

A little over 10 years ago, I happened to be sitting right where you are today. Actually, I was standing right here, giving a speech for my own Awards Ceremony. I graduated from Lowell High School in 2003.

My story begins in Mexico City, where my parents had me at ages 15 and 16 years old; younger than you are today. My father as a young man made his way to San Francisco, my mother then followed with my younger brother and I, both ages 5 and 6. That journey is engrained in me like - like remembering your own birthday; it was a big risk my parents took for us, and it was life changing. It also awoke consciousness of otherness. When I arrived here, I was different, I didn't speak English and I didn't fit in...and trust me, I tried. Fast forward and imagine this thought, a 14 year old Raquel wearing baggy jeans, dark brown lip liner, and my big hoop earrings.



Simply put, my parents were the biggest influence in my life, and they would have never allowed me to get involved with drug, gangs, or teen pregnancies despite how prevalent they were in the Tenderloin where I grew up. I wanted to fit in but remember going against the grain when it came to my education. When my peers invited me to cut class, I just couldn't do it; I had to do algebra. When some of my closest friends brought alcohol or weed to smoke during lunch, I was busy in band class; I played the Oboe.

Things only got harder after I was accepted to Lowell High, I was no longer a closet nerd, and my secret was out. I went from going to a school of mostly Black or Latinos to a predominantly Asian and Caucasian school with kids that came from families that had money. Many already had in mind where they were going to go to college, and all of the sudden I began to question how smart I really. I was struggling trying to get my homework done in a crowded one bedroom apartment with seven other family members. I also had to set time to translate for my mom and dad and in some instances fend for my whole family when they were being ripped off.

The thing about living in two worlds is that you begin to develop some resiliency tactics. For example: I learned about time management when I had to get all of my school projects done and get home before it was dark. I found my own voice when I would get drug and other inappropriate offers on my street corner. At Lowell, I learned that in order to get ahead I would have to work twice as hard as my peers. I had really struggled with doubts and insecurities deeply rooted from growing up in the Tenderloin. After all, I didn't know any stories of anyone leaving the Tenderloin, let alone knowing they had done something of themselves. What I saw back then, was that people don't leave the Tenderloin, and even if you don't join a gang, you could be jumped or be a random victim of violence at any moment. My younger brother experienced a lot of this violence growing up and at some point he thought focusing on surviving was more important than turning in homework. I still remember having to jump in some of his fights. When it is ingrained in you that you will fail as a young person, you can start to doubt yourself. He, ultimately, did not go on to college.

Choosing the right college was not easy. I applied to all of the UC's and to a small liberal arts College in the middle of no-where, Ripon, Wisconsin. While I was accepted to five of the UCs, I chose Ripon College. Choosing Ripon was a difficult decision; my parents had never saved any money for college, and the UC's had given me very small scholarships. I would not have been able to cover the first year alone. When Ripon awarded me a significant scholarship I knew that the possibilities of me leaving the state had increased. It was when Meritus came into my life and awarded me the rest that ensured I would be able to feasibly attend college while only working part time and really focus in my classes.

Meritus gave me validation as a young person - that I was doing the right thing by pursuing a college education. I was able to release myself from the inhibitions of being myself, and gave me the encouragement that we all had the same hopes and dreams of becoming successful and helping our families. After all it was me, who Meritus wanted to invest in, not someone else. They saw potential and leadership, and understood even before I did that I wanted to pave a path for others out of the Tenderloin.

I not only became the first in my family to graduate from high school, I also became the first to graduate from college with a double major in Economics and Political Science. After completing college in 3.5 years, I worked in Chicago for almost two years in international trade with the World Trade Center Chicago. In 2008, I moved to the Bay Area and worked with tech giant Cisco Systems. I currently work for a private equity firm that invests in Healthcare companies. For the near future, I am deciding between remaining in finance or making a career change to law in order to protect those who are marginalized. As a Meritus Alumna, I am involved in a leadership role with the Meritus Alumni Network. I hope that when you are in my shoes you, too, can give back.

To the class of 2014: be yourself, because when you are comfortable with yourself, you will find confidence; never look at those competing next to you because that will slow YOU down. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable or too proud to ask or receive help. You have been successful because you have taken charge and responsibility over your families, but there will be many instances in college and in your careers where you will need to reach out and ask for help and find mentors. Lastly, take risks, figuratively speaking dive off your cliffs and take ownership of your challenges. Keep paving new ways and continue to be the leader that you've been waiting for, don't wait for someone else to step up because with the Meritus network and their support you will have a fair chance to make a difference in your communities and the places you will go. Lastly, thank you for inspiring me with your resiliency, especially those who have already faced many more obstacles than I ever did.

To my donors, thank you for investing in me and knowing back then what the phrase "high risk, high reward" meant. You changed the trajectory of a high risk young Latina. You helped me pave the way for many of those who followed after me. I hope that you see that your investment in me ten years ago, paid off by more multiples than you imagined because, not only is my little sister college bound, but you instilled in me and those in my communities the ripple effect of hope and validated that we can all have a chance no matter what neighborhood you are from in San Francisco.