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Match Charter Public High School valedictorian stands up when she sees injustice

By Jeremy C. Fox Globe Correspondent, July 9, 2022



Charlotte Cano Polanco has been accepted to her “dream school,” Stanford University in California. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

When Charlotte Cano Polanco sees an injustice, she takes action.

Charlotte, 18, graduated last month as the valedictorian of Match Charter Public High School in Boston and was one of a select few Match students chosen last year to spend the spring studying at a private school in the Vermont mountains.

But in Vermont, Charlotte, who came to the United States from her native Dominican Republic at age 5, saw that she and other students of color were a small minority. She felt that white students and teachers engaged in microaggressions that made her and others uncomfortable.

“My whole life I’ve been at Match, so it’s just people who look like me,” she said. “It was a really challenging experience because we were surrounded by whiteness. ... The whole curriculum was set up for an ideal student who’s white, rich, who went to private school.”

Charlotte could have just written an angry journal entry or complained in long texts to friends back home. But instead, she demanded change. She worked with other students of color to organize a peaceful protest and to speak out about their experiences at a faculty meeting.

“I’m a really anxious person, so just doing that was so scary,” Charlotte said. “I had to come out of my comfort zone.”

In interviews, educators at Match drew on the protest as an example of Charlotte’s character.

“I feel like a lot of other students may have buckled, because it was racism coming from authority figures,” said Jamica Legrand, Charlotte’s former English teacher and soccer coach. “She wouldn’t allow herself to do that. Instead, we would talk, and she would think of ways that she could help the other students that were also feeling that way to speak up.”

Ashley LaCavalla, director of the high school’s college and career office, said Match has changed its policies on sending students to study at other institutions based on what it learned from Charlotte and another student who participated in the Vermont program with her.

“We’re more strict about who we’re recommending these schools to, because they definitely were doing our students a disservice,” LaCavalla said. “It kind of changed our entire approach to semester schools.”

Charlotte's mother, 41-year-old Yira Polanco, said her daughter learned to be strong and self-reliant by watching the struggles and the sacrifices her parents made as immigrants.

"She sees that we are working hard for her and her brothers," Polanco said. "She's so smart. ... She wants to do something better for [herself] and for everybody."

Now, Polanco said, her daughter is inspiring others to work harder — including her younger brothers, "and me, and her father, everybody in the family."

When Charlotte was about a year and a half old, her parents came to the United States to find work, while she remained in the Dominican Republic with her grandmother, she said.

She was reunited with her parents in Boston when she was about 5, and the family grew with the births of her brothers, Ian, 15, and Ethan, 12. But when Charlotte was in fourth grade, her parents separated, and she wound up living for three years with her mother and brothers in a rundown apartment that was part of a family shelter.

"Most of the time, our lights and our heat didn't function," Charlotte recalled. "I remember there were so many times, especially in the winter, when we had to sleep with the oven open so we could get that heat, since the heater wasn't working."

The family got their meals from church food pantries and walked a half-hour each morning to the school bus stop, even on the coldest winter days. When they couldn't afford the storage unit where they had placed family photos and important documents, their belongings were tossed in the trash, she said.

Charlotte's mother was unemployed when the family lost their home, but later she worked as a waitress, then as a delivery driver for an online retailer, and now as a baggage handler at Logan International Airport. While she worked long hours, Charlotte was often at home in Mattapan acting as a second mother to her brothers: preparing their meals, playing with them, and teaching them life lessons.

And Charlotte didn't let her circumstances dictate her academic trajectory. In the classroom — and on the soccer field — she understood new lessons quickly and then would step up and help her peers understand, Legrand said.

“As a coach or as a teacher, when you don’t have to tell a student or a player to do something, and they automatically pick up on what it is that they need to do, sometimes it makes me question, ‘Well, do they need me?’” she said. “But then also, it makes me really proud, because I’m like, ‘You don’t need me, and my whole job is preparing you for a world where you don’t necessarily need people to be successful.’”

Despite being known at Match for her advocacy around women’s rights and racial equality, Charlotte is an unlikely activist. In the classroom, she rarely draws attention to herself. But when she feels that anyone is being treated unfairly, she sheds her placid façade and reveals her tenacity.

“Even when there was an issue happening this year with one of their teachers, she helped the other students in organizing a peaceful protest,” LaCavalla said. “She seems quiet, but there’s a lot going on. Maybe it’s like the definition of an introvert.”

Charlotte has been accepted to her “dream school,” Stanford University in California, and she is counting down the days until she heads west for a new and very different chapter of her life. She is interested in studying neuroscience and in working to increase access to quality health care for communities of color and immigrant populations.

Her mother is proud and excited for her only daughter to have this educational opportunity, but she has mixed feelings, at best, about her living a continent away.

“I cry every single day,” Polanco said. “She is the best part of me.”