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**July 23, 2015**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Elizabeth Rivera Serves as Student Speaker at Northwestern College’s 111th Commencement!**

**[Bridgeview, Chicago-Jefferson Park & Rosemont, IL]** Northwestern College conducted its 111th Commencement Ceremony at the Arie Crown Theater at McCormick Place in Chicago. This year’s ceremony featured two students who addressed their class, including Elizabeth Rivera of McKinley Park and Valedictorian Alex Barton of Chicago. Elizabeth was a double-major in Business Administration and Executive Accounting while Alex majored in Criminal Justice.

Focusing on Elizabeth, she presented an enlightening address, emphasizing a “*you can do anything*” theme, for never in a million years did she think that as a high school drop-out and teen mom she would graduate from college, much less find herself giving a college commencement address to her classmates. She was told she was simply a “statistic” due to the choices she had made, but she was determined *not* to be a statistic, but instead, to be a positive example to her children, despite the dysfunctional family they had. Attending Northwestern College changed her – just as it had changed each one of her fellow graduates, she told them. But to get that education, Elizabeth had to juggle work, kids, husband and a household – but she did it!

Elizabeth, 35, grew up in the Humboldt Park area and attended Roberto Clemente High School in Chicago, but she dropped out at 16 after having a baby, thus she did not graduate. But Elizabeth always knew that someday she wanted to open her own business; unfortunately, that dream was put on hold when she dropped out of high school in 1996. Elizabeth describes her family as dysfunctional – her parents separated when she was 13 after she completed 8th grade, and she and her older brother stayed with her mother while her father eventually remarried and had another child. She herself was a teen mom who had to be both mom and dad to her now three children.

After leaving high school, Elizabeth’s life became all about working and caring for her daughter Julissa. She worked at many different places, including fast food, factory and office jobs. Then in 2006 she obtained her GED, a step in the right direction she thought, but just a first step. Elizabeth wanted to go to college, but she had reservations – it had been years since she had been in a classroom setting. She saw online education as a good way to test the waters to see what college was like and whether or not she could succeed at it; so she took some online classes with Kaplan and the University of Phoenix but didn’t feel like she was getting the education she needed. Then after talking to a friend who had attended Northwestern College and really liked it, she made the leap!

So with her kids in school, giving her some flexibility, in the spring of 2012 Elizabeth enrolled at Northwestern College as a Business Administration major. She was very nervous about fitting in, or what to do in a college classroom. “College was foreign to me since I had not attended school since early 1996, and I wasn’t sure what to expect,” she shared with her classmates at commencement. “I was so naive that I was worried about the dumbest things like, do I raise my hand to go to the bathroom?” which elicited chuckles from her classmates as well as nods of agreement. But her Northwestern College teachers made it very easy for her to feel comfortable, she told them. However, getting to that point – starting college – had not been an easy road.

Though not legally married, Elizabeth and Esteban met 14 years ago on a Yahoo chat room. Seven years ago their relationship became romantic, and for the past 7 years they have lived together. Her three children (Julissa, 19; Gerardo, 12; and Ximena, 10) along with Esteban’s two children (Bernardo, 12; and Victor, 8) amounted to a lot of responsibility, and work. Without Esteban’s assistance, which allowed her to be a full-time student without having to worry about working, and without her children supporting her by giving her space when she needed to do homework or study, Elizabeth would not have been able to obtain her college degree. She now stands as the first in her household, and the first in the household of her parents, to graduate from college. She further shared that her oldest child was the first to graduate high school in her immediate family, proof that she didn’t do such a bad job being both mom and dad to her! “The point I’m trying to make,” she told her fellow graduates, “is that it is very possible to survive and strive in adversity as long as you have determination.”

Coming to Northwestern College was one of the best decisions she made, she told them, much like it was for many of her fellow graduates. “I walked in as a Business Administration major and I walked out with a double major in Executive Accounting and Business Administration.” She credited her accomplishments to her Northwestern College instructors that not only taught her, but made the courses fun, and at times even served as counselors, confidants and some even friends. “I was amazed as to how many of them took that extra time to make sure I was doing well and on track. Because of our teachers and our hard work, we are here today.”

In addition to the support of Esteban and her children, there was one other person that Elizabeth thanked from the podium that day – her Aunt Nelly from Florida who had made the trip to see her graduate. It was her Aunt Nelly who had first introduced her to the business world and helped her to get her first administration job, which she loved.

Elizabeth is currently in school again working towards obtaining her nail technician’s license. With that under her belt, she’ll be one step closer to achieving her dream of owning her own business. It is her hope to open up her own nail salon within the next two years. There could be a Bachelor’s degree in her future as well, but only when she’s able to pay for it herself, without taking out school loans.

“Some of you might be just starting your journey in life, and others like myself are building a path for our children and loved ones,” she told them. “Whatever your journey is, make it a great one, and one that you will not regret.”

**About Northwestern College:**

Northwestern College (NC) is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and is a member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, http://www.ncahlc.org. The college offers focused career-oriented associate degree and certificate programs with flexible schedules and a supportive faculty. Day, evening, weekend, online classes and online programs are available. More information can be found at www.NC.edu or by calling toll-free (888) 205-2283.

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