

National Honor Society Keynote Address 2011
Dorado Academy

What it takes to be a leader
by Dr. Sayra C. González Huertas

Good morning Mrs. Escabí, Headmaster; Mrs. Laureano, Middle/High School Principal; Mr. De La Torre, Guidance Counselor; Parents, fellow staff and faculty members, National Honor Society Members and Inductees. I feel very honored to have been asked to deliver this message on the day of the induction of many of our outstanding students to the National Honor and National Junior Honor Societies. I know, from experience, just how significant this day is. However, I must admit that this induction ceremony looks very different than the one I was in when a group of fellow students decided that we wanted to be part of the Honor Society that many other schools had. Along with a willing advisor we formed the *Carpe Diem* chapter of the National Honor Society. Yes, I know. We thought it was a cool name at the time.

We didn't know many of the norms that govern the National Honor Society but we recognized, even then, the importance of the honor being bestowed upon us; an honor that I cherish to this very day.

However, things have changed a bit since I went to high school. Everything has gotten much more intense. I realize that a large portion of your time in high school is spent worrying

about due dates, grades and class rankings, test scores and awards.

In many respects, scholarship is now defined solely by how impressive your college application is, leadership is defined by how many organizations you are the president of, service is something done to put on a scholarship application, and character is defined by how little you get caught. I'm saying this because I don't want you to feel bad if this is how you look at the four principals of the National Honor Society. I too have been guilty of this type of thinking. I do want you to realize you are probably wrong.

Scholarship is not merely studying day and night to get all A's. Mark Twain once said: "I never let school get in the way of my education." When you think about scholarship, don't limit yourself to school and academics. True scholarship is finding the joy in learning and nurturing a curious viewpoint when looking at the immensity of the world around us. **Service** is not an accumulation of hours you need to fulfill or something that will look good on a college application. Service is something you live every day. It is a gift you give of your time, your resources and yourself in order to improve the lives of people around you. When you see people arguing, do you take sides? Do you stay silent? Or do you push for calm and clarity? Whether it's in school or at home or in your social life, ask yourself: am I adding value? Am I being cocky or am I being kind? Am I being petty or am I being patient? Am I

bringing out the worst in others or the best? This leads us to **Character**.

Character can be defined as what you do if you knew no one would ever find out. You can, to a great extent, choose the kind of person you want to be. We might be born with certain gifts, but we always have choices and we are responsible for every choice we make- for everything we do or fail to do, for the way we treat people and for the values we uphold. Do you know what you stand for? Do you live by your values? There is a word for that: it's called integrity. If a teacher left the classroom during a test and you had your notes in your notebook under your desk. What would you do? The answer is a key to your true character.

This brings us to the subject of **Leadership**. Leadership does not mean that people follow simply because you are bossy and domineering. Nor does having a title at the end of your name make you a leader. True leadership is the ability to move people to change.

Leadership is not a rare talent that a lucky few are born with. While it might be true that some people are born with qualities which may facilitate leadership but leadership isn't hereditary. Leaders are made and leadership is earned through experience and hard work. Leaders are not necessarily the most outgoing or the most popular of the bunch. Leaders *empower* people and *inspire* others to share in their vision. They earn respect through their humility and commitment.

Effective leaders are not the ones who control and manipulate others. True leaders don't exert blind control over others. Leadership is not achieved through manipulation or a mentality of, "you have to do what I say or else!" When you inspire others by presenting a clear **vision** and coherent purpose you are already walking the path of leadership.

Leadership is about responsibility. Someone once said that a real leader faces the music even when he doesn't like the tune. Do you stand up for what you believe? Even when that makes you unpopular for a while?

Leaders need to believe in themselves in order to persevere. I'm not going to sugarcoat it, being a leader can be very difficult. People are going to question you, they might not always cooperate and the path can often be a lonely one. You need to be able to think, to listen to yourself, to that quiet voice inside that tells you what you really care about, what you really believe in order to know what the next step should be. It is very difficult to hear that voice while Skyping with three people, texting two others, updating your Twitter feed, listening to Bruno Mars, all while studying for your Math exam.

Thinking means concentrating on one thing long enough to develop an idea about it. It means gathering yourself into a single point rather than letting yourself be lost in the noise of everybody else's opinions making it impossible to hear your own. Remember that your worth is not dictated by what others think of you. Your worth lies in staying true to yourself, you

beliefs and knowing that you tried to be the very best version of yourself in a given situation, slip-ups and all.

A true leader has the courage to stand up and change his or her world. I don't only mean *change the world* like a big, dramatic statement. I mean looking around you and trying to make a difference right here, right now. That might mean having the courage to tell a friend that something he is doing is *not* ok. It might be making sure that the cafeteria tables are cleared after snack and lunch time. It might mean standing up to the classmate that is always picking on anyone who seems different than he or she is. These seemingly small acts make a big impact and prepare for the moment when you will take over all of this and work to make it better.

Finally, a true leader unites the group. Our Puerto Rican society is disintegrating into a mess of violence, loneliness and indifference. It has become commonplace to talk about anybody and everybody. We talk about the fat one and the skinny one. We talk about the rich one and the poor one. We talk about the gay kid, the divorceé, the “popular”, the “PNP”, the “independentista”. All expressions whose sole purpose is to alienate us and breed an environment of apathy, of simply not caring.

A few months ago, Dr. José Vargas Vidot, founder of Iniciativa Comunitaria , an organization that works with some of the most alienated members of our society, wrote a beautiful piece for the newspaper called: “Soy un pescador de

sueños”. Today, I’d like to leave you with a passage from this essay:

Nos hacemos ciudadanos cuando llegamos a tener conciencia de los sentimientos y emociones de los demás seres humanos y es ahí donde nos toca romper murallas y rebelarnos contra lo que nos separa y desobedecer las pautas del aislamiento y amorosamente acercar nuestro corazón al otro corazón y prójimo con prójimo entender el valor de la aventura solidaria de una revolución de amor. ..La revolución que nace en nuestros corazones debe extenderse a través de nuestras manos y llegar a tocar un mundo herido...Amarremos nuestros corazones con hilos de amor; acerquemos nuestras voluntades con puentes de paz; superemos nuestras diferencias con lazos de respeto y regalémosle a esta bendita tierra el perpetuo amanecer de la justicia.

I told you at the beginning that I was part of the group which named the Dorado Academy chapter of the National Honor Society, *Carpe Diem*. That means seize the day. Those words are as true now as they ever were. Don’t waste a minute thinking you are too young, too inexperienced, too weird to make a difference. This is your time, it’s your school and you have the power to make it a better place.

Thank you and congratulations to you all.