

11/15/2018

**8:30AM-10:30AM WESTCHESTER LIBRARY SYSTEM ANNUAL
MEETING WLS CONFERENCE ROOM, 570 TAXTER ROAD-
SUITE 400, ELMSFORD, NY 10523**

WELCOME

- Good morning. I'm so happy to be here with you this morning to celebrate 60 years of the Westchester Library System.
- Congratulations for the work you do in communities every day.
- The Westchester Library System is a model of what strong community connections look like in pursuit of a common goal.
- Rather than working in silos, the Westchester Library System unites our county libraries to serve the greater good.
- Preparing to address you all this morning gave me the opportunity to think about the impact that public libraries have made in my own life.

HISTORY

- I grew up in the Bronx, before the Internet, Amazon and bookstores – which by the way – the Bronx is presently the only borough without a bookstore.
- My own source for books was the library— at school and in my community of Soundview.
- For the over one million residents in the Bronx, and anywhere else, the library is one of the most valuable resources for free information, learning, and support, regardless of where we come from.
- But for a bookworm like me, the library was also the place to be. A space to learn and grow and read as much as I wanted – especially after school – it was the gathering place where you had to whisper.
- I'm an avid reader. Reading has provided for me a reflection of myself as much as it helps us understand the writer or the world around us.

- Reading opened up my world to new and sometimes radical perspectives.
- Books made me reflect upon my own identity; as a person, as a woman, as a Latina and as a descendant of centuries of turmoil and change in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- The value of that self-discovery and independence of thought is something I think doesn't get much attention when we talk about libraries as an institution (I also grew up in the era of book reports!!)
- No one in this room would disagree that the libraries represented by the Westchester Library System are a gateway to knowledge, particularly for underserved and challenged populations.
- We all know that libraries help make us smarter, connect more people to one another, and offer resources available to anyone.
- As a democratic institution, libraries embody the pursuit of knowledge that makes us better citizens, better neighbors and also scholars.
- Libraries, therefore, represent for me more than just access to great books. They gave me the tools I needed to better understand myself, and live in other magical spaces. I watched a scene recently of the movie "The Namesake" (My kids were in tears....and then remembered when we had brunch at Jhumpa's house). I had not seen the movie, but I recalled my first reading – there is a scene where the family is gathered at Nick's home and there is so much food-so many options. I remember thinking – oh that is soooo Puerto Rican!! Suddenly the Indian culture was not so foreign to me.
- Why is this important?

CUNY

- I believe it is crucial for our young people to read, to hear their own voices and find themselves in the pages of books; in characters who reflect them.
- I taught at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice for three semesters.
- 43% of our students are Latino.

- Those numbers were reflected in my own classroom, but there were students of all backgrounds present: Bangladesh, Yemen, Ivory Coast.
- My students were brilliant, but it occurred to me how unfamiliar they were with literature representative of their own culture and history.
- One day, I asked my class to name a Latino author they had read in their youth. Not one student could do it.
- I have two children of my own, so I made sure to introduce them to the books I loved from a diversity of authors. I learned that day that schooling can only take you so far.
- I was lucky to have mentors to introduce me to great literature written by Latinos and Latinas, and to always have libraries give me access to those books since a bookstore was way in the future.
- I wanted to provide my students with that same inspiration – ensuring access to literature that is reflective of your culture supports the health and well-being of our society.
- I believe that when we better understand ourselves, we are more confident, have higher self-esteem, and are more whole. We see more of what we have in common with others.
- I know that access to literature helps us to understand others, and it is a vital way to bridge the gaps that tend to separate people from each other.
- I was deeply moved by Khaled Hosseini's story of dual identities in The Kite Runner, in the same way that Esmeralda Santiago's When I Was Puerto Rican reminded me of my own dual identity as second generation Puerto Rican who has never lived on the island.
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's story of the African experience in Americanah made a strong impression on me, the same way that Julia Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies historical fiction brought new perspective of my understanding of Latin American history.
- These works give us a better understanding of one another. Greater compassion and understanding is seemingly lacking these days, especially if we look at what's presented to us in today's news media.

- This is a unique opportunity for your network – to add the literature, the research, the confirmation that we have always come to this country as whole pieces of a puzzle in formation. We do not take from this country – we give it its meaning, these United States.

Conclusion

- I developed a Latino reading list for my students which I'm leaving with you today – since we are officially in Puerto Rican History Month!!
- A library isn't just a space where you borrow books or movies or work on a computer.
- A library is a place where you can start again.
- I was moved to read about your guidance to men and women recently released from prison. Because a library is not just about the content of its books and files, it is also a place where you can find humanity.
- I am proud to see a long-lasting institution continue to drive change in the community, and look forward to seeing your work flourish in the many years to come.