**GRADUATION SPEECH**

**FOR**

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Hello everyone! To family and friends, professors and administrators, students, and of course graduates, I want to thank you all for giving me a few moments to speak with all of you, and as I tell my story and my insights that happened throughout my education and training, please know that I’m **STILL** surprised when I think of the path I wound up on in my career and in my life. If you had seen me and known my situation, you probably would not have pictured me here either.... but because of the passion, innovation and insights of some very rare and dedicated educators and professionals, here I am... well on my way to earning my PhD. I know what you must be thinking... “**HMMM** ... A PhD... he looks so **YOUNG**!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). There’s a famous gossip website that rhymes with “BMC” that has a regular feature that’s titled, “Good Genes or Good Docs?” I my case, I have to admit to good genes, good docs, great teachers, relentless guidance counselors, and educational programs that encourage, support and champion young people who, while not as financially fluid as is necessary to go through the educational system, show promise and determination and are presented with opportunities that are, very simply, life changing. That’s what happened to me.

I was born in Colombia and my family .... and I... emigrated to the United States when I was very young. Also when I was just a young boy of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ years old, (**were you 9? Please fill in**) my mother passed away. Before that, our family had its share of challenges... mostly financial, and once my mother was gone, although her presence was and is irreplaceable, my oldest sister, Judy, stepped up to the plate and (**If you want to make a joke you can say**) did her best interpretation of a prison warden... I mean she basically raised me.... she took me to school, met with my teachers, and kept me on a very short rope, as the expression goes... and by the way.... I **LOVE** her for it and I am thrilled that she is here today to laugh if I make mistakes in this speech... I mean .... encourage me, support me, and be proud of me!! (**Wait for the laugh**). I also want to acknowledge my father, José, my rock, my idol, the life of the party, my best friend, and my biggest fan and cheering section. One more... I want to also thank my younger sister, Yoksaidy (**Is this correct?**) for looking up to me and for allowing me to be **HER** guide and inspiration through life. Knowing she’s watching, knowing how proud she is of me, keeps me on my toes. These three people (**Do you want to add**) and my mother, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, who I am **SURE** is watching down on all of us and making sure we are **ALWAYS** true to ourselves, are the inspiration and reason that I what I do, how I do it. My father.... you know.... the **life of the party**.... had only **ONE** directive for me as I was growing up, and he was relentless in drilling this instruction into each one of his kids... He would say, ”I don’t care what you do... I don’t care what you go to school for.... but when you choose your path in life, just **BE THE BEST**.” And his voice is always with me, in great times like this and in tougher times when I really struggle to get through.... I hear him and I pick myself up and remember my purpose and mission in my career and in life.

So there I was.... one day in high school... back in\_\_\_\_\_\_ (**give the year**) and I found myself in a course for health occupations.... and it was **INTERESTING**. A registered nurse taught the course and in it, she detailed the different careers within nursing that might be options for us. Before I knew it, I was placing one foot in front of the other and I asked if I might be able to shadow her on her nursing rounds. That woman was Laura Cilento, and although we are no longer in contact, she was the **true catalyst** who placed me on the path I’ve been on. The author, Leo Rosten said, “The purpose of life is **not** to be happy, but to **matter**, to **be productive**, to **be useful**, to have it make some **difference** that you have lived at all.” As much as I was on my way in search of that personal fulfillment, the people I have mentioned gave my life purpose and meaning.

I mention this because I really believe that although it’s the young people in this room and in life who are searching for their focus, I want to make sure that all of the educators, administrators, family members and friends here today know that what you do is for a **reason**. While you may not realize it, **someone** is watching. Someone is listening to your ideas, your suggestions, your encouragement, and your criticism. We owe it to ourselves and to each other to pay attention, be respectful, listen, learn, and acknowledge every single thing that enters our line of sight and our earshot. Every sound byte, every flashing glance has the potential to be life changing.... it is **OUR** job to pay attention and follow the clues.... no matter if we want to or not.... our loved ones and our communities need our unique contributions to life just as we need theirs... and that goes for every single relationship we have.

The English poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson, wrote a passage that goes, “I am part of all that I have met.” Obviously, my family and I share an intensely strong bond, a synergy, love, and some major DNA, and I am thankful every day that they are a living breathing part of me. I’m grateful for my mentors and teachers who have taught, commented, and encouraged me on my path, but there is one more person who, without her constant focus and encouragement, I would not be here. She really puts the “**guidance**” in Guidance Counselor, and that is the relentless, committed, compassionate, and wise, Paula Venable. I am so happy that Paula is here today. And if any of you also know her, you might understand why I will paraphrase the words of an old time comedian when I say.... Take my guidance counselor... **PLEASE**!!! (**And wait for the laugh**). All jokes aside, Paula is the real deal, and as the coordinator for the Rutgers Educational Opportunity Fund program, she has consistently demonstrated her gifts of caring, encouragement, and vision. Paula new what was best for me **WAAAAY** before I did and she was insistent that I make my choices and commitments and **KEEP THEM**. While I will admit that on occasion, it seemed like she might have cared **a little too much**.... I was admittedly **on the verge** of entering the witness protection program... **more than a few times**... just to get **a break.**.. (**Wait for the laugh**).... in the end... or in the process... I exacted my revenge on her (**just start to say the word, “stalking”**) **stalki**-I mean enthusiastic attention.... we became good friends .... and now **I** bother **HER**!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). All jokes aside, knowing that someone took the time to observe and anticipate my abilities and to really **CARE** about my well being and my future focus really made a tremendous difference in my life as well as in the lives of others that she has mentored. And to show her endless, **relentless** support of her candidates... it was Laura who nominated me for this honor. I’m so happy she’s here today.... Laura? How am I doing??? (**Wait for the laugh**). If I may speak for everyone whose lives you’ve touched, **THANK YOU**.

During my schooling and early training phases of my career, there were times I just **DID NOT** want to do certain projects and commitments.... but you can guess what little birdie was right on my shoulder whispering in my ear.... some would call it encouragement... some might call it **forcing**... (**Wait for the laugh**), but once again, Laura was right... I **DID** need to do that externship at Morristown... and I realized that every project, every assignment, every time I was “encouraged” to do something that took me out of my comfort zone was a learning experience... and I stretched and I grew as a student, a person, and a professional. Because of demands and expectations, I encourage the same level of participation from those that work with and for me. It goes back to my father’s one requirement.... **be the best**. Work for **excellence**... **DON’T SETTLE.** and that is in my mind every day.

The entire process of studying for and entering the nursing profession is challenging as well as rewarding, and of course there are events and encounters that serve to really cause a person to **wake up**. I will **NEVER** forget my externship in critical care (**is this correct? If not please fix**). There was one incident in particular that I can still see, feel, and hear in my head. One July 4th, as I was serving as a critical care nurse, we were advised there had been a car accident and patients would be arriving by helicopter. We knew it had to be bad.... one of the victims was a 17 year old Colombian boy.... please keep in mind I was just 21 at the time. This young boy died.... I saw the carnage... the wounds... the grief... the immediacy of the care applied.... and eventually the hopelessness of the effort. I saw the unimaginable shock and disbelief experienced by his parents. It was my first encounter with an active coding.... everything was done to save him, but it didn’t help, and almost like an out of body experience, I saw this young guy.... he could have been **me**.... and he was gone..... forever. It was probably at that moment that I truly owned being a part of the medical profession. I was very young.... I was learning... and although I saw almost too much, I knew I had to dedicate myself and my work to becoming a nurse anesthetist. For all of you students that might have a more “romantic” or idealistic view of this profession, just know that the genuine experiences you will have cannot be imagined or predicted. It’s a hard profession but one that is of critical importance.... **LITERALLY**... you will stretch and twist and go without, but lives matter and you will find the balance.

The Educational Opportunity Fund is life saving on so many levels. It encourages students to find their purpose and then supports them... and us... to meet our educational and career goals.... it all goes back to my father’s mandate....**BE THE BEST** you can be. And while the work load ... especially in anesthesia school, was painful... **GET IT**... ? (**Wait for the laugh**) and can by **trying**... like I’m **TRYING** to function while working **SIXTY** hour weeks... **PLUS** studying, **plus** everything else... yes. Life goes on the back burner for three years. (**Wait for the laugh**). Remember it’s all **NECESSARY** parts of building us up emotionally, physically, and education-wise. And if any of you are feeling sick at the thought... if you’re ready to choke imagining what’s ahead... **DON’T WORRY... I’m a nurse!!! I’ve GOT this!!! (Wait for the laugh).**

I know that if I can handle the workload, **YOU** can as well.... just remember to care for people... show respect for people... **EVERYONE**... family.... teachers... colleagues... patients... as **YOU** would want to be treated. Show empathy... operate from a place of compassion, because like I learned from the family of the young Colombian... you will **NEED IT**.

Throughout my years of study and clinic practice, as I paid attention to my work, I wondered when the time would come that I would be able to relax a little, take a deep breath, and enjoy some down time. Thanks to my studies and my career, I am able to now find the time to travel, indulge explorations in my passions , like Buddhism, and see what the world is really like from a point of view that is sharpened and brighter thanks to opportunities and challenges accepted and lessons learned. I have to say, it has **ALL** been worth it, and I am eager and ready to keep learning... for work **AND** life.

For those of you lucky enough to be in the EOF program, **CONGRATULATIONS**!!! This is your opportunity of a **LIFETIME**... a good portion of your education has been endowed by the state of New Jersey and the playing field has been leveled.... now is the time to take your **BEST SHOT.**.. pay attention... ask the tough questions... **DO YOUR HOMEWORK**... ask for **MORE** responsibility and work like your life depends on it, because it does.... you **WILL** be the first line of defense in the “war” against sickness and suffering and that means a lot to people you don’t even know yet. I wish all of you the very best of good luck and serious accomplishment in the future. Thank you all for listening and congratulations to our graduates!!!