



2013

## Commencement Address

Juan Salgado

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## Juan Salgado '91 - Commencement Address

**May 5, 2013**

### **"You Who"**

President Wilson, Illinois Wesleyan University trustees, faculty and staff, this wonderful, beautiful Class of 2013

Illinois Wesleyan University stirs the mind and spirit in ways that bring the best out of human beings. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Illinois Wesleyan University, a gratitude and a debt that has only grown greater today.

Please know that I receive this honorary degree knowing the responsibility that it brings, and I accept it with humility knowing Illinois Wesleyan University has had such a profound impact on my life. I will bring further honor to this degree with everything that I do in the future.

I learned responsibility and humility from my parents, Daniel and Carmen Salgado, who are here with me today. The honorary degree you have graciously bestowed upon me is an amazing gift for them.

I grew up observing my 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.

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.

Class of 2013, I'm honored to share in your celebration with you. I know how important this moment is for your parents. Today, as you walk across this stage, your parents will be experiencing a joy, a wonderful joy you have brought to their lives, a moment that marks your achievement, and theirs. So congratulations, Class of 2013, congratulations, parents and loved ones of the Class of 2013.

I'm exactly 44 years old, so I've got 22 years before Wesleyan, 22 years after Wesleyan. I left this beloved University with clarity in my purpose for living, for growing, and with so many unanswered questions about where and how I would fully engage that passion, a passion like a ring of fire that continues to burn inside me and around me in everything that I do.

I want you to know that what we all do in our lives is so shaped and formed by what we lived and observe.

A brief moment to let you that as a grade schooler, I delivered newspapers at the break of dawn. 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 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 OK, as long as we wake up.

And so I go out to the elements, a beautiful day like that, with my backpack full of papers, and guess what happened? A beautiful world emerged. My neighbors, adult neighbors, working class neighbors, white-collar neighbors, black neighbors, white neighbors – all kinds of neighbors – appreciated me for a simple act of delivering a newspaper. I learned valuable lessons cutting onions and washing dishes. I learned valuable lessons reading meters inside of people's homes. I learned valuable lessons catering to people in beautiful, elegant places in our city I may never have known, places of immense wealth and immense opportunity.

These are all experiences before I attended Illinois Wesleyan University. But the wonderful thing about this University is how I arrived. I arrived with a lot of questions. Questions about race.

How come my white friends left when my black friends moved in? Why am I an acceptable Mexican when so many others are not referred to in kind names, but actually in derogatory terms, in terms we've heard recently in the Congress of the United States of America as it relates to people like me. Maybe it's the fact that I went by John and not Juan, maybe it's the fact that I played football and baseball, not soccer. Perhaps it's the fact that I spoke English well? Or maybe it's just that they knew me. But why, why?

I had identity questions.

In America I was a Mexican and in Mexico they said I was 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. The places that rooted the love and care that you know today.

And these were just the beginning of those questions.

If you knew me when I arrived at Illinois Wesleyan, you wouldn't have known that I even had those questions. There are realities we ignore sometimes in life; it's easier to live that way. But the truth is, I came stirred up inside about America, its promise to its people and the world. Nobody really knew it.

I thought I might leave those questions behind, but instead I ended up all wound up with passion, energy and enthusiasm headed to the University of Illinois to study Urban Planning. Headed back to Chicago to make the city I grew up in a better place. A better place for me, my family and those around me.

It was Illinois Wesleyan University, its people and environment, its promise to its students and society that unleashed my capacity for inquiry and dialogue, for understanding and debate, for accepting that different paradigms do exist and challenging my own.

The intimacy here – the wonderful intimacy that you have experienced as students – challenged me in wonderful ways. 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. To not share my thoughts with others is to deny them and myself the opportunity for greater rigor and understanding, while rendering my own value and voice invisible to the world.

And then there is the inspirational faculty and staff at this University. Generation after generation they come to Illinois Wesleyan because it's you who stirs them up, you who brings their passion and energy out, your story, your possibility, your contributions, now and in the future, which they can often see, even when you don't.

The Illinois Wesleyan recruiter then, Jerry Pope, caught me at a college fair and thank God never let me go. I remember Dr. Seeborg probing me about why I asked the questions that I did, asking me to go in search of answers and guiding me into the field of economics. I remember Dr. Chapman calling me into her office, suggesting I go to graduate school. I didn't even know what Urban Planning was, but she knew me, she knew enough to guide me.

I watched President Minor Myers, God bless his soul, walk among faculty and students as a friend and neighbor, a keeper of a magnificent culture in the same way that President Wilson does today, in the same way that I, as the leader of an educational institution, attempt to do every day.

You students have been prepared to bring Illinois Wesleyan into the world. The leaders outside this university largely do not have the abilities that you do. If they did, we would not be kicking so many cans down the road, letting so many opportunities slip away and taking unthinkable risks with the very earth we inhabit. In fact, I would suggest many of our leaders need to come onto campus, sit in 17-student classrooms and figure things out, act like the whole world was 2,000 students who need to live in peace with each other. Need to live the motto and the beliefs of this great University. So as you go out with your passion and your energy and your wisdom, don't let the world unwind what you know. Don't let it unwind what you know. Make sure that you bring Illinois Wesleyan into the world.

As you search for opportunities to set yourself in motion, to bring Illinois Wesleyan to the world, you may not know which path to take or which road to travel. I'm here to tell you: Don't choose a path. Make your own.

Make your own path. Do what you dream to do, what you are called to do and what you are capable of doing. Figure out your passion and you'll find your path. My first job out of college I started as part-time pay, full time work, doing what I wanted to. My second job, organizing to help churches and faith leaders to put their faith and value into action and create healthy communities, didn't even require a college degree, but was exactly where my spirit wanted me to be.

Do what stirs your spirit and soul. Keep doing what stirs your spirit and soul. You might not fully comprehend where you will end up but I guarantee you the journey will be rewarding, the pay, not always in dollars, will be immense and the value of your Illinois Wesleyan education will become as priceless as mine has been.

I want to share a brief story. In March 2009, only months after President Barack Obama was elected and sworn into office, as a leader in our nation's immigration rights movement I was invited to join the 44th Anniversary of the March from Selma to Montgomery Alabama, to speak at the Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King Leadership Breakfast and thereafter at Tabernacle Church. To walk across the Edmund Pettis Bridge with freedom riders, singers and marchers. People like Bob Moses, who had worked to pass the voting rights act and had lived to see Barack Obama elected President. Priceless moments. Follow your passion, follow your dreams.

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.

At Instituto del Progreso Latino, I'm working to preserve upward mobility in America and strengthen our economy in the process. After all, it's an irony that upward mobility in America is less possible today than it was when I was in your seat. Poor and working-class young people, children in England today are more likely to be upwardly mobile than poor and working-class kids in these United States of America.

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 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.

Yet throughout my lifetime, the opportunity for upward mobility has steadily declined. Inflation-adjusted median wages in America have not increased and the ranks of low-wage workers, underemployed workers, no-longer-looking-for-work workers, underground-economy workers and impoverished, imprisoned workers, potential workers – these ranks have grown to unsustainable proportions.

At Instituto, we respond to this challenge. We turn 4th- and 6th-grade-reading adults into licensed practical nurses earning \$24 dollars per hour, changing their life circumstances. We take 16- to 21-year-old young kids who had dropped out of school and turn them into college entrants, more reinvigorated with education than they ever have in their life before.

We've helped thousands of unemployed workers enter into the new high-production, high-technology jobs in manufacturing. And now we've started a school where 12-year-old kids can dream to become doctors and nurses and scientists, on their way to great careers.

At Instituto we face our current reality. Reality where just a few weeks ago, as I was writing these remarks, a 14-year-old boy from my school was shot and killed, another mother and father's pain at the front of my doorsteps, present, the same pain that comes from losing anyone to unnecessary violence. The pain that so many families are living in our cities. The pain felt in Newtown, Connecticut, in Boston, in Colorado, in too many places and too many circumstances to name.

The violence amidst our homes, community, nation and world is a call to action. A time to examine everything we do and change course.

There are moments in life when we answer the call because the situation demands it of us, where there is literally nobody else there but us to help the wounded, where the child we brought to life, the child that sits in front of us today cries out to us for help and our capacity to love that child responds.

But there are other moments in life when we can choose to hear our neighbor's cries or not, to build the loving and lasting society we all want for ourselves and our families, to create a safe world of opportunity and possibility, not a world of privilege or entitlement.

These are the choices you're prepared to make, the new world you will create. These are the moments we either silence our own passion or to lean into our inner spirit.

I did not expect Illinois Wesleyan to unleash my spirit, if I had I may never have come. I came to Illinois Wesleyan because I felt at home. I still feel at home, will always feel at home.

Our work is not on this campus. It's in the world that needs you. It's the world that's going to get you. It's the world that needs you to unleash your passion. Unleash your inner spirit; unleash it now. Unleash it in the ways that you dream to unleash it. For what you have to unleash is exactly what may be missing. It's the added contribution that will help us reach toward answering our nation's and world's most vexing challenges.

When you unleash yourself, know you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Chasing after wholesome dreams causes us to dig deep inside, helping us to uncover ourselves and reveal more and more of that greatness we already possess.

Congratulations, Illinois Wesleyan University Class of 2013. You are on your way to greatness and I'm honored to have crossed my path with your path. Have a wonderful, wonderful graduation and a wonderful, wonderful life. Thank you.