

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY:

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THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY HARRISBURG CAMPUS COMMENCEMENT

Giant Center
550 West Hersheypark Dr.
Hershey, Pennsylvania

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Ladies and gentlemen, Chancellor Callejo Perez, esteemed faculty, proud parents, and most importantly, the 2024 graduates of The Pennsylvania State University,

As a proud Penn Stater, who bleeds blue and white and wears a Penn State t-shirt when traveling around the nation and the world hoping for a “We are” shout out, congratulations and welcome to the family!

I am Norman Bristol Colon, the Commonwealth Chief Diversity Officer.

Together, let us pledge to be champions of Diversity, Equity, Belonging, and Inclusion—not just in our words, but in our actions, our policies, and our daily interactions. Let us create a future where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or background.

In the words of Audre Lorde, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences." So let us celebrate our differences, for they are the source of our collective strength and the foundation of a more just and compassionate world.

In the words of Desmond Tutu, "My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together." So let us embrace our shared humanity, celebrate our differences, and build a future where everyone belongs.

So today, I stand before you to share a message of resilience, hope, and courage. Our lives are defined not only by our triumphs but also by the struggles and sacrifices that we endure along the way. Each of us carries within us a story—a story of overcoming adversity, of facing our fears, and of persevering against all odds.

Without struggles, there is no progress.

Throughout history, humanity has been shaped by the struggles and sacrifices of countless individuals who dared to dream of a better tomorrow. From civil rights activists fighting for equality to scientists pushing the boundaries of knowledge, from immigrants seeking a better life to soldiers defending freedom, their stories are a testament to the indomitable spirit of the human soul.

If you are a first-generation college grad; if you were raised by a single mother; if you at some point in your life received food stamps; if you are a migrant or an immigrant who moved here to survive; if you graduated from a school district where funding depended on your zip code; if English is your second language, I know there are some of you in the audience today that can identify with my message of surviving against all odds.

I was born in Puerto Rico to a family of humble beginnings. My mom raised my brothers and I in very modest ways. She would work in the fields of Puerto Rico for 10 to 12 hours a day under that shining Caribbean sun to give us what she could – especially food at the table. The pain in her bones and the bloody marks on her hands for pressing agricultural machine or by picking tomatoes, peppers, watermelon with her bare hands, fermented in me early on a great sense of empathy and deep appreciation for the work of migrant and agricultural workers. They put food on our tables and feed the most fed nation in the world on a daily basis. Witnessing her sacrifices with such a labor of love inspires me every day to do mine.

I learned from my mother impeccable lessons. Among them, I wasn't poor.

Poverty is defined as the state or condition where people and communities cannot meet a minimum standard of living because they lack the proper resources. These include (but aren't limited to) financial resources, basic healthcare and education, clean drinking water, and infrastructure.

Well, I did not know how poor I was until reading that definition or until somebody told me so following a definition by the federal government.

In my home, poverty was not defined by how much is in your bank account, the zip code that you live in, or the type of transportation you have. Poverty was a lack of character and integrity. Poverty was a lack of empathy and community service. You see, even with less than \$5,000 a year to raise six boys by herself and still support her mother, mom taught me the values that money can't buy, and that ever since, I have lived by.

And, just as the history of our nation has been unfolding for 400 years, my senior year of high school my family moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania to search for better opportunities.

When I moved here, I did not even have a penny in my pockets. But most importantly, my packets were full of hopes, dreams, aspirations, faith, and an indescribable feeling of possibilities.

I learned English as quickly as possible by watching boring national TV news programs that now serve me well in my current job. In high school, I was LEP – limited English proficient student and received ESL – English as a Second Language classes and support. That did not deter me from graduating with honors and later enrolling at Penn State.

But, even after a great accomplishment of being accepted, I did not know that challenges were yet to come. Language barrier. Economic hardships. Human relations. Finding balance between study, work, and civic engagement. I am not ashamed to admit that sometimes I needed to decide whether to use my funds for breakfast or dinner when I couldn't afford both. Through it all I kept a picture of my mother near my bed and every time I was challenged, and quitting was never an option, I would say: "Mom, because of you I am here and for you I am going to make it."

On a day like the one you are witnessing today; I became the first ever to graduate from college in my family and the first one to graduate from a US mainland university from my barrio. That priceless piece of paper leveled the plain field for me. It allowed me to pursue my career in government and provided me a level of respectful assertiveness to go into classrooms, conference rooms and board rooms to reaffirm that to do the job I do not have to divorce myself from who I am and everything I represent and that I may speak with an accent, but I don't

think with an accent. Meaning, I would have a seat at the decision-making tables not a token addition to a staff or office.

Starting from humble beginnings is a testament to resilience and determination. It's a journey filled with challenges, but also with invaluable lessons and opportunities for growth. Whether it's overcoming financial struggles, societal barriers, or personal hardships, the path from humble beginnings teaches us the value of hard work, perseverance, and the importance of staying true to ourselves.

Growing up with limited resources often instills in us a deep appreciation for every small victory and a profound understanding of the power of resourcefulness. We learn to make the most of what we have, to be creative problem solvers, and to never take anything for granted.

But perhaps most importantly, coming from humble beginnings fosters a sense of empathy and compassion. We understand the struggles of others because we've been there ourselves. And it fuels our desire to give back, to uplift those who are still on their journey, just as others may have supported us along the way.

So, to everyone who comes from humble beginnings, remember that your story is not defined by where you start, but by the heights you reach and the lives you touch along the way. Embrace your journey, cherish the lessons learned, and never forget the strength that resides within you. Your humble beginnings are just the first chapter of a remarkable story waiting to unfold.

But struggles and sacrifices are not merely obstacles to be overcome; they are also catalysts for growth and transformation. It is often in our darkest moments that we discover our greatest strengths, our deepest reservoirs of courage, and our unwavering capacity for hope. It is

through adversity that we learn to appreciate the beauty of life, to cherish the moments of joy, and to find meaning in the face of despair.

Yet, in the midst of our struggles, it can be all too easy to lose sight of the light at the end of the tunnel, to succumb to doubt and despair, to wonder if our sacrifices are in vain. But it is precisely in these moments that we must summon the courage to keep moving forward, to cling to hope with all our might, and to believe in the power of resilience to carry us through.

As you stand on the threshold of the future, you are faced with a world that is both full of promise and fraught with challenges. From climate change to social injustice, from technological disruption to geopolitical tensions, the road ahead is not without its obstacles. But do not be daunted by the magnitude of the task before you. Instead, draw inspiration from the words of those who have come before us and dared to dream of a better world. It is said that the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

I will leave you with this. I came from the poorest barrio in my hometown and was one of the poorest students attending Penn State, first generation college grad, and English language learner who repeatedly sang: Pollito: Chicken; Gallina: Hen; Lapid: Pencil; Pluma: Pen. And, never imagined a day like today,

I have worked for every single Pennsylvania governor for almost 2 decades and have met every American President since moving to Pennsylvania.

Yet, I have left the White House from an event with the President to break bread with a homeless. I salute my Governor with the same respect that I salute our building cleaning crew.

These three takeaways:

Never forget where you came from so you will always know where you are going.

Dream big. After all we all can afford it as dreaming costs you nothing and it is the best way for you to accomplish everything.

And, as the most diverse generation of college grads in the history of our state and nation, please pay it forward.

Thank you!