



**Remarks by Honoree Dr. Arturo Porzecanski
ReachingU Annual Benefit
New York City, November 11, 2015**

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to the leadership of ReachingU for bestowing this recognition on me. We've all heard the New Testament phrase that "You can't be a prophet in your own land" – and that is often true. That is why I'm particularly honored that a volunteer organization that has its roots in my own land has chosen to recognize me for whatever I have accomplished while living for nearly 50 years here, rather than in my own land.

I share this honor with President Renate Rennie, fellow members of the board of directors, and the staff of the Tinker Foundation who are present here, because they have allowed me to use our Board Discretionary Grants Program to provide extra support to ReachingU for many years. Tinker's financial contribution looks somewhat modest now that ReachingU has greatly expanded its fundraising, but it probably played a catalytic role in the early days.

I also appreciate very much all the friends and colleagues from my 3 decades on Wall Street who took the trouble to be here tonight to help celebrate this special occasion, and also to get acquainted with the good work carried out by ReachingU.

I want to pay homage to my very accomplished parents, Bernardo and Stephanie, who passed away 25 and 5 years ago, respectively. They were very demanding of themselves, and that gave them the moral authority to set very high expectations for their children – and with the benefit of hindsight, I am very glad that they did. To give but one example, they insisted – and this was back in the 1950s – that we learn English at a time when knowledge of French, and no other foreign language, was popular and required in schools.

This entailed going to after-school programs where English classes were taught for a fee. I remember objecting strenuously time and again, and having to be dragged there. Fortunately, they were not indulging, permissive parents. You could object and they would listen to you – but if they thought they knew better, you had to obey. How can I not be grateful to them, for their vision and parenting style, when my career would have been so limited if I had not learned English early on?

And last but not least, I wish to recognize and express tremendous gratitude to my wife Nina. She is a highly accomplished economist who has been a loving and devoted partner of mine for over 40 years – and an exemplary mother for over 30 years. When I fell deathly ill 10 years ago, and was in and out of hospitals for the following 4 years with a terminal prognosis, she quit the high-level job she loved in order to spend my remaining time watching over me. She was the best caregiver that money cannot buy, and without her vigilance, advocacy and moral support, I could not have accomplished much of

what I am being recognized for tonight. And many thanks also to our children, Marc and Katia, who were so supportive during the worst years of my struggle.

I was born and raised in Montevideo, in an old, lower-middle-class neighborhood close to the city center called Cordon, populated mostly by single- and dual-family private homes, modest apartment buildings and small businesses – an area akin to, say, Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood before its recent renewal.

I am a product of the public school system, which was among the best in Latin America. I attended my neighborhood elementary school, and junior and then senior high school, and everybody would get there by walking or using public transportation. Most of my teachers had been my older brother’s teachers, or else the teachers of some of my older cousins who also lived in the neighborhood.

Usually, on the first day of the school year, when students’ names were called aloud, the teacher would stop and tell me the same anecdote that had been told to me the year prior. My mother had always wanted to have a daughter, and disappointed as she was after her first son was born, she kept her hopes up – son after son after son. And I gather that she thought that if she kept talking about how each pregnancy would surely deliver a girl, she would in fact increase the odds of giving birth to a female baby.

So the teacher would say: “Oh, you are Alex’s younger brother, right? Well, did you hear what he told us about you after missing a day of school when you were born? When handing in a note from your father excusing the absence to the front office, where we the teachers were gathered, Alex shrugged his shoulders and announced to us: ‘Yesterday my sister was finally born. It’s another boy.’” (*“Ayer por fin nació mi hermanita: es un varón.”*)

We had to wear a uniform when attending elementary school, and it consisted of white smocks which look like lab coats adorned with a big, navy-blue bow worn below the neck, where a tie might go. This has been the custom in Uruguay for about 140 years, and it was one of the many ideas brought from Europe – especially France – by a young journalist, José Pedro Varela, after he returned from studying how school systems worked there and in the United States. It was thanks to his efforts that Uruguay began to offer free, compulsory, and secular education in 1877 – way ahead of other countries.



Arturo Porzecanski in school uniform when he was 8 years old.

There are reasons why uniforms may create a better learning environment in schools, but Varela was very specific as to why uniforms should be mandatory in Uruguay: the socio-economic differences among students would be erased when everyone would wear the same, simple uniforms, he thought, and thus the uniforms would promote the ideal of democratic equality, and the recognition of distinctions based only on individual talent and virtues.

Maybe the uniforms did enable progress toward those lofty goals, but as often happens with ideals, reality didn’t exactly conform. My mother, as most mothers did, made sure that our uniforms were

washed, bleached, mended, starched and ironed every weekend, and that the wide ribbon for our bows was ironed, as well. Therefore, at least on Monday mornings, most of us school children looked like we had just come out of a factory that produced child-scientist dolls – impeccably clean, formal and proper. By the time Fridays came, of course, the uniforms were wrinkled-up, dirty and even torn, and the bows were messy or undone – as if they had been worn by normal, active children for five days in a row, which was the case.

But the point I want to make is that even on Monday mornings, Varela's aspiration for democratic equality was severely tested. And the reason is that ours was also the school for a neighborhood shelter for orphaned or abandoned girls. Their smocks were clean on Monday mornings, but they were not bleached, starched or ironed, and their bows were unironed. So those girls really stood out like a sore thumb on our Monday-morning line-up. Varela's vision of equality through a common uniform would only become true by Friday's line-up, because by then all of us were looking equally messy and worn out.

As we graduated from one school year to the next, the orphaned or abandoned girls tended to decrease in numbers, and I never saw them again in our neighborhood junior high school – never mind in our senior high school. Frankly, I haven't thought about them for the last 55 years – until, that is, I sat down to collect my thoughts for this grand evening, and now I can't get them out of my mind.

It occurs to me only now that those girls almost certainly never even went to junior high school. They probably were encouraged to find work, possibly as junior maids or kitchen helpers in the homes of middle- or upper-middle-class families like my own, where they could get at least one good meal a day and some pocket money.

So here we are at the fund-raiser for ReachingU, a foundation set up by Uruguayans living abroad who give back at least a little to the country that was so good to them, by supporting underprivileged children who are at risk of not finishing high school. The fact is, more than 90% of Uruguayan children living in poverty do not finish high school, and thus they are virtually condemned to live their adult lives in poverty, as well, perpetuating a vicious cycle.

So I ask that you commit, or renew your commitment, to this good cause by giving generously and making this night as successful a fund-raiser as possible. And you don't have to be Uruguayan, because we are a very open society, so ReachingU welcomes donations from all!

And if you need something more specific to move you and inspire you to give, beyond what you are going to see and hear next, think about those orphaned or abandoned classmates of mine who had no chance to succeed – because an entity like ReachingU had not yet been established in the 1950s. Please join me in giving their 21st-century equivalents a chance to stay in, and finish, high school.



