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A Letter to Bill Cosby

By SUSAN MARTINEZ

'These people marched and were hit in the face with rocks to get an education, and now we've got these knuckleheads walking around,' he said. 'The lower economic people are not holding up their end in this deal. These people are not parenting. They are buying things for kids -- \$500 sneakers for what? I can't even talk the way these people talk: 'Why you ain't,' 'Where you is' . . . You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth!'

Bill Cosby, speaking at the NAACP in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education

Dear Mr. Cosby,

I wish you had been at dinner last night.

I had the privilege and honor of celebrating 22 young men and women as they were graduated from high school. These students are the FACES for the Future, a three-year program at Children's Hospital Oakland which helps underrepresented minority high school students achieve their dream of becoming health care professionals like the one you portrayed on tv.

This was the second FACES graduation. Last year's graduates, the first, were 30 of the original 32 enrollees. 28 of those students went on to college, many with scholarships, all with their dream within reach.

This year 22 students were graduated -- only two young men made it through -- and the stories they shared in their speeches, songs, and poetry inspired me. Many students were considered at-risk, though not all were from impoverished economic

circumstances.

There was Marqus James, a tall, thin, handsome young man in a well-tailored suit who gave up his love for basketball to pursue something he thought less attainable, a career as a surgeon. At age 17 he found himself scrubbing in on an operation but he "couldn't take the blood." He didn't give up, though; during his rotation in the Intensive Care Nursery he was taken under wing by two nurses. He helped care for the most fragile newborns, many born prematurely, some weighing as little as a pound and a half and easily cradled in his large hands. Marqus will become a nurse, a field he once thought was for women, and as he told of his future the excitement in his voice was contagious.

There was Patricia Warfield, a vibrant young black woman. Patricia wanted to become a lawyer but signed up for FACES because it'd get her out of school early twice a week; she liked that idea, she has lots of energy and many things to do in life. After her first week with FACES she asked to stop. Her mother insisted she stay -- "You've made a commitment and you're going to see it through." Patricia stayed and came to love the program. For her senior clerkship, Patricia worked with a hospital labor and delivery department. The first few days bored her -- watching monitors and measuring the timing of contractions -- and again she asked to be relieved, and again her mother insisted she follow through. Then she saw the birth of a baby (from across the room, as close as she wanted to get), but there was the second birth and third, and many more. She's decided not to be a lawyer after all, and at summer's end she heads to Tuskegee AL to become an OBGYN.

Janderra Landry had a black hooded parka over top her beautiful graduation dress, and even in that coat she looked slight til she sang "Thank You" a cappella. During her first year of FACES, she rarely spoke -- not in class, nor to her counselors, tutors or other students -- and here she was, microphone in hand and in full voice, bringing a roomful of people to their feet with cheers and applause and shouts of "Marifly!" and "You go girl!"

I wish you'd met Luz Gomes, headed east to Williams College on

a scholarship, and Concepcion Solis, who said even though she loved the program she'd decided to become a lawyer. She added, "With a health care bent," and described in great detail how she will commit her life to advocating for the health rights of undocumented immigrants and migrant workers. Maddie Blanco was my intern for six weeks and is a future RN/mental health specialist, and Yolanda Montoya, future midwife, sobbed uncontrollably when she received her plaque and certificate. We burst in to tears with her except her parents, seated next to me, smiles on their faces. Her father held her plaque, touched his daughter's name lettered in gold, and said admiringly "I'm putting this on my office wall." She said, "That's going on MY office wall."

I know for a fact you will hear from Andres Martinez. Andres is going to be a fine physician but is already a passionate speaker. He decided to become a physician at age 4 when he witnessed his mother's heart attack, but it was when Dr. Tomas Magana, co-director and founder of the FACES program, spoke to Andres' freshman class that Andres was inspired to apply. Andres also participated in the National Youth Leadership Forum -- a sort of intensive summer camp for teens interested in health care careers. Students spend each day during NYLF visiting a health care facility and Andres found himself as a local participant amongst a group of privileged high schoolers from around the country. Andres' group visited the local adult trauma center; the other kids hadn't experienced an environment like Oakland and it disturbed them but Andres felt at home. An ER surgeon talked to the students about his work and then took questions. Andres told us, "One girl asked the surgeon 'What kind of car do you drive? How big is your house? How much money do you make?' I went home and I cried." He paused for a moment to catch his breath. He said he saw the future standing alongside him and he didn't like it. He knew he needed to be part of changing it even as people told him he couldn't.

Maybe Andres' personal responsibility is what you meant to describe in your recent remarks, Mr. Cosby. But what you didn't describe -- perhaps because you don't see it -- is that Andres and many of these teens come from neighborhoods with no full-

service grocery store, where the words and the physical environment say "No" at every turn. They attend school in portable trailers considered temporary three decades ago, trailers so moldy they make students physically ill. (In Oakland, asthmatic students miss almost 100 days each year due to respiratory attacks: they go to school, get sick, get better -- sometimes after hospitalization -- and are sent to school where their albuterol gets them labeled "disruptive" and they get sick again anyway.) They are poor people, not bad people, and it is OUR policy decisions and inaction which cause their suffering.

An instructor in the Chicano Studies department at UC Davis said this fall his students had a discussion about the lack of minorities in the class. They said things like "If they really wanted to be here, they would be. Where are all the minorities?" A young woman who'd been quiet all semester finally raised her hand. "They're in Oakland," she said, "in the FACES for the Future program. I was one of them."

She'd been at the top of the FACES class until one semester her grades fell off. She couldn't stay awake during rotations; something was wrong. It turned out she was the sole breadwinner for her family, working double shifts at fast food joints while going to school, trying to study and complete her internship. She couldn't keep up with the bills, could not feed her family, and when the electricity was turned off she could not study her textbooks. The family was evicted, until the folks with FACES found out and intervened.

She told what it's like to have unthinkable challenges instead of basic human rights. She made clear she wasn't the one minority student in class because she just wanted to be there. She got there because people reached out, repeated over and over and over "Yes you CAN." Doctors, nurses, teachers, people like me, worked with her, counseled, tutored, mentored, comforted, fed her breakfast and lunch when she was hungry.

They believed in her when she could not believe in herself.

Nobody admonished these kids for their poverty last night.

Nobody called them names or mocked them. It was an evening full of realizations: applauding the achievements of these strong young men and women, as well as recognizing the network of people who helped. There will be more graduates next year, but they need more than the desire to walk to the podium. They need my support, and yours, every step of the way.

Susan Martinez lives in Oakland. Her essay on Alejandro Escovedo is featured in CounterPunch's sizzling new collection on sex, music, art and culture: [Serpents in the Garden: Liaisons with Culture and Sex](#).