

*Mikaela Pozo, recipient of the 2018 Beat the Odds® scholarship, rewrote her original speech which was to be read at the 2020 Beat the Odds® celebration this past March, to respond to this moment. Below, she shares a story and a message to us all. We are pleased to share that beginning this fall, she will be attending George Mason University to major in philosophy, politics, and economics.*

"My name is Mikaela Pozo and I am a recent high school graduate. Before the COVID-19 pandemic and the events that followed it, I wrote a poem about the importance of visibility that I would have otherwise presented on stage at the Beat the Odds celebration. However, now that the world has changed drastically, I think it's more fitting that I write something else. Today, I want to share a story with all of you, for I think it might resonate with some of you.

In the midst of quarantine, after the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others in the hands of police, I had a very frustrating conversation with one of my extended family members. Through passionate dialogue, I tried to convince them of the importance of supporting Black Lives Matter. I've noticed that there is a lot of anti-black sentiment within the Latinx community and even within my family. It's hard for me to understand why there continues to be so much tension when Black people are part of the Latinx community. But even though the oppression of Black people catalyzes the oppression of other marginalized communities, people are still hesitant to support Black Lives Matter. Even if that wasn't true, isn't it our moral obligation to speak up when our Black brothers and sisters are being killed and discriminated against?

With this in my mind, I was taken aback when I was asked, "Mikaela, why are you so bitter?" after I tried to explain and list out the inequalities that the Black community faces. Her tone was one of betrayal, as if I somehow betrayed my community by caring about another. This on its own was false since Black people are part of my community and my caring wasn't betrayal at all. But most importantly, they are people and deserving of humanity.

I mulled over this question once I went outside to reflect on what I heard, of what was said, and of what I felt. Initially, I felt guilty for not approaching the conversation more calmly and respectfully. However, knowing myself, I often struggle to control my emotions, especially when speaking out about something I deeply believe and care about.

I wondered why she would think I was bitter. Did pointing out inequalities and the imperfections of this country make me bitter? Did my anger about the fact that people continue to invalidate the reality that there are systems in this country that are not made for people of color, especially Black people, by saying things like “they just need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps” make me bitter? Or did the mere fact that I criticize a country that I deeply care about for its faults make me ungrateful?

I think it's quite the opposite. I criticize and demand for a better future because I care. If I was bitter, I probably would have accepted the world as it is. Though I am upset and I sometimes find it hard to plan for a future when there is so much uncertainty, I still have a glimmer of hope. I have a hope that we can live in a future where every single person is loved, valued, and heard. A future where every single person has the opportunity to make all their dreams come true.

I believe it is our responsibility to fight for that future, to find ways big or small to make a difference. Trying to make this country and even this world better doesn't make you ungrateful, if anything it shows how much you care.

The best people are the ones who bring out the best in people. In the same way, shouldn't we try to make this world better than it is? Shouldn't we demand more of those who are supposed serve us? And shouldn't we challenge ourselves to be better?

Silence has never gotten us anywhere. We need to have the courage to ask questions, to speak up, to stand up for what is right, to be uncomfortable, and to build a better future. I will not apologize for my intensity or my passion. I've finally found my voice and I cannot and will not ever give it up.”

*Mikaela Pozo*

*2020 Beat the Odds Honoree*