Students light their candles at the 2017 A Light on the Hill for all CHaSS majors.

"If you create your own space, it will be yours."

That was the advice to students at the Aug. 29 Light on the Hill as each lit their own small candle to acknowledge the new semester and their commitment to excellent work. Each student shared their own lighted candle with their neighbor, signalling that we're all in this together.

The admonition was offered by Crescencio López-González, an assistant professor of Latinx Studies in the Department of Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies.

Dr. López-González received the CHaSS Giraffe Award in April for sticking his neck out to unite Cache Valley's Latino community and inspiring his students to claim their own roles in community activism.

This is the speech by Crescencio López-González that had all Light on the Hill participants standing to applaud:

"Thank you, Dean Ward, for providing me this opportunity to speak at this wonderful event. I also would like to thank Dr. Brad Hall and Dean John Allen who is now retired. The Giraffe Award represents taking risks, community involvement, and going outside of your comfort zone. It represents being different and going beyond of what's expected of you. I believe I received the award for all these reasons, but mainly for creating a space for the Latino community on campus and in Cache Valley. Personally, the Giraffe Award represents the hopes and dreams of immigrants (also known as pioneers here in Utah) who came to this beautiful valley in search of a better life. Before I provide you with general advice on how to take risks, allow me to explain where I come from and how I made it here today.

"I grew up in a small town in the State of Guerrero, Mexico. I was the second oldest in a family of eight children. When I graduated from middle school, I wanted to continue my education, but because we were so poor, my parents could not afford to pay for school, so my mother borrowed money to purchase a one-way ticket to Tijuana. It took me about a week by train to get to Tijuana. That's where I crossed the border, without money or documents. The border patrol stopped me the first time, but not the second time. I ran so fast that sometimes I feel like I'm still running.

"I was sixteen years old, without family in the United States and with a responsibility to send money back home. I arrived in Soledad, California. The setting of John Steinbeck's novel Of Mice and Men. A day after arriving, I started working in the agricultural fields, and two days later, I started taking English classes at night. I worked in the Agricultural fields for four years, and I also attended high school.

"The first sport I participated in high school was Cross Country. Four months later, I received the MVP award. The team had no idea that four months earlier I had practiced crossing the border. Also, I had no idea what the meaning of MVP was when they gave me the award. To make a long story short, I graduated from Gonzales Union High School in the top 10% in a class of 170 students.

I received nine scholarships and was accepted to 5 universities. I decided to attend the University of California Davis.

"In my last year in High School, I also became a legal resident through the 1986 amnesty law signed by Ronald Reagan. All I needed to do was to prove that I worked 90 days in the fields. I worked four and half years. So far, I am the only person from my high school class and the first from my hometown in Mexico to earn a Ph.D. Education has provided for me a safe space. It has kept me out of trouble.

"It has given the opportunity to reinvent myself and free myself from the cycle of poverty. Today, I would like to share with you two personal stories and provide you with general advice on how to take risks and succeed as a college student. In my first semester of college, I
found myself navigating a new system, a place with new challenges.

"The first challenge was my class schedule. I looked at the schedule and figured out that I had been placed in remedial English classes. The counselor or whoever did my schedule placed me in remedial English classes. The counselor didn't know that in high school I had been enrolled in two years of ESL, and I actually fought to get out of ESL classes.

You see, dandelions have adapted a resistance to gardeners and learned to survive in harsh environments. So, my message to you is to be a dandelion, resist like a dandelion.

"The counselor didn't know that my high school had implemented four years of ESL to stop migrant-students from attending college. The counselor didn't know that as an incoming freshman, I participated in a writing competition, and received third place in a group of more than 300 hundred students. So, I decided to drop the class, without the counselor's permission.

"Perhaps you might not identify with this story but this week, your class schedule has been handed to you, and it will probably pave the road for the next four years towards your future. Here's what you are going to hear at the beginning of each class this semester. Your professors are going to mention the words "critical thinking." Almost everyone is going to mention that critical thinking is an important part of their classes. Each is going to provide you with their own definition of what critical thinking means to them.

"Very few are going to talk about "critical action."" Behind critical thinking, there is critical action. It means to act beyond colors, beyond race, and beyond stereotypes. Critical action means to make the right decisions and to live a meaningful life. Critical action means to become conscious of humanity and to act in defense of humanity.

"During my freshman year, I went back to my high school and organized Latino students to protest their high school. We didn't change the system, but many students became aware of the school's policies. I was also banned from my high school.

"In graduate school during my doctoral studies, I decided to create my own area of study and major in Latinx Studies. There were no professors in my department teaching Latinx courses. Normally, professors at this level work with you very closely and help you to finish faster.

Going on my own meant that I was going to lose their support, but I still decided to carve my own space.

"It took me about a year to read as many books as I could. I read a new book every week and kept going. When I presented my project, I knew that it was unique, but I also knew that I was on my own. The only support I received from the university was through more work, more classes, but I kept going. It paid off when I applied for jobs. I received multiple offers, but I decided to come here.

"My message to you is not to be afraid and to take risks. One of the first things I wrote when I came to the Utah State was that I wanted to create my own space. I already knew I was different. But being different is not enough; you have to create that space, a reflection of who you are.

"Some would say that you should find your own space, but there is no such thing as finding your space. You have to create your own space. Successful people don't go out and find a space; they create it. There is a big difference between finding your space and creating one of your own. If you create your own space, it will be yours.

"This summer, I learned resilience from my lawn. I am a first-time homeowner and purchased my first home after 30 years of paying rent and moving more than 25 different times. I spent my summer pulling dandelions. I didn't know how hard it was to get rid of them. You see, dandelions have adapted a resistance to gardeners and learned to survive in harsh environments.

"So, my message to you is to be a dandelion, resist like a dandelion. There will be times that someone is going to come and underestimate your tenacity, but you have to work hard and build resilience, and over time you'll see how strong you really are.

"You're going to confront multiple situations, and you're going to be able to stand above them. So, be a dandelion, not an orchid or a flower, but a dandelion. Take risks, and surprise yourself. You might just end up winning a Giraffe Award!

Light on the Hill 2017 Gallery

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