

Suffolk University College of Arts & Sciences Commencement
Sunday, May 22, 2022
Leader Bank Pavilion
Commencement Speaker
Manny Lopes
Executive Vice President, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts

I have to say, that was an impressive list of people that have received this honor. Thank you President Kelly. Thank you Dean Bursik, Provost Sandell, John Nucci, and Chair Lamb, and the entire Suffolk University Board of Trustees for this honor of addressing you at this momentous occasion. I also want to thank my amazing wife, my two beautiful sons, and my brothers and sisters who are here with us today.

As you've heard, my name is Manny Lopes, and I'm honored to be your commencement speaker. Traditionally, a commencement speaker imparts wisdom and inspiration for moving into the next stage of life. But as I began drafting these remarks, I realized something important pretty quickly. I realized that I don't need to give you inspiration, because really, you are the inspiration. Look to your left. Look to your right. Look at the peers that you sat in class with, shared meals with, stayed up with in the library and online. You're sitting in a field of inspiration. By succeeding in your academic careers, despite huge challenges in a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon, you have risen to meet this moment. So today, I'm going to change things up a little bit and talk about your future accomplishments, but also the ones that you've already achieved.

I know a little bit about turning adversity into advantage. I know what it's like wrestling with challenges, emerging a stronger and better version of yourself. As you heard, I started working at East Boston Neighborhood Health Center at the young age of 18. When I left last year, I was President and CEO. And you can tell by the gray hair that a few years have passed in between. I'd like to tell you a little bit about that journey and about growing up in Boston. But I'll also tell you about my days DJing at one of Boston's biggest nightclubs, just to prove that I was cool one day.

When I was growing up in the streets of Eastie, I never imagined I'd have the privilege of giving a commencement address at Suffolk University, never mind to a cohort that has accomplished as much as you, the Class of 2022.

Graduating from college is a huge feat, and you know that. But you've done something else that's greater. You faced the usual question marks of college years, figuring out who you are and what you want to do, while managing the immense stressors and uncertainty of recent years. You had to accept a different urban college experience without knowing back in March 2020 exactly what that would mean. You adapted to virtual learning, spending your days online instead of classrooms and gathering places. You had to protect yourselves and other from

coronavirus, keeping up with changing guidelines, travel restrictions, and countless, countless, (how many can you count?) COVID tests. You likely had to deal with loved ones getting sick, and perhaps loved ones dying. You may have had COVID yourself. You dealt directly or indirectly with job or income loss during the pandemic. You faced these challenges as well as challenges in mental health and well-being. You didn't ask for any of this.

And as the pandemic brought attention to racial inequities many of us were all well familiar with, your college years were punctuated by the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, and so many headlines that marked our history books. Through the anxiety and heartache as a class, you maintained your academic priorities and navigated the pandemic while fighting for racial justice and equity, fair treatment of LGBTQ community members, for voting rights and human rights, for gender equality, and for the rights of women to make their own decisions. One last item: You, we, are not looking to replace anyone, and we won't be replaced.

You were smart to pick a university that encourages experiential and transformational learning opportunities. You chose Suffolk University because you want to be on the frontline. You want to engage and be engaged. You want to be where the action is, not just because it's exciting, but because it's where you can make the biggest difference.

This is where you ask the question: How do I meet the moment? I've often asked myself that same question. And still do.

My parents immigrated from Cape Verde Islands, a nation off the West Coast of Africa. When I was young, my parents divorced. My mother became a single mother, raising me and my four siblings in a one-bedroom apartment. We knew what it meant to do without. I knew how much my mother had to sacrifice and how hard she worked thankless jobs to keep us fed. I started working at an early age. At age 11, I was delivering newspapers on roller skates (very efficient, but very difficult to do in the winter, also.) At age 14, I was cleaning squid in a warehouse in East Boston that sold calamari to restaurants. I'm still not a fan of stuffed calamari today. But these experiences prepared me to meet the moment in ways I didn't know at the time.

My grandmother passed away when my mother was young. Instead of going to school, she raised her six brothers. As a result, she was illiterate. While my mother didn't have an education, she never let that keep her from providing for her family. First, her six brothers, and then her five kids. She was a role model in rising to meet the moment.

Growing up, I had relatives in Angola, a country in Southern Africa, in the midst of what would be a brutal 26 year long civil war. My mom wanted to bring our relatives to the United States, but first she had to become a US citizen. So at age 11, I started tutoring her for three years to prepare for that exam. When my mother passed the exam, our lives changed dramatically. We went from a family of five in that one-bedroom apartment, to a family of 22 in that same one-bedroom apartment. Yeah, you can imagine. It was crazy. For real.

At home, music became my outlet. I always loved music. Music was part of my family and part of my community. So in high school, I started my own DJ company. For 10 years, 10 years, people actually paid me to play music and have a great time, pump up the crowd with some of my favorite tunes at proms and parties and some of Boston's biggest nightclubs. You can imagine, I thought I was pretty cool back then. I'm just glad you can't see any of the pictures of what I used to wear.

Around that time, I also decided it was time to go back to school and go to college. I wanted to get a degree to prove to myself and the world that I could, despite systemic racism, despite my background. I set my mind on being a Black man with a college degree. But college was expensive, even back then. So I found a job at East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, recruiting patients for a research study. I worked at the health center the entire time while I was getting my bachelor's degree. As a kid and as a DJ, I was used to getting attention and being loud and witty. But at the health center, and as a college student, I had to figure out how to do things a little bit differently. At times, I was plagued by self-doubt. I hadn't heard the term "Impostor Syndrome," but that's how I felt. Was I good enough? Did I go to the right school? Did I speak how professionals should speak? Did I wear the right clothes? Was it obvious that I had no idea what the hell I was doing?

And these voices weren't just in my head. At many turns, I was told I wouldn't succeed. I wasn't the right color. I didn't come from the right background. Ultimately, I had to figure out how to be me, even if it meant that others didn't like me.

Let me be clear. It's OK to change and address your insecurities so you can facilitate your personal and professional goals. We all do that to some degree. But conformity is a slippery slope. You can lose yourself, which is a loss for all of us. Because [with] authenticity comes power, and with power comes the ability to effect meaningful change. This is the engine behind rising to meet the moment. As a community we need you to be your most authentic you, whoever you are. Think of it like this: Being yourself does all of us a great favor.

As I stated, I worked my way up through the health center. I learned everything about increasing access to healthcare for underrepresented communities like East Boston, Chelsea, Revere, Winthrop, the South End, and Roxbury. Late last year I transitioned to my current role as executive vice president of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, the largest health plan in this state. And along the way, I met an amazing woman, and I had two beautiful sons.

The journey hasn't been easy for me. Life is messy. I've lost loved ones. I've been arrested multiple times for racial profiling, first at age 21, when I was possession of a stolen vehicle. I rented a nice car, and I was driving while Black. Police officers surrounded the car, made me and my friends get out, threw us to the ground. They didn't believe I rented a car, even though I could produce a legitimate rental contract.

But I refused, and I still refuse to be bitter. Bitterness slows us down. Those experiences and other challenges I've experienced only made me more determined. They made me more *me*. I

still face the insecurities of being human and trying to make a difference. But adversity helps us get comfortable in our authentic self.

You're already aware that history repeats itself. We often call the events of recent years unprecedented. But the injustices being perpetrated around the world are uncomfortable echoes of the 20th century. Sometimes the ugliness is overwhelming. Sometimes the hard stuff can make you just crawl under your bed and not come out. But life is good.

Now, I'm not going to read you poetry about the beauty of suffering, but I will say: the hard stuff connects us not only to who we are, but also to each other. The hard stuff makes us stronger. And you, through everything you've endured, the strengths you've developed, the community you fostered, you, *you*, are prepared to be our next Greatest Generation.

By confronting the challenges of our times, by continuing to rise to meet the moment, you, too, will lead us to new political courage, creative accomplishments, technological advancements, and a more equitable prosperity.

As the Class of 2022, you get to write the next chapter of our shared history, and I can't wait to cheer you on. Congratulations, grads!

Thank you.

A.D.S. - Alice Darling Secretarial Services

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