Alumni Profile: BrendaChavez

In high school, Brenda Chavez saw a civil rights attorney speaking on television. She was so moved by seeing someone standing up for someone else that she knew she wanted to be a lawyer too. It wasn't going to be easy; she had never met an attorney, and she would be the first in her family to go to college.

"My mom came to the U.S. to give me a better life," says Brenda, "and saved every penny to buy a house, even took on boarders to make ends meet. Lots of people struggled to help me get where I needed to go."

Multiple scholarships—and a lot of hard work—led Brenda to graduate with departmental honors from Stanford University, where she was in the first class to major in Chicana/Chicano Studies. Brenda then went on to earn her Juris Doctorate from Columbia University.

"My scholarship from HSF really opened doors for me," Brenda notes. "College gave me more than just the know-how for my degree; it also taught me life skills like the importance of giving back, having self-discipline, and thinking outside the box. Since I've graduated, all of those skills have helped me. Without the flexibility of my HSF scholarships, it would have been harder to get the breadth of experiences that I did."

Today Brenda is admitted to practice law in New York and California, and is an Associate with Leader Gorham LLP in Los Angeles. She represents clients on a broad range of business transactional matters, including the acquisition and licensing of intellectual property. Her clients include business startups, filmmakers, artists and Web designers.

Brenda knows that she couldn't have gotten where she is today without the role models and mentors she had along the way. That's why she has stepped up to be a mentor to many Hispanic students. She says, "a lot of what I have been able to do has been because of my mother and other women in my family who didn't have the same opportunities I did. That's what I think about when I talk with young people just starting out."

One of her tips? "Be a student of life, for life!" she shares. "You have to do what's required, but also open yourself, take advantage of all college has to offer, be well-rounded, be part of the community." As evidence that she still takes her own advice, Brenda founded Casa Coyo—a cultural arts organization and aspiring artist colony (CasaCoyo.org)—as an expression of her activism, creativity and desire to enact change in the world.

"I hope students see that if I can do it, so can they," says Brenda. "Nothing is out of your reach!"

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