

*The following keynote speech was delivered by Tony Huerta-Apanco '18 during a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day Breakfast on the campus of South Central Technical College.*

Tufah (another keynote presenter at the event) mentioned the story of Emmett Till: a young black man whose life was cut short. This is not simply a lesson from the history books. This happens, in America. Right now. Young black men across the country have their lives cut short. This is not justice. They suffer from vast disparities. As a senior, I will soon be off to college. Hopefully, I will one day graduate. And when that day comes and passes, my African American peers will be twice as likely as my white peers to be unemployed. They will earn less, and thus, have to work more. This is not justice. In Minnesota, for every white person in the state prison system, there are ten African Americans. This is not justice. Health outcomes, educational achievement, even access to quality housing are all diminished. This is not justice. And my African American friends are nearly three times more likely to have deadly force used against them in police encounters. Instead of Emmett Till, we have Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile. Too many names to list here. Mothers still confront the horrors of losing a son, to violence, to prisons, to substance abuse, to strings of injustices. No family should have to face these futures. No parents should have to bury a child. No family should be shattered and torn apart.

But this is exactly what is happening today. Not only are parents losing children, but children are losing parents. Children are seeing their parents yanked from homes, placed in detention centers, deported from this country, this so-called “land of opportunity.” Thousands of families are separated each year because they do not have legal status in this country. Illegal Immigrants? No, Undocumented Immigrants. We hear that they are terrible people, gang members, rapists, and only here to take our jobs and money. But these people are our neighbors; our friends; our co-workers; our family members. The majority of the people that are in the country, with this status, are here for one purpose. Their children. People like you and me. Not because they want land for themselves or the money. They want a better future for their family. They risk their lives to get here. Crossing deserts, riding boats, or trying to jump on trains. Why are these determined people not welcome? Why wouldn't we want to help other people? The people stuck in poverty-stricken, cartel-controlled, war-torn nations. The families, the tired, the poor, the huddled-masses who see America as that shining beacon of opportunity. If we truly are the country that we aim to be, that we strive to be, that we hope to be, then how can we turn these people away? How can we tear apart the families who reach for these opportunities?

So today, in America, we have parents living in fear of losing their children. We have children living in fear of losing their parents. We see racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia. We see a resurgence of white supremacy, of hate groups. We see leaders sowing seeds of hate, of distrust, of fear. But this doesn't have to be our story. Dr. King has shown us the power of a small group of dedicated people. This day is about those who take a stand.