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Hundreds Celebrate Graduates at Southwest Leadership Academy in Phoenix

Valedictorian Kitana Abbs sang the National Anthem a cappella to the delight of the audience. One of SLA's beloved teachers, Chuck Connor was honored by the class and was the commencement speaker. When asked, every student in the class indicated that they had Mr. Connor as a teacher during their high school career at SLA and he was praised for his kindness, his calmness, his constant support of students, and his ability to teach one of the more challenging subjects. Mr. Connor taught all eight years that SLA has been an approved Arizona Charter School but is moving to California to enter the ministry in the next chapter of his life.

One of the most inspiring parts of the night was the speech given by Alicia Hernandez. To understand the impact the school can have, a copy of the speech is printed here in its entirety.

"Most of you may know me as chef Jones' assistant. Very few of you know me as a student at SLA. Hello, my name is Alicia Hernandez, and I am a graduate from 2020.

"If you don't go after what you want, you'll never have it. If you don't ask, the answer will always be no. If you don't step forward, you're always in the same place."-This quote is by Nora Roberts.

I picked this quote because I was a high school dropout. I dropped out in 2015, my senior year of high school when I became pregnant with my first child. In 2019, four years and two kids later, I felt lost. I had no plan for the future. I decided to find out if I could go back to school, because I was 21 years old at the time.

Southwest Leadership Academy received me with open arms. Going back to school with two kids was one of the most challenging things I've done in my life. Many days I wanted to give up. I chose to push myself to not just get my diploma but to be a parent my children can look up to. In class Mr. Newley asked me what I wanted to study in college, so I never had thought about it. Now, I have just finished my second semester at South Mountain Community College.

Remember students even though I woke up with regret. It didn't stop me from making more of myself. As Kathryn Schulz said, "Regret doesn't remind us that we did badly. It reminds us that we know we can do better. "Thank You".