

## NOTRE DAME UNIVERSITY 2017 LATINO RECOGNITION CEREMONY | MAY 19, 2017

It is an honor and privilege to join you today on such an important occasion and to celebrate this great accomplishment in your lives.

I know that your path here was not easy. It involved a lot of hard work. It involved a lot of sacrifice and I'm sure it involved a lot of money. It is a great individual achievement, and each of you should be very proud to be sitting here today.

But, you should also understand, whether you know it or not, that your presence here today is part of something larger—something more profound than the degree you will hold in your hand.

While some of you may have done this on your own, I would bet that most of you did not. Your parents, or maybe another relative, also had to work hard and to sacrifice for you to attend school here.

As a result, you carry a responsibility to your family. Some of you, like I was, are the first generation in your family to attend college. Your graduation then is not just about your future, it is about the future of your family. You carry their name into the next generation. Your success is their success—as will be the success of your children and your children's children.

You are also now alumni of this remarkable institution—and so, again—part of something larger and more profound.

For generations, Notre Dame has taken the children of immigrants, initially from Ireland, Italy, eastern Europe and now across the globe, and vaulted them to the highest leadership positions in our society. This institution is proof positive that inclusivity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, but self-reinforcing.

To be honest, as a proud KU Jayhawk, I might have a slight issue with the consistent excellence of your basketball team, but otherwise I'm a big fan.

Now you may know that NCLR is the largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. I'm proud to say that, next year, we will be celebrating our 50th anniversary. What you may not know is that NCLR has a shared history with Notre Dame.

One of our founders—Dr. Julian Samora—was a professor of sociology at this great institution. For 26 years, he pioneered the field of Mexican American research, served as a mentor to generation after generation of doctoral students, and was a leading activist who helped create and strengthen countless institutions within our community.

He always said his greatest accomplishment was the creation of the graduate program in Mexican American studies here at Notre Dame. And he did it in 1971 when few colleges and universities even had Mexican American students.

Another important figure from our shared history is a woman named, Graciela Olivarez, who was widely known as “Amazing Grace.” Graciela served on the NCLR Board of Directors and led the fight to have equal representation of men and women on our Board in 1973.

Graciela started her career in radio and later became a community activist. Your iconic, former President Father Ted Hesburgh served with her on a presidential commission, and was so impressed with her that he offered her a scholarship to Notre Dame’s law school, even though she had never finished high school.

Graciela was the first woman and the first Latina to graduate from The Law School. She later became the highest-ranking Latina to serve in the Carter administration.

We lost her far too early but I know she would be astonished and thrilled by how many of you there are in this room today. Because Graciela was not just the first—she was the only—Latina in her class.

If she knew that today 11% of the student body at Notre Dame is Hispanic, I think she would say, “That’s wonderful.” And then she would say, “But we can still do better.”

Notre Dame has changed greatly since Amazing Grace came here, because our country has changed. In 1970, there were nine million Latinos in this country, less than 5% of the population. Today, there are 57 million Latinos. One in six Americans is Hispanic and for those under 18, it is one in four. In fact, 60% of the Latino population in this country are millennials or younger.

This is an important development for our community and for our country. Dr. Samora once called our community, “the forgotten Americans.” It is now the largest ethnic group in the United States. As such, we are a crucial part of America’s future. By 2030, one in three new workers will be Latino. We will grow not only in numbers, but in spending power and cultural influence each and every day.

And so again, your presence here today is part of something larger and more profound. Just as others in our community paved the way for you to be here, you and your fellow graduates will define the future of our next generation. Your roles, your successes, your character, your

integrity, your hopes, and your dreams will define what it means to be Latino in the next 30 years and will define the opportunities available to the next generation of Latino graduates.

And make no mistake; it will be a challenge.

The kind of demographic change I just described can make people anxious. It can make them uncomfortable. We are seeing that play out in our country right now.

Now, I don't object to people who fear change. It is a natural human instinct. What I object to are the people who exploit that fear—including some at the highest levels of our society—by attacking the people who embody that change.

In the days ahead our civil rights will be challenged, our status as Americans will be challenged, our ability to live freely as equals will be challenged. And in the face of such adversity, I ask that you not turn away. How we respond, how we stand together will define our future.

My hope is that we can change the politics of today. Rather than embrace the politics of contempt, we embrace the politics of mutual respect. Rather than identify with party politics, we identify with our values as Americans. Rather than let our faiths, our cultures, our race and ethnicities divide us, we embrace our differences to define our country's strengths.

At heart, it has always been about the American Dream. That dream is not dead. Far from it. You all are proof of that. I'm proof of that.

My parents came from rural Mexico where my father rode a horse to work. After serving in World War II, he and my mother settled in Kansas City, Kansas. There they faced discrimination at work and in their community and sometimes struggled to make ends meet.

But my parents believed in this country and believed in me and my six brothers and sisters. They instilled in us a reverence for family, hard work, faith, sacrifice, and love of country.

Like many of you, my brothers and sisters were the first in our family to go to college. Now six of us have graduate degrees. My brother Ramon was the first Latino to go to Harvard Law School. My brother Carlos and twin sister Mary are the first brother and sister in U.S. history to sit on the federal bench together.

My own story took me from KU law school to the West Wing of the White House where I served in the Clinton administration. And I was very proud when my parents came to visit me and got to meet with President Clinton. My father thanked him for giving me a chance and the President replied, "You're the ones who got her here."

It is a credit to them and a credit to this country. They wanted us to know that despite the challenges we may face, in this country—no matter who you are, or what color you are—there is opportunity if you are determined to find it.

My dad had his own way of expressing this, *“El Sol sale para todos.”* Remember, you are no better than anyone else—but you are no less than anyone else either.

My parents knew this country was special, but they always wanted us to remember our heritage and where they—and we—had come from. They understood that one of the reasons this country is unique is that people of different backgrounds, and cultures could succeed here.

Though I must confess my mom had a slightly different definition of success. One day, my *madrina* (godmother) was talking to my mom in the kitchen. Mary and I were in the living room around the corner and could hear the conversation. My Godmother said to my mom, *“Amalia debes de estar muy orgullosa de las Quatas/gemelas, una es juez federal y otra trabaja en la Casas Blanca con el Presidente.”*

Amalia, you should be very proud of the twins, one is a federal judge and the other works in the White House. Mary and I were listening closely to hear what my mom said in response. My mom paused and said, *“Comadre estaria muy orgullosa si supeiran hacer tortillas de harina.”* Comadre, I would be very proud if they knew how to make flour tortillas. My mom wanted us to understand that humility was key.

You all have such stories. Of perseverance. Of barriers overcome. Of parents who supported you along the way. Of a belief in the American Dream so potent it has brought you to this moment in South Bend, Indiana.

Now that you are well on your way to fulfilling your own American Dream, your community, and your country need your help. Consistent with the theme of this ceremony, I ask you to, “get off the sidewalk.”

Start by telling your story. We need our fellow Americans to get to know our community for who we really are, not the falsehoods spread by the unscrupulous and the misguided. And in turn, listen to other people’s stories and get to know them. If we do this, it can bridge the divide that holds our great country back.

Get involved, and stay involved in the political process. Yes, you need to vote. But think about public service, or running for office someday. Our country needs your talent and our community needs your voice. And we need you to encourage others to get involved. Because it is only if we are deeply engaged in the political process that we will make a difference on the issues we all care about.

Lastly, give back to the less fortunate among us. As people that have been given wonderful opportunities in our lives, we have a responsibility to offer a helping hand to someone else.

Consider working in the nonprofit sector. For those fortunate enough to enter more lucrative careers—and believe me I understand the need to pay off those student loans—volunteer.

Eventually consider serving on a nonprofit board. And as your earnings increase, I'd ask that you give to your church or local charity. And if you're looking for places to give, I highly recommend NCLR's Affiliates: incredible organizations in our network who are helping millions of Latinos and many others every single day.

We've all come a long way, but have much more to do to form of "a more perfect union." I have enormous faith that we will succeed because I know the character of our community. I know our resilience. I know our boundless hope in better days to come.

As I close, a few last words of advice since there is so much to be done. Work hard. Follow your passion. Remember that your choices matter—integrity matters. That, and learn how to make flour tortillas.

Thank you very much *y que Dios los bendiga.*