

Title: “Embracing Diversity in Our Struggle for Unity”

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It is a great honor for me to receive this invitation from the School Sisters of Notre Dame to attend this luncheon and speak about “Embracing Diversity in Our Struggle for Unity.” This topic itself sounds like the underlying theme song to my own life journey and my own career pathway:

- As a child who grew up in East Dallas, I recall from the very beginning that I was somewhat different than the majority of my classmates at St. Thomas Aquinas.
- As the first woman in my family to attend college, from the University of Pennsylvania where I started a Latina-based sorority.
- As a student at Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law, where I began to question what a career in the law would require of me.
- As a lawyer at the prestigious firm in the Trammel Crow Building on Ross Avenue in Dallas, where I witnessed big corporate mergers and acquisitions and what happened when things didn’t go according to the business plan.
- As a young professional going back to my motherland, Mexico, to find my purpose and being inspired to become an immigration attorney that would eventually represent thousands of people including detained immigrants facing deportation.
- As a Senior Advisor to the Director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during President Obama’s Administration while facing the challenging task of fighting human trafficking and helping foster greater trust and collaboration within communities by focusing on interior enforcement priorities.
- As the Director of Welcoming Communities and Immigrants Affairs for the City of Dallas, working to promote the successful inclusion of immigrants into the social and economic fabric of the Dallas community.
- As the current Chief of Equity and Inclusion of the City of Dallas, leading a very diverse group of talented women and men striving to serve the residents of Dallas with an eye toward equity and inclusion.
- And, as I stand here today, a mom raising second generation Z children with my husband, as we are trying to guide them in the era which will inevitably be known as the era of COVID-19. I am truly sorry in advance for the sacrifices they and their peers will need to make as our community learns to grapple with such an unprecedented public health crisis.

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since my formative years in East Dallas, but in every single step that I have taken since then most of what I can call an accomplishment came through luck, at least by the definition I employ – which is luck is when opportunity meets with preparation. The opportunities I have been blessed by always result when I have stepped out of my comfort zone to learn and accept new viewpoints, through being resilient as a “double-minority,” a woman and a Latina, through progress in the world in terms of diversity. I am lucky because I was born in the 70s. My maternal grandmother, Juanita Longoria Davila, reached first grade. My mother, Mary Helen, received her GED and I have been blessed to have earned a Juris Doctorate. Every step of my journey has been paved by these majestic, saintly women and other mentoring forces in my life like Adelfa Callejo, Isabelle Collora, Vanna Slaughter, Sarah Saldaña. How lucky am I to be alive right now? However, there is still more work to be done.

The finance site WalletHub ranked Dallas as the fifth most diverse cities in the US across many measurements including: demographic, industry diversity, income, age, religious affiliation, education, language and marital status.¹ While we celebrate diversity, we acknowledge significant disparities which are the result of years when

¹ McCann, Adam. “Most Diver Cities in the U.S.” WalletHub, April 10, 2019.
<https://wallethub.com/edu/most-diverse-cities/12690/>

diversity was not only *not* celebrated, it was relegated. The obvious keywords for today's topic, "Embracing Diversity in Our Struggle for Unity," could be the words "diversity" or even "unity. They are both compelling and magnificent words evoking an ideal that humans have poeticized and romanticized for centuries – And rightfully so!

Human civilizations have always known that unity was to be yearned for and that accepting diversity was the way to reach peace and stability. We have always known that the alternative proposition to this, that is, rejecting unity, could create chaos, injustice, instability, rebellion and war.

We have always known that we could be stronger by unifying our forces. However, just knowing right from wrong hasn't always deterred us humans from moral turpitude. "Embracing Diversity in Our Struggle for Unity," or other variations of the quote have been used as slogans for ages and all over the world: in ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, eastern cultures and even present-day Republics. Even our own nation's creed "e pluribus Unum," is one of the variations. In fact, the European Union's slogan is "United in Diversity." This is to say that we know and understand the importance of both diversity and unity. Yet, we still struggle to accomplish it. It is not easy to reach, because it requires concrete, palpable actions that sometimes deeply cuts against the grain of what we consider normal, against what we have always been taught or what we have always known! We still struggle because it requires SELFLESSNESS!

The way warriors in battle are often celebrated in popular culture, warriors for Unity should be celebrated tenfold, for peace often requires a heavier toll and more courage. That is why Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., St. Theresa of Calcutta, Mahatma Ghandi, Cesar Chavez, Rigoberta Menchu, Malala Yousufzai are celebrated worldwide as heroic for epitomizing courage in the valiant struggle for unity and diversity.

This is the reason why, today, I would like for us to focus a little bit on "Our Struggle" for unity and diversity. Why do we struggle to attain unity? Why do we struggle to embrace our diversity? How do we become selfless change agents that truly foster diversity and unity instead of people who only lift fingers to click and share beautiful Facebook quotes that only talk about it?

We do not have to look too far, to see examples of change agents that we can emulate in their selflessness and palpable actions on how to embrace diversity. The School Sisters of Notre Dame serve in a variety of ministries, which includes formal education, but work wherever there is a need. They minister in prisons, combat racism and poverty in local communities, and tutor immigrants and refugees. They also serve in hospitals caring for the sick and elderly, in communities guiding those in need of spiritual direction and in other countries helping communities gain access to clean water. Their mission is, "*to proclaim the good news as School Sisters of Notre Dame, directing our entire lives toward that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent. As He was sent to show the Father's love to the world, we are sent to make Christ visible by our very being, by sharing our love, faith, and hope."*

To me, this evokes a mission rooted in love, which is the fundamental sentiment by way of which we can embrace diversity. More than 2,500 School Sisters of Notre Dame serve in 30 countries working actively, especially in local situations, to eliminate the root causes of injustice. The sisters and their colleagues seek to empower women, youth and persons who are poor or marginalized and strive to change systems of poverty and injustice in order to realize a world of peace, justice and love.

Love or compassion for humanity, is what it takes to look at a child that is not yours and care for her, that is what it takes to care for the sick and elderly that are not related to us, that is what it takes to welcome with southern hospitality all the immigrants and refugee communities coming from other parts of the world for a better life here in Dallas. And, I bear witness to this creed as my first big boss as an Immigration Attorney is a School Sister of Notre Dame, Sr. Mary Anne Owens who served as CEO of Catholic Charities of Dallas which provided me my first opportunity to practice law in the way that I believe I was ultimately called...in service to

those in greater need of an advocate under the law. Love doesn't have to judge and as Mother Theresa once said, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them."

I love the work I do at the City of Dallas, which I find relatable in many ways to what the sisters do in serving the people. Working for the City of Dallas is more than a job. It is a career that requires dedication, passion and more importantly putting residents, communities and neighborhoods first. At the City of Dallas, we are committed to building a Service First culture. Service First is delivering responsive and proactive service that meets the needs of Dallas residents - 365 days a year! Building a Service First culture is guided by our core values of empathy, ethics, excellence and equity.

Serving people takes a lot and the City of Dallas cannot do it alone. This is why we need the engagement of all people, each doing their best one day at a time. Our work must be done in collaboration with education, health, and social service partners, racial justice advocates, the faith, business, and philanthropic communities and every Dallas resident.

As the Chief of Equity and Inclusion for the City of Dallas, the topic, "Embracing Diversity in Our Struggle for Unity," is at the heart of what I strive to do while providing executive leadership to the Office of Ethics and Compliance, Office of Equity, Office of Fair Housing and Human Rights, and the Office of Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs, Office of Environmental Quality and Sustainability and Office Resilience. Equity is another crucial element that can help us embrace diversity in our struggle for unity. Our strategy at the City of Dallas in creating an equitable city, has been to go back to the core of the issue and study the disparities that exist within our communities. In 2019, we initiated the Dallas Equity Indicators project in a collaboration between City of Dallas, the City University of New York's Institute for State and Local Governance, and the Center for Public Policy Priorities. It is a tool to help Dallas measure disparities and advance equity in our community. The indicators are designed to measure disparities in outcomes across five thematic areas: Economic Opportunity, Education, Neighborhoods and Infrastructure, Justice and Government, and Public Health. The findings can be used by residents, businesses, educators, nonprofit leaders, public health and local government administrators and elected officials to focus public policy efforts on improving outcomes for all residents.

In closing, tangibly embracing diversity means creating an equitable, welcoming society. For us women and other minorities, this will also require us to acknowledge the intersectionality within our own identities. Feminist and critical race theories utilize the concept of intersectionality to frame analytic approaches that simultaneously consider the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference and disadvantage². For example, whereas we may be able to analyze the experiences of men or women, or people of color, we miss the opportunity to understand the experiences of women of color, men who may also have a disability, Latina millennial women, Asian male leaders...all critical intersections that inform³. We can no longer just embrace diversity on the surface, but the challenge is to be meticulous and dig even deeper to make sure that not a single human being is forsaken from the love we have to offer. As for me, I am still a work in progress.

² Cole, E. R. (2009). Intersectionality and research in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 64(3), 170–180. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014564>

³ Making It Real: Equity Is Intersectional <http://www.theinclusionsolution.me/making-real-equity-intersectional/>