

*Buenas tardes.* Good afternoon. I am deeply grateful and humbled to receive this award. Having worked in the trenches with a lot of you “clinicians” as Max would say, I can think of many of you who should be up here. I want to thank the Sax family and the Prize Committee, this prize truly validates how far I have come in life. I also want to thank my partner Grace and my therapist, both of whom couldn’t make it today.

I also want to thank my family but especially my mother. She became an orphan at the age of eight, crossed the desert in search of a better life, and though we never had much she always managed to put food on the table. *Todo lo que soy o espero ser te lo debo a ti. Te quiero mucho ama, gracias por estar a qui.* Everything I am and hope to be I owe to you. I love you mom, thank you for being here.

Before law school, I spent my days teaching special ed in South LA. This meant dealing with a lot of challenges in engaging my students and meeting their needs, and a particular favorite student of mine who followed me around all day “pretending” to be my bodyguard. Needless to say, I thought law school was going to be a breeze. But after the dreaded 1L year, the only thing I wanted to do was run back to my students. Thanks to friends like Marisol and Samuel who always cheered me on and a new family I found in the clinics, my passions were reinvigorated.

Words cannot express how much I loved my clinical experience. I made friends, made a best friend, and everything in between. But more importantly I enjoyed the clinics because I worked on issues that are at the core of my existence. Whenever a client walked into EBCLC I saw my mother asking for help because we were about to be evicted, I saw my father going to clean slate in order to clear his criminal record. I can still see my uncle pleading the immigration people because he was about to be deported.

At EBCLC I also found amazing mentors. Eliza, Rudy, and Tanya helped me grow as an advocate. Eliza as Eliza does, was always able to calm us down before our court hearings. Rudy always made Rebecca and I laugh after a long day in Hayward. Tanya, you always believed in me, even when I had doubts. Whether it was letting me take the lead negotiating with background check companies or pushing me to apply for fellowships. I cannot thank you enough. At EBCLC, my supervisors showed me the type of attorney I wanted to be.

While EBCLC helped me increase my confidence as an advocate, the Death Penalty Clinic pushed me to face my fears. Ty, I want to thank you though we never worked together much. I feel like I have always liked you from afar. Bidish, my twin on occasions. Thank you for always keeping it real and treating all of us on the team as colleagues and not just as students. Lis, I hope my mother does not get jealous, but I care about you like a mother. I truly admire, respect and adore you. You are THE hardest working person in the legal profession, and I want to grow up to be like you.

To be honest, when Lis told me that my assignment was to help draft a brief to the Supreme Court, I started hyperventilating. The learning curve was steep, but we managed to make it work. Celia can attest to the countless hours we put in, and even though our cert was not granted, I think we did our part to clog up the machinery of death for a bit. I think Lis sensed that I was getting antsy to get my hands dirty, so she let me loose on a great group of people known collectively as the Garcia team. Team; thank you for taking me in.

The scariest thing about doing mitigation work was realizing how much my childhood mirrored my client's. I too am Mexican, had an alcoholic father, grew up in poverty, and witnessed traumatic events at an early age. Witness after witness, we not only got a glimpse into the complicated life of our client, but it also stirred visceral emotions deep inside me.

Particularly difficult, yet gratifying, were the visits Maritza and I made to our client's grandmother. Her story was tragic, yet she did not let her tragedy define her. The more we spoke to her the more we learned that the system not only failed our client, but his parents and his grandmother. Systematically failed three generations. A system that continues to fail many of us. While I am here, my client and my childhood friends have not been as fortunate.

I faced many obstacles growing up like our clients: a poor education, gang warfare, parents who were never given an opportunity to complete elementary school, and much more. But in the wise words of 2Pac, "Just 'cause you're from the ghetto doesn't mean you can't grow."

Even though law school was rigorous, the hardest thing has been accepting that in a school like Berkeley, there are few individuals that look like our clients. I know I am the exception amongst my peers most of the time and that is not OK.

I feel honored to be able to go back into my community after graduation and make sure kids like me do not fall through the cracks. By fighting back against our draconian immigration laws and reforming our education policies, we can make sure that all families have access to what everyone in this room has achieved. I may have beaten the odds, but I will continue my life journey of working for the day when a poor Chicana/Chicano entering Berkeley Law is no longer a statistical anomaly but the norm. Thank you!