

Hunter Collage School of Social Work
Graduation Speech
Sylvia Liliana Sanchez & Javier Adrian Sanchez

Yellow = Both speaking
Green = Sylvia speaking
Blue = Javier speaking

Good Morning. Esteemed Faculty; Family members; Friends; Supporters. Our fellow Graduates.

My name is Sylvia Liliana Sanchez.

And I am Javier Adrian Sanchez.

Today we stand before you as two unified siblings who despite growing up in the same household have our own unique stories of what led us into the field of social work.

We are two faces of social work. Two unique paths with unique traits and personalities. All leading to this moment.

One the first born child of a young couple in Colombia;

The other the first one born to immigrant parents in Elmhurst, Queens.

One a heterosexual identified female.

The other a gay identified male.

One with long black hair.

The other, without any hair left to speak of.

Both have had the determination and grit to meet the challenges presented by Hunter College School of Social Work because of the people who brought us here. It is for that reason that we are here today to state that our degree belongs to more than just the two of us.

It belongs to a cousin, who as a young teenager arrived to the United States without understanding the English language and who later on today, on the great stage of Radio City Music Hall, will open the commencement ceremonies as one of the three valedictorian of the Hunter College under grad program.

It belongs to a father who as the eldest son left Colombia and sacrificed working exhaustive hours as a yellow cab driver in order to bring his siblings to NY to share in his American dream. He is the personification of what it means to provide for your family; your *entire* family.

A stepfather who as a waiter proved that the value of strong work ethics and professionalism, will earn you respect from colleagues and supervisors. The integrity he has demonstrated throughout all of his jobs is admirable and has considerably impacted our own work ethics.

A younger brother who is discovering the power of his own voice in his own unique way. His journey towards greatness provides us with a towering sense of pride. Living with two social work students isn't easy, and we thank him for graciously allowing us to bring him along throughout our learning process. He is truly our angel.

It belongs to a mother who has only known work as one where she is in the service of others, whether in a coat check room, as a cashier, or cleaning a college cafeteria; always working with a sense of pride while reminding us on a daily basis that education is the key for us to “salir adelante en la vida”, to get ahead in life.

The value of education has always been fundamental in our family. Our family today is living a redefined American Dream envisioned by our parents and shared by so many immigrant families where we choose to maintain our cultural identities while navigating through the dominant culture.

As the first members of our family to receive graduate degrees, we are humbled by the significance of this momentous event, where the sacrifices our parents made on a daily basis is honored by their children gaining the educational opportunities never afforded to them. This recognized privilege of education is one that will be utilized as a tool to help bring about social change so that others can “salir adelante” as well.

Each one of them takes a piece of this degree for it was through their support and example of what it means to work and to learn that we were able to meet these challenges. And they are not alone in our recognitions.

It belongs to all of our partners, spouses, children, parents; siblings, friends, mentors, family members -- both birth and chosen -- who stood by us --all of us -- over the past two years as we recorded and processed all the work we did with our clients. Who listened to our frustrations of what it meant to be social workers while celebrating with us the successes achieved. And so fellow graduates, we

ask that you all stand up right now to applaud and cheer for the loved ones here today witnessing your accomplishments for they too deserve our gratitude.

To all the professors who opened up the world of social work to us with passion, rigor, and veracity. And to those that believe Hunter College should take the next steps in becoming the premiere school of social work where an anti-oppressive approach should be part of our daily learning and our foundational framework of knowledge.

It belongs to those fellow students who fought for a basic necessity such as adequate facilities where all students and faculty members could feel comfortable using the restroom. And to those who will continue to fight in sharing the “why” this is important. To those who took student organizing to a whole different level by helping to establish new curriculum, taking on leadership roles in alliances, or sharing insight and best practices for the field.

This degree belongs to the clients that allowed us to practice with them on the field. The members of our coalitions who discovered that their voices, no matter what language it may be, matters just as much as those in the dominant culture. To members of our groups who bravely shared their experiences while allowing for mutual aid to foster.

It belongs to a sister whose path I have always followed and will continue to follow if I am to have a virtuous and fulfilled life. Without you I would never have arrived here. This degree belongs to you.

It belongs to a brother who although is my younger brother, this degree I dedicate to you. Your continuous support, guidance, and unconditional love, makes me the luckiest person in the world. You are my superhero.

And to our fellow students: this degree belongs to each of you. Yes, this degree belongs to each of us. For we all challenged each others thoughts, values and beliefs systems. Whether we have realized it or not, we all have impacted each others' education. We admitted to each other that we all part of an oppressive structure. That we are all racists; sexists; heterosexists; and owners of prejudicial thoughts clouding our judgments. Yet all the while, offering methods of recovery and healing allowing us to begin or continue our paths in anti-oppressive work and advocacy.

May we walk out of here with the strength, courage, confidence, and sense of empowerment we thrive on witnessing when our clients reach their own personal

milestones. We entered challenged – and no doubt will continue to be challenged – and now we walk out together, just like the two of us here on stage – unified!

Thank you!