



SCHOLARS TODAY – LEADERS TOMORROW STUDENT SPEECH

Warleny Sanchez

Good morning/Good afternoon! My name is Warleny Sanchez, and I am from the Dominican Republic, but I currently live in Lowell, Mass. I am a senior at Notre Dame Cristo Rey High School, and it is an honor to stand here today as part of NDCR.

When I was nine years old, I came to the United States with my mother and my two siblings. Already feeling like an alien, it did not help to start a new school, not knowing English. I had no one, but like a seed buried underground, I was preparing to bloom, yet no one could see it. I was being bullied because I was different; I was a wildflower in the wrong season. I remember walking around the city of Lawrence, looking for a place to stay with just \$300 in our pockets: no car and no idea how to begin. We went from shelter to shelter, not being able to go to school for a few months. When we finally arrived at a shelter that I called my first home, it was as if a crack in the soil opened, letting in sunlight. I still wilted in silence. I was just a child, beginning to bloom, my petals unfolding through pain and persistence. Where I come from, violence and survival are daily realities. In my *barrio* in the Dominican Republic, drugs, crime, and the constant police presence were not just stories; they were background noise. I did not have time to sit and talk about how that made me feel or how it had impacted me. I did not even know that mental health existed, or that what I saw growing up could influence my thinking. The chaos was a storm snapping petals before they bloomed.

During this time, my roots grew in silence, unseen but strong. I coped by caring for others, watering their roots while mine remained dry. Maybe if I could make someone else feel less invisible, I could escape from the harsh reality I was living in. After a while, my mom, my siblings, and I finally moved into an apartment. It was not perfect, but for me, it was a flowerpot offering an opportunity to reinvent myself.

People gaze upon the radiant, strong flower I have become, admiring the heart behind it, the one that feels deeply for others. I feel pain when someone is not picked for a team during dodgeball. I still remember what it is like to have nothing. I see struggle even when it is buried, maybe because I bloomed through it myself. Children are going through a similar or worse situation today, and I hope that I may find a way to make a difference because, to me, they are the living memory of every season that I have survived. As I stand here today, I still cannot believe that college is right around the corner. With everything that I have been through and my background, I never thought I would have the opportunity to attend college. When you start seeing a pattern in your family of people not being able to access higher education, you begin to believe that maybe you will not make it either.

NDCR means more to me than just education; it is the way I express myself and move through the world. NDCR represents a second chance, growth, and opportunities. All of my teachers hold a special place in my heart, but if I talked about every single one, I would be here all day, so I will highlight one.

One of them is Ms. Dominguez. She has taught me to never judge a book by its cover. It may sound like a typical saying, but it is something she truly showed me through her actions. She has also taught me the importance of living in the moment and building a life that you desire and believe you deserve. She has helped me become more confident in my own voice and personality. I have always felt nervous about speaking up, but something she once said really stayed with me: "The room goes quiet when you speak." At first, I thought it meant that nobody cared, but it meant the opposite: it showed the respect and importance of my voice.

Through the Corporate Work Study Program, I have had the great honor of working at Sensitech, where I process inter-company orders from other Sensitech locations in other countries. Beyond the work itself, I have met amazing individuals who have impacted my life greatly. My supervisor, Vicente Perez, has become a role model for me. Through this experience, I have learned that asking questions and standing up for what you think is right or wrong is an important part of life. I have also learned that while work is important, it is not everything. We grow up thinking this system is the only way of living, but the people around you grow and evolve right in front of you, and you do not always realize it until it is too late. That is why it is important to prioritize what truly matters and what genuinely impacts us.

Today, I am proud to say that I will be attending the University of Notre Dame, where I will be studying psychology. NDCR allowed me to visit the school, by funding my trip back in January. That's when I fell in love with the university and decided on committing. Who would have thought that a little girl from the Dominican Republic would one day be a fighting Irish? This opportunity is not only the result of my hard work, but also the support from this school and the trust you have placed in NDCR. Your investment is not just funding a school; it is changing lives like mine.

Most importantly, this opportunity is because of my greatest inspiration: my mom.

My mom has always believed that I was going to be better than her. But the truth is, I have always dreamed of becoming at least half the woman she is today.

Mami, tú eres la inspiración más grande para mí. Que no hayas tenido las oportunidades de hoy en día no define quién eres. Tu fuerza, tu amor y tu corazón son todo para mí. Mi único sueño es ser la mitad de la mujer que eres tú. Te amo muchísimo. Todo esto es por ti.