

AGAINST THE ODDS

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LUZ VILLAR SPENDS HER DAYS ENGAGING WITH THE PEOPLE OF BOSTON. Her boss is a Congresswoman, representing Massachusetts's 7th Congressional District. Luz grew up in a neighborhood where only 10% of students graduate high school and go to college. Luz's journey has been full of challenges but her story, like her, is remarkable. She is proof that obstacles only make you stronger if you let them.

When Luz Villar started high school, she didn't know exactly what she wanted to study or what career path she wanted to pursue. She knew, though, that if she wanted to go to college, scholarships were a must. "I joined DECA in high school because of the scholarship and higher education opportunities it provided."

Pretty soon, Luz realized that DECA could offer more than financial aid. She found a chapter that felt more like family, adults who encouraged and supported her, and challenges that ultimately shaped her into the person she is today.

LEARNING FROM DEFEAT

Though Luz's first competition run ended at regionals, placing fourth in Apparel and Accessories, she didn't let that stop her. The following year, she qualified for the Massachusetts DECA state competition and ultimately punched her ticket to ICDC in Atlanta, but not in the most traditional way. Her chapter advisor, Letty Brown, encouraged Luz to enter the t-shirt design contest for the Massachusetts DECA Career Development Conference. "I honestly didn't take her too seriously because I was so confident I would place at states," Luz confesses, adding that Mrs. Brown even paid to overnight her entry because she finished it so late. It was the last thing on Luz's mind until the moment she walked into the Marriott in Boston and saw hundreds of people wearing her design. (Mrs. Brown knew she had won the contest but kept it a secret so that Luz could see her accomplishment firsthand.)

The trip to Atlanta for ICDC that year was only Luz's second time on a plane, and she remembers the feelings of excitement and joy, as well as the support of her teachers, that allowed her to push through the challenges she was facing. "That was one of the toughest periods of my life. I had a lot going on at home. I never told my teachers about it, but I didn't need to. They were supportive, attentive, and believed in me more than I did in myself. DECA was my escape and motivation to keep going on many days I wanted to give up."

Luz credits a great deal of her success to the things she learned as a DECA member. The most memorable moment in her DECA career, according to Luz, didn't include DECA Glass or even a medal. Instead, it included defeat. Luz's state office campaign in Massachusetts her junior year didn't end the way she hoped it would.

“ Even though I lost, it felt like I won – because Mrs. Brown showed how much she believed in me and that alone was empowering.”

A LONG ROAD

Luz was the first in her family to graduate from high school. Thanks to her DECA scholarships, she was able to attend Boston Architectural College, but it wasn't easy. She was homeless – sleeping on friends' couches and doing all she could to succeed in school. After two years, though, her scholarship money ran out.

Luz left school, dejected and unsure where to turn. Then a friend told her about Year Up, an intensive year long training program for low-income young adults that teaches workforce skills and matches students with corporate internships. It sounded too good to be true, but she applied and got in.

In 2012, just three weeks into her Year Up program, Luz was asked to be the keynote speaker at Year Up's annual breakfast and share her story with 200+ CEOs and business professionals in attendance. She was shocked and confused. He told her that the staff unanimously voted for her to deliver the speech because of her poise, professionalism and ability to speak eloquently to just about anyone. "The day of the event, all I could think about was the speech I gave when running for state office – which was terrifying. When I stepped up to the podium, though, it felt natural. All of my years in DECA culminated in that moment, with hundreds of people staring back at me. I felt confident."

Luz continued fighting in school and at work. She graduated from Year Up in 2013 and got a job at a financial services firm. She chose to continue to attend Cambridge College while working full time, stating simply, "I told myself I wasn't leaving Boston without a college degree."

In 2017, Luz graduated from Cambridge College with a degree in Business Management.

PATH TO POLICY

Luz's passion for policy stems from her own personal experiences. As a woman of color who grew up in a single-parent household and spent years in the foster care system, she faced numerous barriers. "When I started to hit road blocks after graduating high school, I became more aware of how people are systemically engineered into these positions. I faced a lot of challenges and spent many nights crying and frustrated, but never gave up on myself. That empowerment to be self-motivated I got from DECA carried me through college and I want to do everything I can to support others."

Luz had never heard of Ayanna Pressley when a Year Up staff member first mentioned her. "I always went to talk to him about my ideas and various projects I was working on. He saw that I shared a lot of the same passions as Representative Pressley and encouraged me to apply for a job in her office." When she ultimately interviewed for a job, she learned she was competing against recent graduates from Harvard, Suffolk and Northeastern. She was nervous, to say the least.

Ayanna Pressley was an at-large Boston City Counselor when Luz interviewed with her. "The first thing she said to me was 'I'm so impressed with your professionalism – in your appearance and your demeanor – at such a young age. Who taught you this – your parents?' and I said, 'No, DECA.' My mom worked back-to-back jobs and so there wasn't anyone at home to teach me these things. Where I come from, most kids don't ever see anything beyond the block we grew up on. We went to school and came home. I was lucky enough to find DECA. I got to compete at regionals and states. I got to attend an international conference where I met so many people from so many different backgrounds, some of whom I still keep up with today. DECA allowed me to build a network I otherwise couldn't have. Because of DECA, I know how to conduct myself in a professional setting."

She got the job, serving as Ayanna Pressley's Scheduler and Community Liaison for over two years. In November 2018, Ayanna Pressley was elected to Congress. In January, when Congresswoman Pressley announced her key staff hires, Luz's name was on that list.

"I work with an amazing team that gets to help constituents across the district. I faced many of the same issues our residents face, so I naturally empathize with them and work with a certain sense of urgency. I get to raise these issues to the people with the power to change them. And if there is not policy already in place, then we create one."

FULL CIRCLE

When talking to Luz, it's apparent that she doesn't dwell on the hardships or negative events in her life. Instead, she focuses on showing gratitude for those people and things that supported her through it all. "I was lucky enough to have adults like Mrs. Brown step in when my parents didn't. With every passing year, I realize how much the adults in my life sacrificed for me to be where I am today." When she was in high school, her DECA advisor was among her greatest supporters. She even received a \$500 scholarship from Mrs. Brown and her DECA chapter.

In March of 2018, Luz returned to Southeastern High School. Mrs. Brown was excited when she first got the call. "Luz told me she wanted to come in and talk to our students. I said sure! I had no idea what she was going to do but she came in spoke with our students about her story and letting our students know to never give up."

Her contributions didn't stop there. She surprised Mrs. Brown and Southeastern DECA with a check for \$500 to repay them for all they did for her.

“ I give credit to DECA for everything I am doing today. I learned hard and soft skills I otherwise wouldn't have. I'm just excited to contribute so that others can have the same opportunity.”

