

Good morning and thank you for allowing me to share this special day with you. I want to congratulate each and every one of you for achieving this milestone in your American dream. Your hard work, dedication and sacrifices in the pursuit of this dream are what brought you here today. I applaud your courage and commitment, this is your day, a day which you will remember forever, so please cherish this moment and be proud of how far you have come and what you have accomplished.

I, like you am a naturalized citizen of The United States of America and would like to share with you the journey my family and I took towards our American Dream.

I was born in former Yugoslavia, in present day Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I was just a child when my world changed in wartime Sarajevo. Prior to the war my life was filled with carefree laughter and innocence, yet all of that seemed to change overnight. My life was suddenly filled with fear, confusion, hiding in basements until it was safe to come out and the constant soundtrack of the shelling over Sarejveo. At the time it seemed as though a permanent darkness loomed over everything we did.

I was just six years old and my sister, Nina, was nine nine years old when we watched our school disappear into flames. That beautiful building was more than just brick and stone to us; it represented hope and a place that we had accepted to grow up in, to make lifelong friends in, and most importantly to learn in. As we watched our school disappear, in flames, for the first time we were gripped with the fear and the reality of war. It was then that our parents told us that they would stop at nothing to make sure that our education continued. In the coming months the books and stories that my parents gave us to read, helped us to escape to a world that was not our own and allowed us to momentarily escape the horror and reality of war. My books and stories gave me hope, and tempted me to dream of worlds far better than my own. I dreamed of a place where I could be free and safe, where it did not matter what my ethnic background was and who my parents were.

My wonderful parents, to whom I owe everything, thought me that education is the most important thing I could ever own and that could never be taken away from me. While my city and my body could be broken, my mind could not. They taught me to cherish and develop that above all else. When we were fleeing Sarajevo after my father had been wounded as a civilian, my parents took very little with them, they carried my sister and I, and their diplomas. With that small act they showed us that they valued us and their education above all else and for that lesson I am eternally grateful.

Our journey then took us to neighboring Croatia, where my sister and I stayed behind while our parents searched for work in Germany. When it was safe, my sister and I traveled alone by bus through Europe and into Germany to join them. We settled into Germany with our Refugee visas and soon my sister and I learned the language to the point of fluency. Yet we were not like all of the other German children even though we wanted to belong and had worked so hard to learn German and their culture, no matter what we did we had the stigma of being a foreigner and a refugee attached to us everywhere we went. Our highly educated parents had difficulty even securing the most menial jobs, anytime we wanted to venture outside of the city that we lived in we needed special permission and visas to do so, all because of our refugee status.

Our parents wanted a better life for my sister and I, they wanted us to have the opportunity to continue our education and to be whatever it is that we wanted to be. My parents took a chance and applied for the refugee program in the United States of America, America was a place where they had heard that it didn't matter where you came from,, that as long as you were willing to work hard you truly could make the most of yourselves and would have all of the same opportunities as those born there.

We received the news that we had been approved and that we had been sponsored by Harrodsburg Christian Church in Harrodsburg Kentucky to make the journey to America. I remember being terrified of leaving my friends and the only life I had come to know, what lay ahead was the prospect of having to learn another language and a whole new way of life. And so we packed our bags and got ready to make our journey across the ocean and to this new land.

When we first arrived we did not know the language nor did we know anyone there, yet all around us we were greeted by smiling faces, eager hello's and lots of hugs. As the months passed we learned the language and started going to school with all of the American Children. Yet this time it was different than any of the places that we had been before, we did not need special permission to go to another city or to another state, it did not matter to anyone that we were not originally from here if anything people were welcoming and curious to learn more about us.

For the first time, I finally felt safe and like I had found a place where I belonged, there was no fear and uncertainty that we would be forced to leave or that we would be harassed about our country of origin. My parents had brought us to a land where we had the opportunity to grow and make a better life for ourselves. My parents were able to find jobs in the fields that they were educated in and my sister and I were able to work hard at school and excel.

When my family moved to the United States we had to start from the beginning, my parents had not been saving for our college education like most of our peer's parents. Although it was hard to believe, we were told that if we wanted to go to school and were willing to work very hard we would have the opportunity to do so. So we did just that, my sister and I worked hard in school and rose to the top of our classes and ultimately earned full academic scholarships to attend university and law school, with my sister graduated from law school nearly six years ago and myself nearly two years ago.

Looking back, I know that I have found the land that I was dreaming of as a little girl in war torn Bosnia. Here I am free to be who I want to be without fear of persecution and I know that there are no limits placed on me because of where I come from. Today I am a very proud American so happy to have been given the opportunity to live and work in this country. Here I know that the only limitations that I have are the ones that I place on myself. America is a land that was made by immigrants and you are already a part of a rich history of people coming here in search of a better life.

I encourage you to never forget where you came from and to always be proud of your journey because it is what makes you so uniquely American. But I also encourage you to embrace your adopted country and all it has to offer. America truly is the place where dreams do come true and you can be anything you want to be regardless of where you started in life if you are willing to put in the hard work. Most importantly I want to leave you with the notion that being an American also comes with great responsibility, this freedom that we have is our responsibility to protect. We all have a responsibility to make this country the greatest that it can be so that it can continue to be a beacon of light and hope for everyone. Thank you.