

**Remarks Prepared for Delivery  
At the Lehman College Commencement  
June 3, 1999  
By Judge Sonia Sotomayor**

Thank you, Dean Fernandez, for that lovely introduction.

As many of you know, or just been told, I am a daughter of the Bronx, having been born and raised here to young adulthood. Therefore, I was very honored and excited to have been invited to speak today at an institution, Lehman College, which is such an important part of the fabric of the Bronx and of the City. I have spent much time trying to think of what I could say to all of you today. I am before a jubilant crowd of graduates and their families who are filled with the joy and excitement of accomplishment -- an accomplishment of years of study and hard work -- and of hope for a future that you all expect will be brighter because of your efforts.

I also understand the historical importance of your class -- you are the last graduating class of this century. The new millennium will undoubtedly bring many changes for all [of] us and you will be the class that bridges one century to the next. Hence, I want to say something that will both commend what you have done and affirm the optimism you feel about your futures.

To accomplish my goal, I decided to tell you a story -- the story of my mother's life. I tell this story because I suspect that my mom's story is simply a variation of the story of many of the parents in this room and perhaps a story filled with cords of resemblance to the life of many of the graduates in the room. It is also a story of what hope, hard work, education and the dedication to make a better life, can achieve. By telling this story, I hope many of you see yourselves and that you understand that your struggles have not and will not go unnoticed in life.

My mother, Celina Baez, was born in 1927 in Lajas, Puerto Rico, a then tiny agricultural community in the western part

of the island. Unlike today, the Puerto Rico of my mother's childhood was completely undeveloped and was vastly poorer than any state of the Union. The per capita income of the island at that time was \$200 a year, almost four times less than that of the Union's poorest state. Unemployment was chronic and vacillated between 33 and 50 percent. The island's literacy rate was only 39 percent, and while over 50 percent of the population was infected with tuberculosis, malaria and hookworms, only 2 of the island's 77 districts had doctors.

To top all this off, the worst hurricane of that part of the century hit Puerto Rico in 1928, only a year after my mother's birth. For those of you who do not know, until that hurricane, Puerto Rico produced the most sought-after coffee bean in the world, the coffee of the Kings and Queens of Europe. The 1928 hurricane, however, destroyed that industry, which has never again retained its same vitality.

In the face of these economic, medical, and social problems, it should come as little surprise that my mother's mother -- my grandmother -- was never able to recover her health after my mother's birth. My grandmother was bedridden from the day my mother was born. When my mother was only nine, my grandmother died, and very soon after her death, my grandfather abandoned my mother.

Fortunately, my mom's eldest sister and eldest brother -- both of whom are no longer living -- took my mother under their protective wings. In a context of poverty that no child in this room will ever have to experience or know, a child was raised by slightly older children, as my aunt and uncle helped my mother survive in the even more depression-blighted Puerto Rico of the thirties.

Having grown up in a home filled with poverty and illness, my mother has shared with me very few happy childhood memories. The only happiness she has related involved her limited schooling. Although my mother had no money for books or pencils, she found a way around these problems by memorizing her school lessons. Each day, she would run home after school to

spend an hour among the trees behind her home. There, she would line up her towering friends in her imagination and use a stick as a pointer to teach the trees the lessons she had learned for that day. This was her one hour of happiness before she went into the house to work.

At seventeen, however, my mother found a way out of her devastating poverty. Like countless other Americans and Puerto Ricans, she joined the Army. Percentage-wise, more Puerto Ricans have served and died in American wars as soldiers than Americans from any one state. In an act of courage and survival, my mother, alone and with no family ties to the States, became a WAC -- a member of the Women's Army Corps -- and was shipped to Georgia for her training.

I can only imagine the culture shock my mom must have felt as a youth, somewhere between childhood and womanhood, trying to work in the South with a Spanish-only grammar school education. She has told me that the first time she picked up a telephone and received a call from her sergeant, she thought she had to hang up the receiver to find him. You can imagine the dismay of the sergeant when he arrived only to find a dial tone.

During this period, my mother met my father. My father and his family had also emigrated to the States during the war. Shortly after my mother was discharged from the Army, she married my father, and during those early years, my Dad worked in a tool-and-die factory while my mother went to James Monroe High School in the Bronx to obtain her GED. With this degree in hand, my mother found a job as a telephone operator at Prospect Hospital, a then small private hospital in the South Bronx, which would become her home for the next 35 years.

At that hospital, my mother was always a tireless and energetic worker, and the owner soon recognized her potential and encouraged her to get a practical nurse's license. Shortly after my birth, my mother did just that, and by the time my brother was born three and a half years later, she was working on the hospital floors and was one of the most respected nurses in the hospital.

Unfortunately, my Dad died at the age of 42, in part from the heart complications that had kept him out of the Army during the war. My mother was left alone, with two very young children, and no savings. My mother was then forced to devote even more of her time to work.

During most of my childhood, my mother worked six days a week. She struggled to put my brother and me through school. For my mother, education has always been the top priority in all our lives. It was because of her that we were the only kids I knew in the housing projects to have an Encyclopedia Britannica.

I suspect many of you don't know what an Encyclopedia Britannica is. In today's world, when you want to know something, you go on [the] internet. When I was growing up, the Encyclopedia was a home library - a series of books filled with articles and beautiful pictures about almost anything you wanted to know about. Most of you can't image what it was like -- the days before color tv -- to open up those wonderful books and stare at those beautifully colored and educational pictures. Despite the enormous financial burden that purchase placed on my mother, we had those wonderful books.

In my junior year of high school and my brother's freshman year, my mother sat our family down to talk about the future. She knew that we would leave home in only a few years and that my father's Social Security benefits would end shortly. She asked us whether we could make the sacrifice of her going to college so that she could become a registered nurse. My mother had been watching the pay and prestige difference between practical and registered nurses growing with each passing year. She knew that as a registered nurse she could survive without depending on us, and she wanted to give us the freedom to pursue our own lives. It was no sacrifice at all for my brother and me to help my Mom go to school. Although we worked, she also worked -- every Saturday and every Sunday -- and she also took out loans to help in the shorter term.

To this day, I can remember how devoted she was to getting her degree. My Mom attended Hostos Community College -- a sister Bronx City school to Lehman College. My mom was like no student I knew. She got home from school or work and literally immersed herself in her studies, working until midnight or beyond, only to get up again before all of us. She was a nearly straight-A student who took the nursing test and passed all five parts on her very first try. With an example like that, none of you have to wonder why my brother and I had no choice but to do well in school.

After passing her nursing boards, my Mom returned to Prospect Hospital. Within two years she became the hospital's emergency room supervisor, a position she held until the hospital closed. My mother then worked until her retirement seven years ago in a methadone clinic which was a part of the Hunts Point Multiservices Community Center run by Ramon Velez in the South Bronx.

So far, I have only focused on my mother's background and professional accomplishments, but the more important part of her story is her beauty as a human being. My mother is truly the most generous, giving person I have ever known. My mother gives unselfishly, giving what she cannot spare, and always without expecting anything in return. I cannot name all of the people who have relied upon my mother to come to their homes without pay to give them shots, to change their dressings, to incubate them, or simply to bathe them during their illnesses.

I remember that once, while she lived in Co-Op City, my mother declined to visit me during a college affair because an older gentleman in our building was at his deathbed. Although he was a complete stranger to our family, he needed someone to give him his daily medications. He had heard about my mother through others, and because he had no one else in his life to care for him, he knocked on our door and asked my mother for help. My mother would not leave him in his dying days, not even for a weekend with me.

Many of my friends know that there have been plenty of times

when my mother has driven my brother and me crazy. She is a mother and knows how to push every button we own in the same way every mother in this room probably instinctually knows how to do that to their own children. I am, however, -- like every child in this room -- a smaller person for every time I have gotten short or frustrated with my mother. Everything I and my brother are, everything we have accomplished or can hope to accomplish, is a product of my mother's many gifts to us.

I graduated from Princeton University and Yale Law School. I have been a prosecutor in Manhattan, a partner in a law firm in Manhattan, Pavia and Harcourt, a federal district court judge in the Southern District of New York, and now a Second Circuit Court of Appeals Judge. My brother attended the City University's six year medical program and graduated from NYU medical school. He was a resident at Syracuse University, did Fellowships at Philadelphia Children's Hospital and Detroit's State University. Today, my brother, the father of three children, operates two offices in Syracuse New York and is a respect[ed] attending [physician] in two local hospitals.

As successful as we have been, as hard as we have worked, the challenges my brother and I have faced are inconsequential in comparison to the hardships my mother has overcome. Because I know that the vast majority of graduates today are people of color, a great majority woman and that almost all of you come from working class and poor families, I suspect that your accomplishments today are also a product of your own personal struggles and in many cases, that of your parents or other loving relatives. I also suspect that my mother's story of hardship is not dissimilar from that of many of you in this room. I hope you take from my mom's story the hope, optimism and encouragement she has given to my brother and me.

You have certainly taken the first and critical step - you have educated yourselves. If my mother's story teaches anything, it is that with education you can overcome enormous disadvantages. My brother and I grew up in the projects, through my mother's emphasis on education, we are living wonderful full lives, liberated from the shackles of poverty. You will too and by

educating yourselves, you are giving your children the chance to do the same. You have all earned your congratulations today and I extend them, understanding how hard it is to go to school and work but knowing how sweet the victory must be in knowing you have succeeded.

I don't intend by telling you my mother's story or in my words to you to be Pollyannic. All of us are well aware that this country is not perfect. All of us are well aware that even here, not all dreams come true and not all hopes can be realized. If nothing else, economic realities affect everyone. Yet, the need to dream, the need to hope, the need to believe and know that we live in a land that gives us the chance to have dreams come true, that is what the gift of living in America is all about.

But, with our gift comes responsibility. We all share the responsibility of working together within our democratic system of government -- to strengthen it -- to ensure that the promise of America and its opportunities endures for us and for all generations to come.

Having graduated from college and some of you from graduate school, you are now part of the educated elite. You must make your voices heard. For those of you who are citizens, it is your right and your obligation to vote because voting is your fundamental way of expressing your views. Remember, however, that voting is not enough. All of you should write to elected officials and express your views. Become involved in political and community issues. Volunteer your time and talents to civic and social activities and become an active part of improving our schools and communities. When called for jury service, come and serve.

A critical part of the promise of America is that all people, no matter how rich or poor they start out or end up, no matter what their ethnic or racial or religious background may be, have shared and continue to share in creating this country. The diverse people of this country are its greatest strength and the key to its success. I urge you to continue to learn about this country and teach your children about this country and its culture, but -- and

this is a very big but -- do not forget your backgrounds and the cultures that you come from. Don't forget the struggles and hardships of your parents and grandparents. Teach your children about their heritage. Tell them of your sacrifices.

All of our children must always remember that America is a nation of immigrants all of whom have worked very hard. Our children must never fear those who are different. Instead, all of us and all of our children must constantly learn from each other and from our differences. We must all appreciate that we are infinitely richer by our diversity and that by honoring our diversity, the promise of America will continue to shine on all of us.

I encourage you in short, to continue your hard work, to continue your struggles, to continue going to school, even if you have to later in life, as my mother did -- because as my mom taught me -- we can overcome all hardships. Your presence here today as graduates is a very important tribute to the promise of this country and the very first step in making your life dreams come true. I wish all of you the luck and success I have been blessed with in life and wish you the most joyous celebration on this very special day.