

What's up Rutgers?! I would first like to say welcome to each and every one of you in this room. It's really an honor to be able to stand up here today on behalf of the Class of 2019. My name is Isabeau Paolina Touchard. I say my name proudly- as it is a symbol of my mixed heritage and upbringing.

4 years ago, I would have never imagined that I would be standing here in front of you all and be saying my unique name so proudly. But, a few courses taught by diverse faculty, speeches by incredible people like Tarana Burke, clubs I've joined and a few very long lines at Queens later, here I am. I have learned a great deal of lessons during my years here at Rutgers University. All of which, I will carry with me for the rest of my life. But what I didn't realize until now is that it has also taught me the greatest lesson of all: Authenticity is powerful.

Growing up in a small, suburban town in CENTRAL New Jersey, I often found myself trying to cover up the tracks of my family's migration. As ashamed as I am to admit it now, I was so embarrassed of my family's struggle- both financially and linguistically. Ever since I can remember, I spent countless times interpreting what my mother said in sign language into spoken language. Now, she's hispanic, so you know there were times that I had to bring the attitude- even if I was only 8 years old.

As time went on, things began to feel more financially stable. I finally got those heely's I always wanted, my mom actually stopped at McDonalds after only one beg, and I was even getting a little brother! But in the blink of an eye, that stability was swept right from under us. As I sat in the lawyer's office with my parents, I listened and watched when they decided to have my father go back to Venezuela. This decision was a gamble- we were warned that there was only a 50/50 chance of my father's return. While he was there, my mom, newborn brother and I waited and

waited to hear back about the status of his immigration. This lasted for what seemed like the longest 14 months of my life.

In that time, the world just felt so cruel. Cruel to my Deaf mother who was trying so hard to make ends meet. Cruel to my father who was forced back into a world of poverty. And cruel to me, because I selfishly wanted to be just like my 5th grade classmates whose parents could afford to pay for new clothes, class trips and cupcakes on their birthday.

Despite all of that, my parents always saw the silver lining in things. They would never let me dwell on our struggles for more than a day before saying “focus on the good, not the bad.” And more importantly, they never once made me feel like a college education was out of my reach.

Like many of you in the crowd today, I am proudly wearing my cap & gown because of the example set forth by my parents and loved ones around me. Whether you grew up with similar circumstances or not doesn't take away from the fact that you are sitting here today, obtaining your degree from one of the best universities in the country. We have all carved our own path to get here. And while we have each faced our own struggles along the way, it is important that we do not let it define us. Instead, we should use it to fuel the fire within us.

With the help of the faculty, staff, administrators and a lot of Hansel crisps later, we finally made it. With this degree, we choose what the future holds for us. Philosopher & poet, Mac Miller once said “You could have the world in the palm of your hand, but it don't mean a thing til you change it.”

It is now our choice to stay driven in the midst of today's political turmoil. It is now our choice to use our experiences here towards the greater good of humanity. It is now our choice to be

accepting, understanding and most of all, be our most authentic selves. Dean Ewell and Ildi, it is also now your turn to stop emailing us.

It's been a privilege to have shared this experience with you all. Although I know we will never miss taking an LX during rush hour traffic again, this University will always hold a special place our heart. Congratulations to the Class of 2019. We did it!