



SCHOLARS TODAY – LEADERS TOMORROW ALUMNI SPEECH

Marcos Peña Veras

Good evening everyone,

It is an honor to stand before you as a proud alumnus of Notre Dame Cristo Rey High School. My name is Marcos Peña Veras, and I am 24 years old. A little bit more about me: I was born in the Dominican Republic, was raised in Lawrence, and attended Notre Dame Cristo Rey High school from 2016 to 2020. I graduated high school and then completed my bachelor's degree in health studies from Western New England University in three years and then was accepted into the Doctor of Occupational Therapy program at WNE. Two days ago, I successfully defended my doctoral capstone and was called Doctor for the first time. I will walk the stage at commencement in two weeks where my professional journey will officially begin.

I would like to thank Sister Maryalice, administrators, and staff for your kind invitation here tonight. I spoke at this gala before, last time in the role of a student at NDCR, this time as an alumnus. It is truly a full circle moment for me right now, because when I think about who I am today and all of the things I have been able to accomplish, I think back to my time at NDCR. I remember applying to colleges and meeting with counselors and receiving our "I Got In" shirts. And here I stand in front of all of you having completed my bachelor's degree, graduating, and right before graduating again.

I am very grateful for the opportunities that I received while I was a student here. Because of the scholarships I received, it was easier to get through college. The councilors made sure that whatever college I decided to go to was not only good from an academic standpoint, but from a financial one as well. Navigating FAFSA as a first-generation student in the U.S was more manageable because of courses offered at NDCR for parents and students. So, not only did I receive instructional material in class, but I was also prepared in other skills that I utilized all throughout my college life. The true definition of education for life. So, I can sum up my experience at NDCR using one word: Opportunity.

I had the incredible opportunity of spending the early parts of my young-adult formative years in a private Catholic institution. Here, I was given the opportunity to connect with my faith, the opportunity to excel academically, the opportunity to be involved, the opportunity to advocate, and the opportunity to attend college. All of these opportunities and experiences challenged me, pushed me, and ultimately helped me grow. This is very important because sometimes an opportunity is everything you need to prove to others, but especially yourself that you are capable of reaching your goals.

Opportunities lead to growth, but growth doesn't always look the way we expect it to. Sometimes it's not in the big, visible achievements, but in the quiet moments; the times you

choose to keep going when things get hard, the times you learn from failure, the times you discover strength you didn't know you had. And that's what NDCR does so well. It creates a space where growth is possible.

I want to share something personal with you—something that really brought me back to this moment.

Like I mentioned earlier, I successfully defended my doctoral capstone a couple days ago and it brought me back to many moments at NDCR. I have to be honest, sitting there after my defense, hearing the words “Dr. Marcos Peña,” I didn't just think about the work I had done recently. My mind came back here.

To this school.

Because the truth is, that moment didn't start two days ago. It started years ago, in classrooms at NDCR. In conversations with teachers and counselors. In moments when someone encouraged me to keep going, even when I wasn't sure I could.

There were times along the way through college, through graduate school, through long nights of studying, when things felt overwhelming. Times when I questioned if I was capable of making it this far. Times when I questioned if I belonged in those spaces. But the foundation that was built here carried me forward. The lessons I learned here about resilience, about discipline, about believing in something bigger than myself; those lessons stayed with me. And they made that moment possible.

It was always a pleasure hearing from Dorymar. She would just check up and see if I needed anything. If she could help with anything. More than a few times I found myself smiling at messages because it felt like someone beside myself, and my parents cared. It felt like I didn't just graduate from NDCR, but NDCR came with me to college.

And that's what tonight is about. It's about continuing that cycle of opportunity. Because the truth is, potential is everywhere, but opportunity is what allows it to grow.

To the students here tonight: take advantage of every opportunity in front of you. Even the ones that seem small. Even the ones that feel challenging. Especially those. Because one day, you'll look back and realize those moments shaped who you have become. And more importantly, they have created a path to who you will become. And don't you worry if an opportunity you sought does not work out. There is an even greater one waiting for you.

To the faculty and staff: thank you for being the foundation of this community. Your presence, your belief, and your commitment make all the difference. And to everyone here tonight: thank you for showing up—not just physically, but with intention. Your support is not just appreciated—it is transformative. It is transforming young adults into community leaders, organizers, advocates, healthcare professionals, and even doctors.

NDCR was the place where I discovered my voice. A place that helped me begin to understand the impact of community and the power of opportunity. So tonight, as we celebrate and as we

give, let's remember what we're really investing in. We're investing in growth. We're investing in opportunity. We're investing in future leaders.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of your evening.