Good Morning,

My name is Rene Jimenez; I am the Asst. Director of High School Programs at Peninsula Bridge. Peninsula Bridge is a non-profit organization that works to support 1st generation college students in achieving higher education and career goals. My life experience, career, and education has demonstrated to me how important positivity, respect, knowledge and education are in life.

Today, I am going to share with you a small but very important piece of my life. I was born in Michoacan, Mexico. Once known as peaceful and friendly land. Now, Michoacan is known as unsafe and poor. When I was born, my mother was only 17 years old. A young teenager, with no idea of how to raise herself, let alone a child. My mother decided that Mexico was not the place to find success and peace. When I was 6months old, my mother made the tough decision to leave our beautiful mother land. A 17 year-old traveling thousands of miles with a baby to reach a dream that was not for certain. After traveling through deserts, highways, and danger my mother finally reached the “Land of Dreams”. She reached a land that she thought was going to change our lives instantly. Well, it changed our lives, that’s for certain. Some people who come from other countries have this idea that once you are in the United States, stability is automatic or at least close to it. My mother was one of those people. The toughest years of her life were just beginning.

We eventually settled in Menlo Park, Ca where we shared a 3-bedroom house with about 15 other people. I know what you’re thinking, “Where did everyone sleep?” I thought the same thing when I heard about this. Although, I lived it, I was too young to remember it now. Well eventually, my mother saved enough money to purchase our own home in Menlo Park. It was the first step in her life that showed her that dreams do come true in this country. That first success didn’t come because she was in America, it came because she was willing to put in the work to give my sister and me a better life.

When I was in the fourth grade, I attended Belle Haven Elementary. It was my designated public school. During those years of my life, I was following the wrong crowd and selected role models that were only showing me how to destroy myself. I rebelled during those years because my father left our home, and began another family. My mother was torn apart because now it was truly her raising my sister and me all by herself. She stepped up to the plate, and became the best father and mother. When my father lived with us, he stopped my mother from bringing positive change in our life.

After I failed to do any school work in the 4th grade I was given an ultimatum by my teacher. I had to complete a year's worth of work in a couple of weeks or repeat the 4th grade. My mother realized that I was headed toward failure. She made a choice that changed my life forever, in many ways. I was not the best student, but the school system was failing me as well. My mother transferred my sister and me to a catholic school in Palo Alto. This was a dream of hers since before I was old enough to attend school but couldn't do it because my father said it was a waste of money.

 I remember my first day of school at a religious school. I was furious because I didn't really practice a strong relationship with God. I was afraid of change. Although, I was furious it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I found more value in education and my faith in God grew stronger as well. I was attending mass twice a month at my new school. It was the first time in my life that I understood the meaning of prayer. My mother noticed a change in my attitude and the way that I expressed my feelings. I was sharing more about myself with my mother, which was something I always struggled with. After my years at Saint Elizabeth Seton School, I was accepted and attended Saint Lawrence Academy in Santa Clara. For not liking religious schools, I sure was good at making sure I continued in them. During my high school years, life changed, and became rough again.

While I was in high school my mother and I experienced a rough immigration process. Life was about to change. My mother spent all her life savings on Lawyer fees. Not only was our legal status in the country up for decision, but now my mother was financially unstable and we hit rock bottom. I remember how difficult it was for my mother to put food on the table for my sister and me. She worked tirelessly to provide for us. Some nights my mother wouldn't eat dinner with us. This was not because she didn't want to, it was because we didn't have enough food to provide for our family of three. It made me feel terrible. It broke my heart to experience this. I felt as if I had to do something to improve our life. There were nights I found my mother crying because she felt like she was failing as a mother. I used to hug her and let her know that I was going to take care of her. During those times is when our faith grew the most. We found refuge in God. Although we were poor financially, we were not poor in our spirituality. I know that surrounding ourselves with God made us feel more positive. It made us feel like good things were coming in life. They did. A few years after we began our immigration process, a judge granted us our permanent residency. Life began to improve. Spirituality is a very important part of my family's life. There are moments when we feel we need to be closer to God, usually, those moments are negative. It is very important to keep a strong connection with your faith during the best of times, just as it is during the bad moments in life.

I am very proud of my mother and the work ethic she has passed on to me. Not only did my mother possess such strong work-ethic, she also made sure that she never caused harm or brought negativity into anyone’s life. She is a strong believer that if you live life with a positive mentality and express sincere emotion to those around you, life will reward you. This quote that I took from a man we celebrate this month, reminds me of my mother’s love and goodwill. Martin Luther King once said, “*The time is always right to do what is right.”* The time for my mother was always right to do what was right. I learned that from her.

I know that many of us here have our own story. I share this piece of my life because I know that many of you here can relate. One way or another, our families have struggled. They succeeded and struggled again. It’s something we can’t run away from but we face with courage and positivity. Challenges in life have brought me to where I am today. I have struggled. We all have struggled. I didn’t think that I would graduate high school, let alone get a college education. I had talent that allowed me to make it to the next level of education. I received a soccer scholarship to play NCAA soccer. It changed my life. It gave me the discipline and all the tools that I needed to become a successful, low-income, 1st generation college graduate with a business degree. Now, I have the ability to inspire students who are like me and who are very different from me. Students who have families that have struggled or are struggling. Just like my mother passed this message of positivity and this incredible work ethic to me, I plan on doing the same with every student that I work with.

I am going to share an example of one of my students who has a similar experience to mine, and how he stays motivated. This is a 4.0 honor student who has the potential to achieve any goal he sets for himself. This student, in the time frame of 6 months, experienced a life change that would break many people. His parents separated. His mother moved in with his older sibling. Dad downgraded from a three-bedroom apartment due to the very high increase in rent prices. Now my student, his sister, and father are renting a bedroom in someone's home. My student lost his privacy, study space, and home. It made me feel very sad and immediately wanted to do something to help. In this situation, there was nothing I could do beside give my student a safe place to share his emotions and express how he felt about all the changes that he experienced. It astonished me how positive my student was and continues to be. This student continues to receive straight A's and uses his life challenges as motivation to succeed.

I've learned that a crowded home is a common thing for many people in our community. The increase is rent cost has driven people out of the Bay Area. Last year we lost two students to relocation. I expect that number to increase this year. Picture a friend or yourself having to move because you can no longer afford to live where you grew up. It is a sad reality, but our students keep a strong faith, positive mentality, and high motivation to overcome all of their obstacles. Education and kindness are tools that we all need to use to empower our voices, and to empower our actions.

I want us to take a moment to think about these next questions.

Am I working to become the person that I know I can be?

What can I do to understand others?

Remember, there is always someone in this room you can relate to. There is also someone who can benefit from your positivity. “*The time is always right to do what is right.*”

Thank you.