

It feels good to be home. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would be chosen to address such a special group of girls like you, so I'd like to thank *Community as a Campus* for having me as your keynote speaker today, at such an amazing event in the very room where my dreams turned into reality, where some of my fondest memories were sealed.

My journey began in the early 80's. I grew up on the corner of Armitage and Damen. I remember going to my uncle's house every weekend to hang out with my cousins who happened to be all boys. We played running bases and raced each other on the sidewalks of Armitage and Wood. We also played a lot of video games and ding-dong-ditch, too. And we would watch Michael Jordan and the Bulls on TV. On the way back home from a visit, I asked my dad, "Papi can you buy me a basket and a ball so that I can play in our back yard?" To which my father replied, "Sure, mi vida."

You know what my father did? He took a paint bucket, cut out the bottom, and with the handle, he hung it on one of my mom's clothesline hooks. Then he took me to the corner store to buy me a ball, and it wasn't a basketball. Not exactly what I imagined it to be. Shortly after we moved to our new home, and my dad bought me a hoop and a real basketball. Now we were getting somewhere.

In 7th grade, Pulaski held tryouts for the girls' basketball team. I saw about 20 girls following Eugene Dismukes who walked this group to Holstein Park. I begged Mr. D to let me try out, and he decided to give me an opportunity. By 8th grade, I led Pulaski to their first championship against Jahn Elementary School at Hamlin Park in 1991.

I went on to attend Roberto Clemente Community Academy High School where I met my best friend, Awilda Rosario. Awilda was point guard and captain of the girls' basketball team and we first met during tryouts. Knowing that I was hesitant to do so, Awilda encouraged me to try out for the girls' softball team. It was the push I needed that paved the way for an amazing career in high school athletics; and formed an unbreakable bond between catcher, pitcher, and coach.

It was my beloved Softball Coach, the late Barbara Jean Martin, who helped me discover a talent I never knew I had. Ms. Martin liked my throw. So, she walked up to me and said, "You have a nice arm, can you do this?" And from that day forward, I became a pitcher and Awilda my catcher. Having no clue what I was doing, I pitched illegally all of freshman year and I only got away with it because the umpires didn't know all the softball rules.

After my sophomore season, Coach Martin used her own money and paid my way to attend a pitching camp at DePaul University. There were only two athletes of color in attendance at that pitching camp: me, and Michelle Artis from Washington HS. We made eye contact right away and together, we decided to join forces when no one else invited us into their circles. After one pitching camp, Clemente Girls Softball made history in 1994 with a record of 20-3, undefeated in our conference and 2nd Place in the City of Chicago. In 1995 my team made a second appearance for the City Title, and can you take a wild guess what pitcher I had to face for the city title? My pitching camp partner, Michelle Artis from Washington HS. And, although there were many accolades in softball, there were just as many in basketball.

I was 1 of 8 players selected to represent the state in a 3-Point Shootout in Normal, Illinois in 1993. I was also chosen for the Chicago All City Team in my senior year. My Basketball Coach, the Late Jean Bloechl, called me into her office to tell me how proud she was of all my accomplishments and shared with me my basketball statistics. It was in her office that she announced that my jersey would be retired for rebounds. The feeling was overwhelming; to feel that all your hard work would be recognized for generations.

So how did participation in sport impact my life? Not only did it keep me busy, out of trouble and away from crime, but it also taught me: how to work under pressure, how to handle adversity, how to sacrifice the personal for team success, and it helped me to understand that doing work outside of practice leads to a competitive advantage.

But let me be clear about my personal experience, everything I was able to achieve I achieved on raw talent. I never played on travel teams, I never had shooting coaches, batting coaches, or pitching coaches. So, I knew after that one experience at pitching camp, it was my obligation to pay it forward and teach all the other pitchers everything I learned. Furthermore, I didn't get here by myself, I had help from my teammates.

There is a picture of me with my second baseman in the background, her name is Lourdes Rivera-Lewis. Lourdes had my back all those years ago, and now I have hers. Lourdes was recently diagnosed with Stage 3 breast Cancer. She couldn't be here today, because she is at the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture selling candles to offset the cost of her Chemotherapy. I honor her today and I let her know that she is not alone in her fight.

I had an amazing High School experience in athletics because I had a strong support network of family, friends, teachers, and coaches. My parents believed in me and supported my athletic dreams. My Softball Coach, Ms. Martin, was

like a second mother to me. Coach had the gift of taking students who had never swung a bat, or had never thrown a football, and transformed them into champions. This phenomenal woman paid my way to pitching camp, paid the other half of my fee towards an ACT prep class, locked me in her apartment until all my college applications and essays were completed. And, when I graduated, she gave me the lamest gift any high school senior could ever receive: a Thesaurus.

So, what happened? After pitching camp, we had 2 undefeated seasons and back-to-back appearances for the city championship, my ACT score improved by 8 points, opening doors to college access and scholarships. And I was so upset when she put that Thesaurus in a Nike shoe box! I thought she was going to give me a pair of J's because that was all I wanted. Instead, I pulled out that book. And you know what? I used my thesaurus in college every day. So, if you ask me, Barbara Martin had a very profound impact on my life, and she still does. I lost her 2 years ago this month. In her will she left her rings to all her nieces. After all the rings were given away, there was one left. That ring was for me, and I am wearing it today. The ring is missing a stone, so I thought I would have it replaced. Then I thought about what the ring symbolized. The missing stone represented the void that my coach left behind, not only in my life, but in the countless lives of other students, staff and coaches who had the pleasure of her company. Sir Isaac Newton said it best, "If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants." So, to all my educators and coaches in attendance, I just want to say thank you for all you do and all you will do for your students.

I know Ms. Martin was very proud of her success, but even prouder of how participation in the girls' Softball Program has grown almost sixfold from the 10 players she had in my freshman year and prouder still that all the players on her championship teams went on to college. In an article published in the Chicago Tribune, *At Clemente they Simply caller her 'MOM'*, Barry Tempkin mentions, "She was the only female Frosh-Soph football coach in the state in 1992 and earned two Chicago Public League section titles. And she accomplished all that despite having lost her practice facility during construction of a baseball field for the Clemente boys baseball team. The installation of a new baseball field forced the football, softball and boys' and girls' soccer teams as well as Phys ed classes to use a cramped, rock-infested area. Martin watched Clemente athletes get scraped and bruised practicing on that and she had had enough. And like any mom, Ms. Martin would get fighting mad when she felt her kids were being cheated. So, on Friday, October 18, 1996, she filed a Title IX complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights alleging that the school's athletes

were being denied equal access to quality facilities. She named both the City of Chicago and the Board of Education in the Title IX complaint. "I want them to know they can't get away with this," she said. "The girls . . . the rest of Clemente deserve better. "We teach kids to live within the law, and here it is. If I get in trouble, it's worth it. I'm fighting for my kids." If this isn't a prime example of how Title IX was utilized to fight for the rights of Clemente students, then I don't know what is. And Title IX is the very reason that you all are here today.

In 1959 when Hawaii became a U.S. State, Patsy Mink was the first woman of color elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and the first Asian-American woman to serve in Congress. She was one of the authors and sponsors of the Title IX law that stated that "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

The impact of Title IX on women's sports is significant. The law opened doors and removed barriers for girls and women. And Title IX remains the only law that grants women any kind of equality in America. But the promise of Title IX has yet to be achieved. Why? Because 50 years later, Title IX advocates say that boys still get better treatment. Often, they say, boys' teams are provided nicer uniforms, play on better fields, are led by more experienced coaches, have their practices scheduled at more desirable times (relegating girls teams to early mornings and late nights), play with newer equipment and dress in better-equipped locker rooms. All are potential violations of Title IX. When girls see that they're getting worse treatment, their options include challenging their coach or principal, filing a lawsuit, and lodging a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education — That's a lot to ask of a high school student.

In high school, I knew that things weren't equal, and I thought that it was just the way it was. New uniforms were ordered for the baseball team every year. The baseball team had their own batting cage for which the girls' team had no access. There was no funding for school busses to take us to and from basketball games, so we had to rely on public transportation. We were in the heart of Cabrini Green having lost both games to the Varsity and Junior Varsity against Near North high school. As we walked towards the bus stop in the dead of winter, several members of the Near North teams followed us. When they finally caught up to us they jumped one of my teammates. I realized that Clemente could have gotten into a lot of trouble had someone filed a Title XI lawsuit. After that, we never had an issue getting a bus.

In 1991, the girls' basketball team was one of the poorest dressed teams in the league, wearing polyester uniforms. Our basketballs were old and worn and we held practice in the small gym, but never in the large gym, which was often reserved for the boys' teams. In softball, most practices were also held in the small gym and in the lobby behind the school. And, years later, I realized that Ms. Martin should not have paid for my pitching camp out of her own pocket. Instead, there should have been funding for that, but there wasn't.

Despite the evidence that sport helps create female leaders, more and more girls are dropping out of sports each year. According to the Women's Sports Foundation, by the age of 14 girls drop out of sports at two times the rate of boys. While several factors can influence girls' participation in sports, from affordability to accessibility, the positive influence of a coach or role model has proven to be invaluable in keeping girls in the sports. As female leaders and former athletes, it is up to us to empower girls to get in, and stay in, the game.

I leave you with some words of advice.

- 1. Don't let anyone stand in the way of your dreams.** – It is an absolute truth that there are people that want to see you do well, just not better than them and I am not talking about sports, I am talking about life. There will be people (including family) that will be envious of everything you have achieved. Sometimes you need to tune out negativity to move forward with your dreams. And if someone truly cares about you, they will never ask you to put your dreams on hold for their own. Sophomore year we beat Steinmetz HS 56-42 in their own gym. I hit a 3-pointer at the buzzer. An administrator came up to us and congratulated us on our win. Then she asked, "By the way, who hit that 3-pointer at the buzzer?" When I replied, "That was me," she took one look at me and said, "Oh, it couldn't have been you." From that point forward, I promised myself that no one would ever doubt me again.
You don't think I can? Watch me!
- 2. Learn to love haters.** Think about it, for someone who doesn't like me very much, you sure talk about me a lot, so keep loving me. Your opinion of me is none of my business. And I don't mind because you don't matter.
- 3. Dedicate time outside of practice to perfect your craft.** – I can't stress this enough. Find a college workout you like and execute it 3 times a week. The very best athletes put in the work outside of practice and games. And

whatever you do, give it 100% of your time and effort and finish what you start. So that you can say, “I did my best and my best is good enough.”

4. **Establish friendships with girls from other teams at other schools** – There were times that my teammates and I did not agree. You were brought together for a purpose today. And I hope you made some connections because you will see each other again, in high school or even on opposing teams. Acknowledge and support each other.
5. **Don't forget where you came from** – Come back and visit your school, tell your story so that you may serve as an inspiration to others. It gives young people hope that they too can achieve great things when you do.
6. **Never give up, never quit** – I know losing is hard. After the 1994 basketball season, I was the only returning starter my Senior year. I went from a record of 13-1 to 1-13. You have no idea how battered and bruised I was after every game playing with freshman and sophomores. But I never gave up. So, before you make a decision that will change your life, call someone. Don't make that decision alone. Talk about it, with your coach or with a teacher and if they can't help, they will find someone who will.
7. **And finally, don't be afraid to make some noise** – Maya Angelou said, “If you don't like something, change it, if you can't change it, change your attitude.” After your participation today, you will be more aware of your rights to equity in sports. Don't be afraid to take a stand. And know that you don't have to take that risk alone. Organize and involve others because there is strength in numbers. In the end the only things in life you'll regret are the risks you didn't take. And Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, said it best “well-behaved women rarely make history.”

Thank you