

FR1ENDS of the CH1LDREN

Boston

A Parent's Journey with *Friends-Boston*

2017 Friend Raiser Speech

Good evening. My name is Nilsa Wong, and I am the mother of Rolando – one of the Achievers at *Friends of the Children*. When I found out about the event, I asked if I could attend and tell my story. I really wanted the people who support the organization to know what this organization has done for my family. So here I am.



I am a mother of four amazing children – Rolando being the youngest. I am a survivor of domestic violence and homelessness. My strength and unconditional love for my children are what got me through the really dark times. I was with Rolando's father for 15 years. Through those years, he struggled with drug addiction which made it impossible for us to be a family. I did my best to protect my children from all of the ugly things. But even if I put on a strong face in front of my children, they felt all of the pain that I tried to hide from them.

I still remember the day when I got the letter from *Friends of the Children* asking for my permission to observe Rolando's kindergarten classroom. I was so overwhelmed with everything that was going on; I didn't think there was anything *Friends of the Children* could do to help us. I have two older sons who needed support in school. We were stuck on waiting list after waiting list – never receiving any services. I would scream and fight with the school, and still no one would step up to help.

I remember thinking to myself that *Friends of the Children* wouldn't be any different. Boy, was I wrong! They promised to be there for me and

Rolando from kindergarten through high school graduation, no matter what's going on in our lives. Now 7 years later, I can tell you that *Friends-Boston* has done what they have promised and so much more.

The last few years have been very difficult. Rolando's father wasn't getting the help he needed, and I had to watch my son walk around with the burdens of his father's trouble on his shoulders. I knew Rolando's worst fear was his father dying, and little by little, I watched him shut down. He started to really struggle with school, and I did what I could as a mother to keep him from falling apart. Through it all, Rolando's mentor, Zack, was there for us. He would take Rolando on outings to take his mind off of what was happening. He would help Rolando catch up with homework, and go to the school meetings with me when I needed a partner to help us advocate. Because of Zack, Rolando had a chance to remember that he was just a kid.

Friends of the Children cares about more than just Rolando. They care about all of us as a family. We had issues with our apartment last year, and we lost all of our furniture. For months, we lived out of plastic bins and spent our nights sleeping on the floor with nothing to keep us warm. I worried that we wouldn't make it. Zack and *Friends of the Children* helped us find the resources to buy new furniture and start to put our lives back together.

They were also there for us during the worst moment this year when we learned that Rolando's father passed away from a drug overdose. It broke my heart to think that my son's worst nightmare had come true. I couldn't bring

myself to be the one to break the news to him, so I called Zack. He helped me think through what to do, and he went to Rolando's school with my oldest son to help break the news to him. What surprised me the most was how strong Rolando was. While I was a mess, Rolando was a strong young man who stepped up to help make all of the arrangements. He asked Zack to help him put together a go-fund-me page so we could cover the funeral expenses. He told me that he now wants to do something to help other kids who lost their parents to drug overdose. As a mother, I was so incredibly proud of my son. I know that Rolando's strengths and compassion for others are because of Zack and *Friends of the Children*.

Today is a new day, and I have many hopes and dreams for my children and I. I just had the most amazing Mother's Day, and I can't wait to make more amazing memories as a family. My children and I have been through so much, and I am so proud of how strong we are. Rolando once said to me that he was too young to see all of the things he has seen.

I want Rolando to know that he has a place in this world, despite the experiences he has had with his dad. I want Rolando to be strong, positive and have a positive impact on other people. I want him to be successful, and I will do whatever I can to support him. I also know I can count on *Friends of the Children* to help me. I want to use this opportunity to tell all of my children that I am proud of them. I want to say thank you to all of the mentors who have worked with Rolando, including Kelvin and Zack. I can't imagine where we would be as a family if I hadn't signed yes on that permission form 7 years ago. To everyone who is here tonight, thank you for supporting this amazing organization and thank you for the opportunity to tell my story.