

Pace Law School Honorary Degree Acceptance Speech

May 18, 2003

About six years ago, I was given a private tour of the White House by a Department of Justice attorney. I had seen the White House out of a window in an Executive Building interview with DOJ officials during my Court of Appeals nomination process. DOJ arranged the tour because I had mentioned that I had never received a White House tour. Each time I intended a public visit, some world event had intruded and cancelled the tour.

It is hard to describe in words what that afternoon visit to the White House was like for me. I was overwhelmed. As some people in the audience may know, I grew up in a South Bronx housing project. I am the child of first generation immigrant Puerto Ricans to New York City. As I was growing up, none of my cousins in New York had yet graduated from college. I was, however, a child with dreams. I dreamed first of graduating from college. I was precocious enough to dream even of going to law school. I hoped to become a prosecutor and, I even imagined that someday, maybe, if life was really good to me, I would become a judge. The only kind of judge I knew about then was a criminal court judge because my only exposure to the law was from television. Back then, Perry Mason was the star TV attorney, and he only practiced criminal law.

That afternoon six years ago in the White House, I realized I had lived my dreams and more incredibly, I had far surpassed them. With the aid of family and friends, I had graduated

from both college and law school, attending some of the finest institutions in the land. I have often described my first week at college at Princeton as a visitor landing in an alien country. Yet, I made it through my schooling and I even got to be a prosecutor in the office of one of the finest DA's in the country, Bob Morgenthau. I traveled the world in private practice as an international commercial lawyer.

I didn't become a criminal court judge, but I did become a federal district court judge and, during my White House tour, I was being considered - and have subsequently become, a United States Circuit Court Judge. It is humbling to be a part of one of the greatest courts of our country. Walking the rooms of the White House on a private tour, I was overwhelmed and felt privileged in an extraordinary way. Few people can say they have lived their fantasies in the way I can.

I love my work. It stimulates and challenges me. I wake up each morning excited about the prospect of engaging in work that fulfills me and gives me a chance to have a voice in the development of law. I love the law - I admire our profession for all the good it has and continues to do in the world. I respect the rule of law because it helps us as communities of people organize ourselves into civilized patterns of human behavior.

Even when the rule of law fails, as some may consider it has in some of the events of recent times, we still look to it for comfort and a sense of security. It gives us much and I am eternally grateful that I am a member of a noble profession.

Now, I fully recognize that a large measure of my professional success is attributable to plain good luck. It is a very rare blessing when one can live ones professional dreams as completely as I have been able to. Receiving an honorary degree from an institution with the

public service values of Pace Law School is a palpable reminder of the privilege of my life.

It is my hope for all of you graduating today that you can find the same degree of joy in your life as I have been blessed in having in my life. It is my desire for you that you find the same fulfillment I have in my career.

If you measure your achievement on the basis of the professional position you attain (i.e., will you become a Circuit Court Judge or a partner in a prestigious law firm or a professor at an Ivy League school?), you are likely never to be completely happy. If that were all that there was to the success in my life, I know I would not find joy nor full meaning. Instead, I have found satisfaction in my life through my work but it alone has not given me success or happiness. Passion in pursuing a dream and in doing good in the world is a wonderful goal. It is a goal you will not find satisfying in reaching, however, without recognizing that the more important part of life is your connection with the people whom you travel the journey of your life with. Also important is the quality of sharing and giving that you do in your life.

In short, you will find joy and ultimate success in your life by maintaining a passion-through paid and pro bono work, through church, or other activities in which you both give to society and its betterment and you give of yourself personally to your family and friends.

I am a great advocate of lawyers doing pro bono work because I think the act of giving, without pay, to others gives you a richness money can't buy. My advocacy today is not limited, however, to giving professionally. I also advocate the giving of yourself to the family and friends in your life. I am advocating today a reminder that in the bustle of living the demands of your profession, you keep the importance of family and friends in the forefront of your priorities. It is the quality of your connection to those that you love and who love you that will ultimately

measure the success of your life.

In the audience today with me are my mother and my closest friend, Dawn Cardi. Dawn is a 1979 graduate of Pace Law School. Dawn has shared the joy and tears of every professional step and misstep I have taken. Dawn is a solo practitioner who, unlike me, choose to divide her life between her profession and her husband and children, and she and her family have adopted me as a part of their life. She is my watchdog in reminding me when I am moving too fast and to slow down and to appreciate the importance of the people affected by what I do. She reminds me to work hard – she works incredibly hard – but to value goodness and giving to others as much as I value what I do intellectually. She is an exceptional graduate of Pace and one it should be enormously proud of — she does important work with consummate skill, passion and dedication. In the generosity of the support and love my mom and friends have given me, I came back from visiting the White House six years ago, and had people who shared my joy and wonder with me and that sharing gave the moment true meaning and importance.

Sharing life with loving and good people should have been the true dream of my childhood - I am glad to say that it is the dream of my adulthood. If I can continue to say that I live a meaningful life because I do good work in which I give to others and I have family and friends who share my life with me and who give and let me give back to them, then I have truly succeeded far beyond any childhood dream.

There are others of my friends in the audience here today. I thank them and you for being here and sharing this special moment with me. I hope each of you graduates can share your celebratory lunches and dinners with family and friends today and know that you are not just celebrating the end of the drudgery of law school but instead you are celebrating a graduation that is a symbol of your love and support of each other and your ultimate achievement as a human being. Be good, caring and giving people in your life and your honorary degrees in life will be more valuable than the very special one I receive today.