The Incredible Journey of Distinguished Alumna Maribel Ledezma-Williams

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Maribel Ledezma-Williams’s Distinguished Alumni speech for the 2012 Undergraduate Program in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity graduation recounted her extraordinary journey from migrant farm worker to Stanford student, and on to a successful career as a diversity practitioner in the financial services sector. Her heartfelt words produced a palpable emotional charge as students, faculty, family and friends attending graduation were captivated by her powerful life story. It was hard to find a dry eye in the audience riveted by her narrative of graceful resilience.

Reflecting on her life, Maribel makes it clear that although she stands up as a successful Stanford graduate, she “will always be that kid who showed up at Stanford feeling a little bit lost”. She was raised in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas by parents who immigrated to the US from Mexico. During her childhood the family traveled as migrant farm workers to California, Indiana and Washington for annual harvests.

When Maribel’s parents dropped her off for Freshman Orientation at Stanford, they could not stay long. They were in transit, on their way to pick apples in Washington State. There was no romantic send-off. The family needed to be in Washington the next day to begin the harvest season. One of her reminders is a food stamp her mother gave her while studying at Stanford. It is now framed in her New York apartment as a continual reminder of her parents’ struggles to provide for their family.

Maintaining a connection to her past helps give Maribel perspective on life’s priorities. She fondly remembers her mother telling her as a child, “Mija get an education. It is the only thing that can’t be taken away from you.” Lessons learned from disparate worlds in the fields and as a student at Stanford have informed her responses to the pressures in her professional world. “Growing up a child of farm workers and picking grapes, that was hard work. Even on my most challenging days [at work] it doesn’t compare to the sacrifices, hard work and the conditions that my parents experienced.”

At the same time, Maribel’s Stanford experience challenges the notion of campus as an exclusive space reserved for students with privilege. “There are still many students coming to Stanford that are first generation and struggle with living in two worlds: reconciling how and where they
grew up with the tremendous opportunities Stanford offers for the future. I’ve learned that you never leave those experiences behind. They have a profound impact on your life and can help propel you forward and become resilient.”

Her path towards understanding the power of reconciling experiences was shaped in large part through her involvement in the establishment of CSRE as an academic program. Maribel matriculated to Stanford in the fall of 1994. Her arrival came on the heels of student hunger strikes to mobilize students and faculty to establish a broader range of ethnic studies programs. The activities on campus at the time spoke to the activist orientation she was developing at that age and her interest in addressing issues facing people of color within an academic framework.

In her sophomore year, she was selected as student representative on the curriculum design committee to create the program in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. She cites her position on this committee as one of the best experiences as an undergraduate at Stanford. The committee gave her exposure to how academic programs develop and the important work faculty does to build support within the university. It also set the course for her to add Chicano Studies to her declared major of Spanish.

Her involvement with CSRE had a significant impact on Maribel, providing an academic lens through which she began to process her experiences and understand its relevance. Growing up, Maribel had gone through bilingual and migrant education programs, was enrolled in speech therapy classes to address an accent and watched her parents navigate a complicated educational system across states. She had only lived in two types of communities, either majority Latino communities or communities that were majority white, with a seasonal migrant farm worker population. Along the way, she experienced racism as they traveled across the country. “Before I got to Stanford, I thought the difficult experiences were the result of deficits on my part. By studying through CSRE I learned there is a broader community that has had similar experiences in this country, as either immigrants or minority communities. It was tremendously empowering and gave me the tools to understand it. CSRE can provide a multi-disciplinary context for why discrimination and exclusion have happened and the agency those communities can have to create change.”

The goal of her graduation speech was not only to make a connection through her personal story but also to help new graduates understand it is possible to take the skills learned at CSRE and translate them into a professional path. “The inter-disciplinary work of CSRE has a real connection to the world we live in. Skills learned at CSRE translate into how to think about diversity broadly, comparing not only race and ethnicity, but also broadening the dialogue for LGBT, veterans, or disability inclusion. By virtue of going through this program, we think about how these identities intersect. Within a corporate context, I’ve applied my studies at Stanford and in CSRE to advance inclusion, with a focus on creating work environments that value different perspectives and foster meritocracy.”

Ultimately, Maribel credits her accomplishments to the support of her family and the community she found at Stanford. For Maribel, the impact loved ones have made include an older sister’s departure to college when she was in 5th grade. “Her decision was an A-ha! moment. I began to imagine having different circumstances for the future. My parents and grandparents were farm workers and I had the right support to follow a different path and make them proud.” Her path left an indelible mark on the university and contributed greatly to shaping the mission of the Center today.

—Dena Montague

Dena Montague received her PhD in Political Science from UCLA. Her research interests are race and politics in the African Diaspora. She is also the Co-Founder of EnergieRich, a social enterprise developing the capacity of rural communities in West Africa for local production of solar products and small-scale computers.