair College as the only brown-skinned girl there. Through the generosity of professors, professional mentors and other people, I have been able to have a successful career as a member of the faculty and now a college administrator at institutions in New Jersey, New York, Boston, Maine, and now Connecticut. Throughout that time, I have seen the transformative power of a college degree.

Let me share a handful of those success stories with you.

In 2007, we launched a program at Eastern called the Dual College Program for students from Hartford High School. The students we selected for the program weren't planning to go to college; they didn't have the grades, the test scores, or the finances. But they had grit and determination. We brought 15 of them a year to our campus and gave them the supports they needed. Among the graduates from our first cohort were Whitley and Orquidea. Today Whitley has her master's degree in social work and Orquidea is working a child psychologist, also having earned her master's degree. What success stories! They just needed an opportunity and some support along the way.

Four years ago, Donald Graham, former publisher of the Washington Post, was seeking two colleges in the country to take in DACA students from 16 states that wouldn't let them attend a public university in their home state. Eastern was one of the schools selected for the Opportunity Scholars program. Today we have 200 DACA students at Eastern, funded by Mr. Graham's foundation. Last year, our entire slate of officers in our Student Government Association were DACA students. 96% of the first cohort graduated this past May—96% in four years—that's higher than Harvard or Yale! One of those graduates is Evelyn Lema of North Carolina. She is a biology major and one of this year's Henry Barnard Scholars, one of only 12 students in the Connecticut State University System. As I speak, Evelyn is conducting research at Stanford University in Palo Alto. Another success story, thanks to someone's helping hand.

Another Barnard scholar is Haley Knox. She graduated from Eastern in 2019. Haley was a math major, as well as a long-distance track star at Eastern. Today she works as a big data software engineer at Cigna in Bloomfield. Haley was such a strong scholar at Eastern she won a National Science Foundation grant to study mathematics at Iowa State University—as a junior! Horace Mann, the great 19th century educator from Massachusetts, called education the “great equalizer of the conditions of men.” Of course, that was before women were given voting rights, before women were allowed to dream of being more than housewives or nurses or schoolteachers. All noble in their own right. Today, Eastern women are doctors, software engineers, research scientists. We have come far. We have more work to do.

You can help. Jennifer Steadman asked for your support before I began my remarks today. It is always a good time to support young women. They are our future . . . and education is the path we are pave for their success. Now, more than ever, is an opportunity for you to make a difference. Many of the young women in Hartford who want to go to college are facing the additional burden of having family members out of work. Perhaps they are also unemployed. Without a college education, they are twice as likely to remain unemployed.