

Danbury Latino Scholarship Fund
June 14, 2009

I understand this is the 14th year in a row that the Danbury Latino Scholarship Fund has been awarding scholarships to Latino students in Greater Danbury. I am also told it is one of the largest Latino scholarship funds in Connecticut, with almost \$50,000 in scholarships being distributed this year to 26 deserving high school seniors. They will be attending colleges this fall ranging from local community colleges and our state universities to Washington University and Ithaca College. This is wonderful news!

Over the life of this organization, you have raised more than \$500,000 and provided financial support to more than 300 students. When I see the names of the colleges that students receiving your scholarships have graduated from — Yale, Boston College, Syracuse, MIT, Purdue — it is clear that you have given Danbury's best Latino students hope for the future, and they have responded by reaching high to fulfill their dreams. I am told that Danbury has the highest percentage of Latinos going to college of any city in Connecticut — 80 percent of Latino high school graduates are going on to some form of postsecondary education. Outstanding!

I want to congratulate the Danbury Latino Scholarship Fund Board for this 14-year track record of persistence, love, and caring; the work you are doing here in Danbury is truly life-changing. In particular, I want to congratulate your chairman, Abner Borgos-Rodriguez, for his leadership, as well as Bianca Rosa for coordinating today's event. I also want to thank my friend and colleague, Dr. James Schmotter, president of Western Connecticut State University, for suggesting to Chairman Rodriguez that he invite me to speak with you today. I want to recognize Superintendent of Schools Dr. Salvatore Pascarelli, my good friend, Dr. Estella Lopez, and the other dignitaries and community leaders in attendance today. Finally, I congratulate the parents and other family members with us today — how proud you must be! I know you have made huge sacrifices for your children; tonight, you are seeing them pay off.

We all know about the high school dropout rates of Latino youth. Perhaps you also know that only about 12 percent of Latinos in America have earned a college degree, compared to 27 percent of all Americans. These numbers are of great concern, and many of us are involved in initiatives to improve these graduation rates. The Danbury Latino Scholarship Fund is helping to change these numbers in Connecticut, and our 26 scholars tonight are proof that we can be successful.

Danbury is not alone in advancing the educational aspirations of its students. In other towns and cities in Connecticut, a number of public schools are seeing significant gains in the academic achievement of minority students through higher expectations, innovative teaching practices, and stronger accountability measures. New Haven's Amistad Academy — a middle school whose students are 98 percent African American or Latino — achieved the largest performance gains between the 6th and 8th grade in the state. Hartford's Dwight Elementary School, with 95 percent of its students from low-income families, more than doubled the percentage of students within goal range on state achievement tests between 2000 and 2004. We CAN change things for the better in our state, and you can feel good that Danbury seems to be at the head of the class!

There are other signs of progress. The number of Hispanics attending college in the United States has grown by almost 400 percent in the past 30 years. Reading and math scores for Latino nine- and 13-year-olds in our nation is at an all-time high. We have much to do, but also much to be proud of today, and much to celebrate. Getting to college is a huge

accomplishment for anyone in this country, and completing college is an even greater achievement, even for students with excellent academic records as those being honored today. Your families are proud tonight; most of you are the first person in your family to attend college. Let us all work hard to ensure that these students are not the last in their family, but simply the pioneers who pave the way for others to follow.

I know many of you have been born in the United States, but each of you has a heritage from another country. How many of you claim Puerto Rican heritage? (RAISE YOUR HANDS) Another Caribbean nation? Mexico? A Central American country? South America? I know that Danbury has people from Peru, Ecuador, Dominican, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, and other Latin American countries. How did we get to Connecticut? What journey did we take to get here? How have we reacted to common challenges?

Today, we find Latinos in every walk of life in Connecticut, but when Latinos first arrived in this state, it was principally to work on the farms or in the factories. Migrant workers did seasonal work on the tobacco farms, apple orchards, and flower nurseries, often sleeping in barns during the April-October growing season. They eventually flexed their political muscles to improve working conditions, creating such groups as the New England Farm Workers Council--“Oficina del Gallo.”

Munitions factories in New London, New Haven, and Bridgeport offered jobs, as well as factories such as the hat companies, furniture makers, and other manufacturers here in Danbury. In Willimantic, Hartford Poultry Company and American Thread Company recruiters brought back workers from Puerto Rico to work as early as 1956. Cutting up chickens was dangerous work and spinning miles of thread everyday grew old soon. However, with little education, these workers had little opportunity to advance in their companies, and also to put up with a great deal of prejudice and resentment from French-Canadian, Polish, Italian, and other national groups who felt they had been passed over for work.

In addition to these tensions, immigrants from throughout Latin America had to face significant cultural differences between their home lands and the American culture. There is an intriguing report you should read if you get a chance—the Latino Cultural Identity Project—that helps to explain some of those differences.

We also had to deal with language barriers, and I am guessing many of you in this audience have learned English the hard way—from newspapers, radio, television, comic books—you name it. There was also the residential segregation that continues to exist, with publicly subsidized housing creating Latino concentrations separated from the rest of the communities we live in. We have used these “villages within a town” to provide protection and support to our families, but they still remind us that we are often treated differently.

We have also suffered from low expectations. A little more than a year ago, a Hartford Courant story described a senior at New Britain High School — we should call him John, whose parents had come from a small rural community in Puerto Rico. He was 13th in a class of more than 800 students, the highest ranking ever achieved by a Latino student at that school. Yet as John described it, “A lot of (teachers) think that if you’re Spanish, you’re probably not going to be a good student, and you get lumped in like that.” John ignored those low expectations and is now on the path towards a career in medicine. His situation is not unique; one Willimantic Latino recalls that during her school years there, “If you couldn’t speak English, they would put you in special ed.”

These issues of language, cultural differences, discrimination, low expectations, and other challenges still remain, but as we can see from the work of the Danbury Latino Scholarship Fund

and the Latino community here in Danbury, we can achieve success as we continue to work to achieve our goals. And we continue to grow as a political and social force: half the growth in the nation's population from 2000-2005 was due to the increase in Latinos, mostly due to children born in the United States of Latino parents. And all the growth in the number of school-aged children in the United States in that time was due to an additional 1.3 million Hispanic children enrolled in K-12. In Connecticut, the Latino population grew by more than 20 percent in that time period.

So we have come to Connecticut from far places. We have endured challenges and difficulties. And we continue to grow as an ethnic community within our state and nation. Tonight we witness 26 more young success stories, ready to make their mark on the world and make our community proud. As these students prepare to start a new chapter in their lives, seeking their fortune and determined to pursue their dreams, let me leave you with a few stories of other Latinos who have made their way in the world. May these stories inspire you as they have inspired me.

The first person I want to tell you about is someone we all have heard of in the news—Sonia Sotomayor. As you know, President Obama has nominated her to the first Latina on the Supreme Court. Her story has been shared extensively in the news media, but well worth repeating. She is of Puerto Rican descent, her father having been born in San Juan; her mother was from Lajas on the southwest coast of the island. They moved to the Bronx, living in the Bronxdale projects not far from Yankee Stadium. Her father had only a 3rd grade education and worked in the factories as a tool and die maker. At age 8, Sotomayor was diagnosed with diabetes; a year later, her father died at age 42 of a heart attack. Her mother was forced to work two jobs, six days a week as a phone operator and a nurse in a methadone clinic. But she knew the value of education and bought the only Encyclopedia in the projects. (This is a reminder to all of us how important it is to have books to read, whether we can afford to buy them, or bring them home from the library.)

With all that love and support, it's not unbelievable to learn that Sonia Sotomayor graduated from high school at the head of her class. But she still had challenges before her. Her first college term paper came back with red ink and a low grade. She responded by seeking English and writing tutoring and joining the support group, Accion Puertorriquena. (Again, another lesson here — seek help when you need it.)

Sotomayor eventually graduated summa cum laude from Princeton University and went on to Yale Law School. She has been an assistant district attorney in New York, an attorney in private practice, a U.S. District Court judge, and now is on the Second Circuit District Court of Appeals, pending confirmation on the U.S. Supreme Court. There is no higher position in the land for a judge, and if she is approved, Sotomayor would be the first Hispanic and first Latina on the court. Her story should be an inspiration to everyone in this room, especially today's graduates.

Other Latinos have overcome barriers and challenges to gaining a foothold in the American dream. Ray Suarez, one of the lead anchors on PBS is also of Puerto Rican background, growing up in Brooklyn. Felix Arroyo, chief information officer for AT&T, grew up on a ranch in San Antonio, where his father was a ranch hand. Bill Perez, former CEO at Nike, was born in Colombia. Astronaut Carlos Noriega was born in Peru. And then there is Tommy Nunez, not a relative of mine as far as I can tell. Tommy Nunez grew up in the barrios of Phoenix, Arizona, getting into trouble throughout his youth to the point of being kicked out of high school. He entered the Marines and eventually got his GED. He later became an NBA

referee, the only Latino referee in any of North America's four major professional sports leagues. He retired and started a foundation to give back to the neighborhoods of his youth. And oh yes, his son Tommy Jr. has followed in his footsteps as an NBA referee.) So we can find success and share it across the generations.)

I want to close my remarks today by telling you a story about a little girl who grew up in the mountains of western Puerto Rico where coffee is grown. She dreamed of becoming a doctor. As you know, becoming a doctor involves a four-year college degree, years of medical school, and then on-the-job residency after that. But she wanted to be a doctor, even though neither of her parents had gone to college. Eventually her father decided to move his family to the United States. He had a dream of a better life for his children, and borrowed \$65 to fly to America and find a new beginning for his family. They eventually settled in Newark, New Jersey, where the little girl's parents worked very hard in the factories there to support their children. They didn't have a lot of money, and there weren't a lot of books in their apartment, but her father always told her that education was her ticket out of the housing projects.

The little girl grew up, graduated from high school, and enrolled in a college nearby. Her first day on campus was a disaster. The beautiful dress her parents had bought her just wasn't the fashion on campus. She came home humiliated, and vowed never to return to the university. But a neighbor encouraged her and she went back. Initially, college felt overwhelming to her. She felt lost, and she wasn't sure of herself. Again, someone stepped in to help her. Her English professor was a kind man, a war veteran in a wheelchair, who tutored her on her writing skills in his office after class.

Through the help of people like this professor and others, through hard work and perseverance, and through the grace of God, the little girl from the mountains of Puerto Rico graduated from several universities, became a college professor, and today, she is President of Eastern Connecticut State University.

Yes, I was that little girl. I tell you this story not to talk about me, but to talk about you and the people who love and care about you. Each of you has great potential, waiting to blossom and grow. I am reminded of the parable of the mustard seed. Jesus said it was the smallest seed, yet when it was cultivated, it grew into a large plant that provided shelter. Take advantage of the opportunities before you, be grateful for your blessings, and you too, will grow and prosper. And never forget the people who help you along the way.

You don't have to become a college president. Latinos are successful in many fields. People like Ugly Betty's America Ferrera, Benicio del Toro, David Ortiz, Jennifer Lopez, and Enrique Iglesias. They didn't start their lives as celebrities, they started just like you and me. So, how high is your aim?

Again, congratulations to all of you and best wishes in the fall to our students. And thank you to the Danbury Latino Scholarship Fund for all the work you are doing. With this kind of community support, our young people are going to succeed. Thank you for having me with you tonight; you inspire me, and I will leave you today refreshed, renewed, and recommitted to the dream we share. Best Wishes and God Bless.