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All the Difference in the World

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All the Difference in the World

Carlina Tapia-Ruano '77 shares the hardships and triumphs that await America's new immigrants.

Editor's Note: The following is excerpted from the commencement speech Carlina Tapia-Ruano gave on May 2, 2004.

When I was a young child, my family fled Cuba and came to America — specifically, Central America.

For several months we were housed in a refugee camp in Costa Rica. Later we moved to Miami and eventually relocated to Michigan where my family lived in the basement of the home of a fellow church member.

I ended up growing up in Holland, Michigan, where nearly everyone I met was a Dutch descendant. In a sea of blond and blue-eyed children, my sister and I were the only dark-haired little girls, struggling with a new language, a new culture, and even a new climate.

My parents were classic immigrant parents, prepared to sacrifice everything to give their children the best possible education, and a new life.

In time, both of my parents became Methodist ministers, and so Illinois Wesleyan University was the perfect school for their youngest daughter.

I remember arriving as a freshman, in the summer of 1973, to move into Gulick Hall. I have many fond memories of my first month at Wesleyan, not the least of which was meeting my future husband, Jeff [Gunn, class of '77].

Still, in the middle of America — in the middle of Illinois — I began to feel less of a connection with my Cuban heritage and more of a desire to blend in with my classmates. As is true for most freshmen, I had no desire to stand out, but rather, hoped to fit in.



"A country that clings to the principles of freedom and democracy is more important now than ever," Tapia-Ruano told the 471 graduating seniors and their families and friends who attended graduation. *(Photo by Marc Featherly)*

After knowing Jeff for a few weeks, I had tried to warn him that I was Hispanic by telling him that I spoke fluent Spanish. I guess he didn't get it because he replied; "Yeah? Well, I took French in high school."

Over time, I have learned to celebrate my Hispanic heritage, not to hide it. In fact, it was here at Illinois Wesleyan that I began to realize that I should be true to that unique aspect of my identity.

I had an important mentor, someone who believed in me at a time of great doubt and uncertainty: History Professor Michael Young. Dr. Young took a very keen interest in me as a student, and I could only have gotten the attention I did by attending a school like Illinois Wesleyan. I am especially grateful for his support of my desire to go to law school at a time when many others said I would not make it. He served as a compass to guide me in life's next endeavor. He did not dismiss my dreams and aspirations because I was Hispanic. He not only accepted that I was a little different, he celebrated it. Through his advice and his confidence in my success, I did go to law school and have gone on to embrace my immigrant heritage by becoming an immigration lawyer.

For more than 20 years I have practiced immigration law in Chicago, and for over 10 years I have taught immigration law to students at Kent Law School. Little did I realize in those times of doubt about my future that my *own* immigration experience would be so pivotal in my career choice.

Many of my clients come from places I have never visited and from cultures very different from my own. I knew I wanted to be a lawyer, but little did I know that I would spend my life helping and representing people from all over the world.

It's strange, but working for foreigners who want to be American makes *me* feel more American.

I have the opportunity to represent people who have come to this country for many of the same reasons that my parents did. They bring a common theme to our country: a deep appreciation for our great freedoms. So often, immigrants understand freedom even better than Americans do, because they have lived in places where they have not been free.

As an immigration lawyer, and as an immigrant, I believe that immigration is *good* for America: it is our national identity, and it is what makes us strong.

These are difficult times in my field. Our laws are ever changing, confusing, and often counterproductive, especially since September 11. Unfortunately, immigration and terrorism, at times, have become synonyms.

As part of my work, I often speak for others who cannot speak for themselves, who are too afraid. I am called upon to advocate for people who do not know our laws, who do not speak our language, before a government that does not always value what immigrants bring to our country.

I believe that the work that *all* of us do to continue our heritage as a country that *welcomes* immigrants and protects refugees, a country that clings to the principles of freedom and democracy, is more important now than ever.

I have stood alongside young and frightened Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans who were arrested by immigration officials at work and placed in county jails before being brought into strange courtrooms, where they faced their families dressed in faded orange jumpsuits, with their hands and ankles in shackles, terrified.

I have accompanied Middle Eastern men who have appeared at immigration offices to comply with special registration laws put in place since 9/11, only to have them arrested by immigration officials, strip-searched, and placed in prisons to await deportation hearings.



Tapia-Ruano, above right, congratulates her son, Tristan Gunn, after he received his diploma during the ceremony. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

For me, my work has truly been a calling. And the first strains of that calling came to me here at Illinois Wesleyan. It was here that I realized that my unique identity was a *strength*, and not a weakness. Eventually, I drew on that realization to choose my work.

Little did I think, when I walked the halls of this institution, downplaying my roots, that I would become the voice for other immigrants and would even become a patriot celebrating America's identity as a "Nation of Immigrants."

Yet, with the tools of language and the gifts of confidence that I received here, I have been able to make a difference in the lives of immigrants who have embraced the American

dream and who have strengthened the rich fabric of our diverse nation.

Illinois Wesleyan took a chance on my difference, and that made all the difference.

My advice to you is to find your calling. Remember the words of former President Minor Myers: "Follow your bliss." Be true to yourself when you choose your work. *Believe* in the work you do. Choose that which will inspire you. That may mean you have to rethink ideas about your own past.

As you move from the protection of this campus to a world filled with fear and uncertainty, there will be many challenges that you must face. So I urge you, be brave. *Embrace* change, and value the differences of those around you. Remain open to new ideas and rise to meet new challenges. If you treat challenges as opportunities, you will find a rich life, a life you can be proud of.