

## TURNING TO A MEANINGFUL PRODUCTIVE LIFE,

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Thank you for your kind introduction and warm welcome.

Well, I'm glad to be in the land of enchantment. New Mexico is like my second home; I came here in 1989. Before I go on I would like to let you know that my mother is here, sitting at the end of the room; so is my sister Veronica, my sister Monica, my sister Gloria. And I'm not going to introduce my in-laws[laughter]. When I was in New Mexico, I remember people talking about the Lobos, the football team, but I never cared much about the Lobos. I remember a joke about a child who was physically abused and the judge asked the child, "Who do you want to live with, your mom or your dad?" And the child said, "with the Lobos." And everyone wondered why and he said, "Because they don't beat anybody [Laughter]." So, then in '98 I went to my job interview in Nebraska and before I went to my job interview I learned as much as I could about the agency, blindness, and so on. About the end of my interview somebody asked me if I was a fan of the Cornhuskers. I knew nothing about football, American football, so I thought "cornhusker?" Corn, you know farm; husker, people working on the farm. So I just tried to make it up and I said, "well, I'm sorry but I don't listen to country music [Laughter]." So now you know why I'm not a sport narrator.

Why am I here today? Well, I hope I can stimulate thinking, your thinking; and I hope you can learn some of the knowledge we all need to learn here and there. Some of you will learn new things and some of you might say, "well you're preaching to the choir and I've heard this before." But you also know why the choir practices a lot, right? That's why you're here too. I became blind when I was getting military training in Peru in 1986; I was twenty years old. Before I became blind I was doing sports, playing soccer, martial arts, I always liked to run on the hills, going up the hills, up the mountains. I like outdoors ..., and I became blind. My family was devastated; I was devastated. I wondered what was going to happen to my life. I remember my mother crying because I wouldn't be able to get my sight back.

I started to get some training in Peru at a little orientation center, which didn't have enough resources, neither the belief nor philosophy we were talking about before. I didn't get encouraged. I remember I went there and trying to learn about blindness and I was told that "well, we want you to know that it is respectable to be blind." That sounded good. "You can work"; and I started to ask, "Well, what can I do?" And they said, "Well you can be a singer, play guitar, do massage therapy, or answer the phones, be the phone operator." Those were the options. Well, for those of you who know me, I'm not a good singer and I don't think I would be one. I like to get massage, but I don't think I could give massages all day long. And phone operator, I love to talk to people, to try to give answers and find solutions, but I'm not the type of person who lives behind a desk just getting phone calls and trying to respond to phone calls. The other option, and picture this twenty year old person who was coming out of the detective academy with military

training, six foot tall, and in Peru I'm very tall, okay. They told me, okay, then I could do crochet. But they didn't realize that maybe that was not going to be a good idea because I only have one hand. So they thought about macramé. That's the type of training I was doing; learning to do macramé. And I met a blind guy because I thought, okay, if this is what I'm going to do with the rest of my life I want to know if this is going to be a productive business. So I met another blind guy and asked, "do you really make enough money to be independent, to survive?" And he told me, "Well, Carlos, people just feel sorry and buy you dinner, buy you meals." That was the type of life that blind people were expecting. Not high expectations. And I couldn't get jobs in Peru. I tried to get a job at the police as a cryptography operator. For those of you who don't know what cryptography is, it is to try to find out those secret codes, how to interpret those. I was good on those but they wouldn't hire me because they never saw a blind person working for the police. And I didn't have the courage or not even the experience; and I didn't know that a blind person could work; I was just trying to find out what I could do.

So here I start to wonder around; so here I went to some friends and some relatives, and some professionals and I started to say, "Well if I were not blind I would like to become a lawyer." By the way, in Peru, in order to have a good job, in an administrative job or being in a leadership position all you have to do is go to law school and then you will get a job like that. We don't have others like administration or political science, those things; so if you are a lawyer, you can get good job. So I said, okay, I would like to be a lawyer if I was able to see. And they told me, yeah, you're right, you're smart, you're bright, but you're blind so you can't do it. I said yeah, yeah I can. But I feel kind of good saying yes, I would like to be a lawyer if I were sighted. But I feel devastated, it was sad to know that I couldn't because I was blind. I learned that some folks went to law school, as blind people in Peru, but they never worked as lawyers, they were phone operators.

So, I moved to America, running away from that reality, with the mentality that I could work in a shelter workshop or leading a group home for the blind. I remember... I'm going to go back to my family here for a little while, my mom one time said, "son, don't worry as long as I'm alive, I'll be with you, living with you [Laughter] ." I don't know if she said that to scare me or...but I run away as you can see. But, she really say that because she mean it. She was willing to give up her own independence or her own life and support me, giving me all her love. She love me, I have no doubt about that, but she had low expectations. So I came to America and was able to come to New Mexico under the misconception that in New Mexico, everyone speaks Spanish. They told me that Fred Schroeder was from Peru and that he was fluent in Spanish. And I say, "What's his name...Fredric Schroeder...I don't think he's Peruvian." Then I met Joe Cordova; his Spanish was a little different than mine. So I was at the airport trying to go back home and I didn't know how to say it, so I stayed in New Mexico[laughter].

Then I went to the orientation center. Well, before that let me talk because there's some folks here I would like to acknowledge. Joe Cordova gave me his house so I could stay there, he lend me Braille writer so I could practice Braille, he talked to Christine Boone who was my first Braille instructor. I remember I learned the alphabet in Peru and I studied Braille with Christine and she would just challenge me every day, "okay, here is new words, new contractions." And I thought if I do my homework very fast she wouldn't bother me with more. Well, she would give me more and more...because her

expectations were high. And I started to feel better about it. I remember talking to Joe Cordova and that's when I learned more about how to be a successful blind person. And I don't remember exactly how he told me, he said in his New Mexican Spanish and I'm going to say it in my Peruvian English, and this is what I want you guys to understand, we listen to this before in different ways; "in order to become successful as a blind person you need to have the fundamental belief that a blind person can compete in terms of equality with the sighted."

The fundamental belief, some people call it philosophy, but the fundamental belief, a foundation like the one Commissioner Wilson and Fatos were talking before. Then you need to be able to put those beliefs into practice, and then start mastering the skill of blindness, and we are talking about mastering the skill of blindness, we are not talking about Mickey Mouse stuff...mastering the skill of blindness. Then, you must be able to cope with the public misconception and misinformation about the blind. When I was talking to you about my mother, what she thought about the blind and what I thought about the blind; that's the type of thing that goes on, part of my family, my friends wouldn't be around me anymore because I became blind, my girlfriend left me basically...and it was painful. When I went to that orientation center back in Perú, they had the heart, the commitment, they wanted to teach me; but what they really did was to reinforce the fact that being blind was inferior, that being blind was being less competent, that the training that they gave me was they only made me a little less dependent, that I didn't want or I couldn't be self determined.

So I moved to the orientation center in Alamogordo after some of the training that Chris Boone and Doug Boone also gave me, and some of the discussions that I had with Joe Cordova, I went to the orientation center. And I remember this interview with Dick Davis, "oh, this guy's sighted" I thought and he's the director of the center. "Sighted people don't understand about blindness," I thought...they just don't. And just picture this, I couldn't understand much what he was talking about, I kind of studied some English while I was at Joe Cordova's house; and I started to hear this type of noise and I thought he was playing with his fingernails... and then he gave me my schedule in Braille, he was writing my schedule in Braille with slates and stylists; and that little detail changed my belief that sighted people don't understand blindness. Later on I learned that he got training like six to nine months, I think, at the orientation center as a sighted person in order to work with the blind. I saw him later on working under sleep shades, teaching cane travel, doing different things.

But I also was exposed to other blind role models. I remember being at the kitchen and Yolanda Thompson, who's a blind person too, was teaching me how to make some cookies. Now for those of you who know me, I don't usually like sweet stuff, so I was trying to make arguments, "well, I don't want to make cookies" and she said, "well, just do it, shut up and do it." And she's kind of loud, so I said, "okay, nevermind." What I remember about, I don't even remember the recipe, what I remember about this was I had to warm the oven first and I said, wait a minute, she's expecting me to put this stuff in that hot burning oven. I only have one hand, I'm blind, she's blind; but I thought, okay, if I burn my arm, I'm going to blame her. I'm going to be in my room for a whole week until I get better, right. So I said, okay, I'll do it and scream so the paramedic will come or something [laughter]. But I was trying to be careful anyways, so here I was trying to get the cookies inside the oven and I was about to burn my hand and Yolanda

stopped me there... I remember this very clearly and I wondered, she's a blind person, how in the world she knew that I was about to burn my arm. I don't bake cookies that often but she knew how to do it...she had the training. And I started to gain respect about the ability of the blind.

I remember Dave Andrews, who is also a blind gentleman, he was getting training at the orientation center because he was a new staff and I learned about social security, SSI. And I thought, okay, the check is like five hundred dollars. If I work and I make minimum wage, maybe I can make like seven hundred and fifty, because I learned one of those tricks people were talking about and I could survive, right. So I started to talk to Dave Andrews about that, and he said, "Carlos you don't want that, you can make more than that, you can make twenty dollars an hour, twenty five dollars an hour; don't you want to own your own house, don't you want to be able to do this and do that..." I was getting empowered, "yeah that's right, I don't want to live on social security; I want to get the training." So I got the training. One of the programs, one of the activities we had was to go out on the mountains and climb mountains and that was one of the first times you see me feel as free as I feel before; because I was on the mountains and no one was telling me "be careful, to the right, to the left, oh my God something's going to happen to you." So I just went up the hill, up the hill, and up the hill; and it's a great feeling. I got there first and just kept going, pretending I didn't listen to the folks saying, "okay Carlos it's time to go back." I just kept going up because I got excited; I started to get empowered.

I remember the philosophy discussions, talking about different things and then in the evenings talking to other blind folks about what we discussed before, and that helped a lot. Now, I want to go back to the foundation that with proper training and opportunity the blind can compete in terms of equality. Please highlight the word "proper" because many people speak the same language, the same words, but let's talk about the word proper training and opportunity. Let's talk about how to put those techniques and skills into practice. When I was in Peru at that little orientation center the only blind person working there was the one who thought Braille. No other blind person working there. He was the only one there maybe because sighted people couldn't teach Braille, they didn't know any Braille. So we are talking about believing in the skill and the capability of the blind. You need to be able to have successful, skillful blind people, and sighted people who believe in the capability of the blind who will challenge the blind. I felt devastated in my life that I was inferior, that I couldn't do things, and getting a good training, being challenged, getting out there with other blind folks encouraging. Now, the second part is putting in practice the skill of blindness. Yeah, you get training and so forth, but that goes six months, right. And all that support that you get there; all of a sudden you are on your own out there in the world.

I remember it was the winter I came to Albuquerque after I got my training and I asked Doug Boone to show me how to get around the community college. And he told me, "okay, I'll just do it once" and I said, "yeah, that's all I need." And it was cold, it was cold, freezing, it was windy, some snow. So he showed me very quick how to get around and he saw that my hands were freezing; I put my hand in my pocket, holding my cane that way, it was so cold; I'm from Lima, Peru and it doesn't get colder than fifty five degrees; my ears were like breaking or something. So here says Doug, "okay Carlos, wait here, I'll go to my car." I said oh good, he's going to get his car. So I started to

stand there and he came back and gave me a glove. “Okay, talk to you around [Laughter].” And I thought he was the meanest guy, I said what’s wrong with this guy, I’m freezing here, but I didn’t have any option. So, I got the glove and it fit good and I started to walk; it was windy, I could hear the trashcans going across the street, no cars... I wanted just to get home. But it was so cold, I just kept walking around. I’d get two or three steps, maybe one back; I had to walk sideways because it was so windy, snow here and there, I never saw snow in my life. Walking and walking..., and then got home, slept, next morning turn the TV on and they said that was the worst winter storm we had in Albuquerque[laughter]. But I thank Doug Boone for that because he had expectation; he was challenging me. Earlier today Joanne Wilson talk about the cocoon and the butterfly. If I didn’t have that experience with him, that experience with Yolanda Thompson, with Joe Cordova, with the staff at the orientation center that they challenge me, I wouldn’t be able to do that.

Then, I move into college; I also remember I called Doug Boone and said, “Doug, would you teach me how to get around campus?” This time was summer, so it wasn’t that cold[laughter], that’s why I called him back. And he said, “Carlos, you got training already, you don’t need me.” And again I thought he was mean. So I went to school and it was easy because I got the training already, but I needed that reinforcement. Again, I was out of the training center, but you need that continued support, and I started to be with other blind folks. You know, as a student, you have to take some math classes, some biology classes, or some science classes, different things that the orientation center don’t have time to teach you. They can talk to you in general, but they cannot teach you every subject, how to do different things as a blind person; that’s why you need to keep having contact with other blind folks. It is so important to be introduced to successful blind people.

Now before I conclude I would like to talk very quick about culture and the hard time I have as a blind person. Some people will say, well the Hispanic culture is different, the Indian culture is different; they always want to overprotect their family. I think that’s a bunch of nonsense because a Hispanic person; any person who is adult wants to work. Just because I was blind nobody has the right to take that right away from me just because I’m blind. So, whatever culture you’re from, whatever culture you’re working with, think about that. You’re blind, whatever you are. There is nothing that culture says because you’re blind you have to be protected; it’s just misconception.

I remember when I was learning English, for some of those who know me, I’m still learning English. I wanted to buy a book, Barlick’s quotations. Just to make sure that I was getting the right one, I asked the guy, “Okay, could you look what success mean.” He looked around and couldn’t find it, so I said, wait a minute, so I told him “how do you spell it”, just in case he was looking the wrong one and he said, “s-e-x-s-e-x” [Laughter] ...]no wonder why he couldn’t find it. So, I’m still trying to practice how to pronounce some words. And in conclusion, my friends, I wish you will learn as much as you can here, challenge yourself. In order for a person to be successful, you must believe, you must have the fundamental belief that a blind person can compete in terms of equality; then, put those skills into practice; with good training, with proper training, highlight that. And finally, blind people need to be an ongoing support with each other, with other blind folks; people who will keep pushing them, who will have the

expectations to make blind people believe and achieve their goals. And with that, thanks for your attention and I wish you the best.