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Wide Awake and Still Dreaming

Juan Salgado '91, the 2013 Commencement speaker, finds inspiration in his family and his education as he leads efforts to help Latino immigrants.



"I'm doing what I dream to do," Salgado told graduating seniors and their families (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Story by KIM HILL & TIM OBERMILLER

Receiving an honorary doctorate and giving the keynote speech at this May's Commencement were just the latest accolades for Juan Salgado. The 1991 Illinois Wesleyan graduate has won commendations from Chicago's mayor and the President of the United States for his leadership of the non-profit Instituto del Progreso Latino. But it was his very first job as a paperboy that Salgado recalled early in his address to 474 graduating seniors, their families and other members of the University community.

"As a grade-schooler, I delivered newspapers at the break of dawn," he told the audience. "My mother and grandmother would come to wake me up — because kids like to sleep — and my grandmother would say, 'Wake up,' and I'd say, 'I quit that job!' And she'd say, 'Well, if you had quit the job then what are the papers doing on the porch ready for you to roll them up and get them out? Get up, boy, and get to work!'"

"My mother would say, 'People are counting on you. Our family name is at stake.' They invoked the family name, so reluctantly I woke up. Sometimes reluctantly we wake up. It's okay, as long as we wake up."

Just as his family motivated him to succeed, Salgado tries to give similar inspiration to thousands of Latino immigrants annually who use Instituto services to learn English, find employment, accustom their children to the U.S. educational systems and adjust to life in Chicago in myriad ways.

In his remarks to the Class of 2013, Salgado recalled his desire at a young age to help working class communities, but that he had far more questions about such work — and about himself — when he arrived as a first-year student at Illinois Wesleyan in the late 1980s.

By the time Salgado graduated from high school, he'd seen suburban flight transform the once largely white, solidly working-class neighborhood of Calumet Park in south suburban Chicago. In Salgado's youth, Calumet Park included pockets of long-standing Latino families. "My grandfather moved there from Mexico in 1918, and we grew up a block away from where my grandfather settled," he recalled in a 2011 interview. "But by the time I graduated from high school, there were very few white families left." Salgado watched as his neighborhood's opportunities faded, and resources were channeled to other communities.

In his Commencement address, Salgado related that he had questions about race and identity when he arrived at Illinois Wesleyan.

"How come my white friends left when my black friends moved in?" asked Salgado, referring to his youth in Calumet Park. "Why am I an acceptable Mexican when so many others are not referred to in kind names, but actually in derogatory terms ... Maybe it's the fact that I went by John and not Juan. ...?"

Yet his family's long history in the U.S. and Salgado's heritage as a second-generation Chicagoan did not translate to full assimilation. In his Commencement address, Salgado said he had identity questions. "In America I was a Mexican and in Mexico they said I was an American. And I wondered, was it possible to be both an immensely proud and dedicated citizen in America and equally proud and equally hopeful and equally loving to the place where your parents came from?"



Under Salgado's leadership, the Instituto Health Sciences Career Academy prepares high school students for college success.

Salgado said he first found the tools to answer those questions at Illinois Wesleyan — "its people and environment, its promise to its students and society that unleashed my capacity ... for understanding and debate, for accepting that different paradigms do exist and challenging my own."

Wesleyan's "intimacy" also challenged Salgado. "When you are in a class of 17 students and the faculty member asks your line of reasoning, you really have no choice but to give it. When there are less than 2,000 students on campus, you have to be thoughtful and respectful. When you add the fact that I was an important part of diversity on campus, I had an obligation. There was often nobody else to deliver a different set of news, a distinct viewpoint to my fellow classmates, than me."

He remembered how Michael Seeborg, Robert S. Eckley Distinguished Professor of Economics, challenged him to find answers to his questions of identity, race and other social issues through the study of economics, which Salgado eventually declared as his major. It was Emerita Professor of Economics Margaret Chapman who first suggested Salgado attend graduate school. "I didn't even know what urban planning was, but she knew me enough to guide me." He won a graduate fellowship to study at the University of Illinois, where he earned a master's degree in urban planning in 1993.



Michael Seeborg, Robert S. Eckley Distinguished Professor of Economics, helped guide Salgado to study economics. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

For the next several years, Salgado worked for Chicago-area efforts such as the Citizens Information Service and the Resurrection Project, which focused on building communities through affordable housing, day care and construction cooperatives. All the while, he volunteered at Instituto, founded more than 30 years ago and today serving more than 14,000 participants and families annually.

In 2001, he became executive director of the Instituto, and was promoted to CEO in 2008. During his tenure, Salgado has spearheaded workforce development initiatives with private industry and universities in Chicago, including a program to help Latino/Latina residents become licensed practical nurses. "We turn 4th- and 6th-grade reading adults into licensed practical nurses earning \$24 per hour, changing their life circumstances," said Salgado.

"We've helped thousands of employed workers enter into new high-production, high-technology jobs in manufacturing. And now we've started a school (Instituto Health Sciences Career Academy) where 12-year-old kids can dream to become doctors and nurses and scientists, on their way to great careers."

Instituto was recognized in 2011 as a White House Champion of Change in Service and Social Innovation. It has also been named the National Council of La Raza Affiliate of the Year and received the Recognition of Excellence Award by the U.S. Department of Labor.

During his Commencement address, Salgado acknowledged that in spite of Instituto's successes, its mission is far from complete — much like the Class of 2013, whose journey has only begun. He also told the graduates they stand at a unique moment in history. "It's an irony that upward mobility in America is less possible today than it was when I was in your seat," he told the graduates. "How can that be when upward mobility is the ray of hope for all of our society, and especially for poor families with big dreams for themselves and their children? It (upward mobility) is what allows the most prosperous in our nation to enjoy their wealth and prosperity without fear of violence. It is what drives our economy and upholds our national security."

Addressing the many challenges in today's world takes passion and creativity, Salgado said, and he admonished the graduates to unleash their passions not only to tackle those challenges, but also to create opportunities for their own happiness and sense of fulfillment.

"Do what stirs your spirit and soul. You might not fully comprehend where you will end up, but the journey will be rewarding and the pay, not always in dollars, will be immense."

He added, "I'm doing what I dream to do. Every day I go to sleep thinking about what to do; I wake up actually doing it."

Salgado took the opportunity to movingly acknowledge his parents, Daniel and Carmen Salgado, who were present in the audience.

"I grew up with a strong sense of citizenship from my father, a Korean War veteran, who spent long, 10-, 12-hour days inside a hot furnace for 42 years." He also recalled his mother "dropping to her knees in prayer, knowing that raising six children in a country she does not know and a language she did not speak required the guidance and strength only our creator can provide. The honorary degree you have graciously bestowed upon me is an amazing gift for them."

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