

Cafecito: A Cup of Coffee for Conexión Américas 2015
Remarks by Executive Director Renata Soto

I remember distinctly one day when my daughter was in fourth grade and came home showing, very proudly, something she had written in school.

Looking at her beautiful, but childlike, hand-writing, I remember examining intensively every curve and line and word and sentence. It dawned on me it was as if I was reading my grandmother's writing. You see, my grandmother had a fourth grade education. And in that moment, in front of that piece of paper, I started to think about all the things and lessons my daughter had ahead of her -- lessons my grandmother Esther didn't have past that fourth-grade experience.

My grandmother grew up in a house with dirt floors in San Jose, Costa Rica. She started working when she was very young, as a domestic worker, a restaurant cook. Later she got married and had a daughter.

She loved to dance, she loved to sing, and she loved to write songs. One time, a grandmother already, I remember she wrote a song for a Costa Rican president she loved and admired so dearly and found the way to send a letter and the song to his family. One of her most precious possessions until the day she died was the letter she received back from the Figueres family.

(Now that I think about it, there might be some magical meaning in the fact that the granddaughter of this amateur songwriter in Costa Rica ended up in Music City, of all places!)

But what I know was not the work of magic is the fact that her only daughter, my mother, grew up to become a top student, a high school teacher and, later, a college professor and published writer.

My grandmothers' hard work, and my mother's hard work, coupled with the love and support of so many people around them – relatives, teachers, friends, neighbors—allowed for an amazing change and for a new trajectory in the life of one girl.

That is why I'm here today rejoicing in the privilege to stand on the same stage with each of these remarkable young men and women, who, like my mother, will be the first in their families to finish high school, go to college and change, not only the trajectory of their own lives, but of their families and future generations.

They are the inaugural class of our Escalera program at Glencliff High School. Escalera (Spanish for "steps") is a national program that Conexión Américas brought to Nashville in 2012 that encourages, and supports, first generation high

school students from immigrant families to take the steps to apply for college, explore careers, and above all, to unleash their dreams and pursue their highest potential.

Through Escalera, they get support to write college essays, complete scholarship applications, secure internships, visit college campuses, and nurture advocacy and leadership skills.

Escalera builds upon the cultural assets of each student and challenges them to explore, deeply, their rich identity as children growing up between two worlds, the distant --yet intimate -- world of their immigrant parents and the American experience_outside the home. Together, they create a supportive community of peers and friends for life.

We started the program at Glencliff High School and, with your support today, we hope to take Escalera to three more high schools in the next three years.

But Conexion Americas' work to support the dreams and aspirations of young people and their families is not only taking place in schools' classrooms.

It is also happening in the Thinkubator, inside our beloved Casa Azafrán, where parents take English classes, or enroll in our small business development program to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams.

It is also happening in our commercial kitchen and culinary incubator, where the rich culinary traditions of many countries become thriving catering businesses, food trucks and wholesale enterprises.

Our work is also evident in neighborhoods where hard-working families invest their lives' savings, claim their roots in a new city and buy a house through our homeownership program. Just yesterday afternoon, our newest homeowners, Jorge Cruz and Edith Ramirez, got the keys and opened the doors of their home in Antioch.

And our work to support the dreams and aspirations of young people and their families is also taking place in the hallways of congress in Washington, DC and of Legislative Plaza here in Tennessee.

For example, last March, Bryan and Kenny took their first airplane ride to travel to our nation's capital and joined hundreds of youth, and adults, from all over the country to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform.

Let me add that, while we have a good share of disappointments for the inaction in congress in that regard, Bryan and Kenny knew that they had a true friend and supporter in our own Congressman Jim Cooper. You need to know that Congressman Cooper flew from Washington late last night to be here with you today. Thank you, Congressman Cooper.

And closer to home, in November of last year in preparation for the state legislative session that ended this week, another Glencliff High School student, Gustavo, joined our board of directors and other allies for a Day in the Hill. In a small group meeting, courageously, he shared his family's immigrant story and his desire to become a psychologist with the Speaker of the House, Beth Harwell, and Lieutenant Governor, Ron Ramsey.

In a small group meeting, Gustavo courageously shared his family's immigrant story and his desire to become a psychologist with two of the most powerful people in the state of Tennessee, Speaker Beth Harwell and Lieutenant Governor Ron Ramsey.

Not always the outcome of that work is in our favor. We just saw what happened on Wednesday when we came one vote short to make it the law of the state to extend in-state college tuition rates to immigrant students who meet certain criteria.

Now, in the state senate, Democrats and Republicans came together to do the right thing and passed the tuition equality bill. They did the right thing not only for young people but for the state's economy and self-interest.

But, in the House on Wednesday, we fell just one vote short. One vote. If not for one vote, today we would be celebrating that many bright, hard-working students were now seeing new possibilities for their future and a more affordable path to college.

While the disillusionment in the faces of so many young people is heartbreaking, and the disappointment in the House members who voted no or who did not cast a vote runs deep, we must celebrate how far we have come in changing the conversation.

And we must thank those who came together and voted yes. Three of those elected officials are here with us. Please join me in thanking Senator Jeff Yarbrow and State Representatives Jason Powell and John Ray Clemmons.

On your tables, there are flyers that list all the other state elected officials who deserve a Thank You. Please send them a note. That's as important as the check that we hope you will write later today. Those who voted no or did not cast a vote should also hear from us. Please share your disappointment and ask them to vote YES next year.

Now, in the work we do, sometimes we lead, sometimes we walk side by side others, sometimes we follow. The historic victory in the State Senate and the 49 votes in the House for tuition equality would have not been possible without the leadership and organizing power of our good friends and Casa Azafrán partners, the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition.

Please turn your attention to table # and give a well-deserved round of applause to TIRRC.

The Tennessee Farm Bureau, the Tennessee Board of Regents, the University of Tennessee system and chambers of commerce across the state also deserve our thank you.

Tuition equality will be on the table again in January. Please stay connected and lend your voice. It does make a difference. Remember, one more vote could have changed the course of history.

But even if some elected officials, at the state and national level, refuse to come together for common sense measures that make a real difference in people's lives, history is not waiting and new futures are being imagined...and pursued...and fought for inside the walls of Glencliff High School, in the homes of each of our Escalera scholars, and in the hearts of parents who one day left everything they knew behind for the chance of a new beginning and a better future in a new land.

Such a journey by two Escalera students and their families is what a young Latino filmmaker from Nashville, Esteban Pedraza, and his partner, Aaron Pryka, bring to life.

Film: "The Bonds that Drive Us"