Thank you so much. It is a true honor for me to be with you all tonight, and I want to thank the Roosevelt Institute, and the wonderful staff and leadership that I've had the pleasure and the honor to work with over the years; to the Roosevelt family for this honor, and for them for bringing us all together tonight to honor the legacy of President FDR.

I also want to take this moment to recognize that the Freedom from Fear Award, for me, is a lot more than an award to Cristina as an individual. It is truly a recognition of the courage of immigrant youth and immigrant families all across the country that have been fighting for their lives.

I am also honored to stand here in the company of so many wonderful leaders who I admire and who have been at the cutting edge of truth telling, movement building, and change making. Congratulations to all of you.

I came to the United States when I was 13-years-old. My parents, to put it simply, fled poverty in Ecuador and came to the United States seeking a better life for my brother and I.

My dad grew up homeless, and so his biggest dream was that our family would never have to experience not having food or shelter, and that I could be the first one in our family to go to college.

And so with those dreams and aspirations, my parents risked it all and left everything behind, coming to a strange land, not knowing the language, but ready to make it work for their family.

And so today, I also recognize their courage. Because of that courage, I’m here.

It took a great risk to be here, and every day since we arrived here we were fighting back discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiments, and the fear of deportation that haunts us every day.

When I was 19-years-old, I started organizing because there was a deep sense of injustice that I experienced when my dad’s wages were stolen multiple times as an undocumented worker, when my brother was stopped and frisked in the streets of New York City as an 11-year-old walking home from school. I knew that we were worried and in fear because of our immigration status. But I also knew that because of the color of our skin, we experienced discrimination, as well.
And as I was organizing, I was asked—actually here in New York City, by the City Bar Association—to share my story for the first time. And it is so powerful to be standing with all of you here today and receiving this award, Freedom from Fear, because when I was 19, I was so afraid. I was so afraid that by sharing my story, I would get deported, that my parents could get deported. But I had a choice to make. I either come out of the shadows to fight for humanity and my parents’ humanity and the immigrant community’s humanity, or would I remain quiet, in suffering and in fear. And so you all know what I chose.

I decided to share my story with one condition at the time: that I would use a fake name and that I would share that I was from Costa Rica, so that I could kind of feel protected, a little bit. So if you heard or read news about my story in the early 2000s, don’t be surprised—my name was Sandra and I was from Costa Rica. And it feels like such an honor and a privilege to be with you here as Cristina and feeling proud of being undocumented and without fear and a lot of pride.

It was our quest for justice and to build community and to build movement and to find that courage that brought together undocumented young people from across the country. And by sharing our stories, by realizing that there was so much connection in the fear that we felt, in the sacrifices that our family had made—that was the courage that led to one of the most powerful slogans that gave birth in the immigrant youth movement: that we are undocumented and we’re unafraid and we are unapologetic.

And right now, over a decade later, and after winning policy changes like the DACA program that protected over a million young people from deportation—people like my own brother Jonathan who is 23—we find ourselves in a moment where this administration has terminated the DACA program, putting my brother’s life and the lives of thousands of young people at risk of deportation.

In probably the most aggressive immigration enforcement era that we have faced as a country, where we see ICE agents—paid by our own taxes—who show up at churches to rip families apart, show up at schools and detain parents when they’re dropping their kids off from school, and wait for people to get out of their homes as they head to work to detain them and put them in detention camps. That’s the America that we live in.

The America that we live in also has nurtured strong social movements like the immigrant youth movement that I have the privilege to be part of. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, by the AIDS movement, by the LGBTQ movement—even in this moment, we have young people from all across the country who are meeting with senators and members of Congress in Washington DC, pushing them to pass a permanent solution to protect undocumented young people, and that bipartisan solution is called the DREAM Act.
And it’s funny, but not so funny sometimes, that I remember that as a 19-year-old I was pushing for the DREAM Act. More than a decade later, I find myself pushing for the same piece of legislation that once was the hope and what engaged me in organizing.

But as Maria said: We are here to stay. We are undocumented. We are unafraid. And even in this difficult moment, we will continue to fight for the rights of immigrant youth and our families.

And the last thing that I will share with you is that I know that we cannot do this alone. Because although we have built a huge support from different sectors, from CEOs and Democrats and Republicans, we cannot do this alone. And we need all of us, all people of conscience, to stand together and to fight against extremists that our running, unfortunately, the White House and many government agencies across the country.

Because the reality is that our fates are bound together. Whether it is us fighting back the racist sentiment and agenda that is trying to wipe out immigrants like me and my parents of this country, or whether it is the attacks on Black people or women or Muslims or refugees or LGBTQ people.

Our fates are intertwined, and this moment calls for all of us to overcome fear and to come together and to answer the question: Which side are you on?

And I know that all of us here stand on the side of justice. So, I invite you to experience freedom from fear with me tonight. Because if we are free from fear, we will find true liberation and community, and we will be able to create change.

Because getting there, it will get all of us. And it will mean that we will have to overcome fear, as well as our cynicism, and to remain hopeful; hopeful in the foundational values of this country.

Because I tell you one thing: Trump and many people across the country may say that I am not an American and that I don’t belong here. And to be honest, I don’t need a piece of paper to legitimate that for me, because the very reason that I organize for values of justice and freedom and pursuit of happiness is because I believe in the foundational dream and values of this nation.

And I know that with all of you and us together, one day, we will get there.

Thank you.