

Building Our Future Together

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Ambassador Howard Gutman
Serge Cruz High School
Molenbeek, Belgium

Watch the videos:

- [Serge Cruz Welcomes U.S. ambassador Howard Gutman](#)
- [Serge Cruz classroom discussion with Ambassador Gutman](#)

Watch the picture gallery

Thanks so much Principal Halleman for that wonderful introduction.

As many of you know, in my first 8 months as Ambassador in Belgium, I have been no stranger to this high school, to Molenbeek, to recent immigrant and first-generation communities, to the Muslim communities in Belgium. My first speech was in Charleroi, to folks much like this group. We had an Iftar in my home with many of you to celebrate Ramadan. Several of you came to my home – along with the Princess's daughter and the Minister of Defense's sons and many other students – for the premiere of the movie FAME. We held a big event at the Community Center in Molenbeek with the actors from FAME and I am going next week to Cureghem in Anderlecht. So the question arises: Why are we spending so much time together?

And I have given many important talks and speeches in Belgium. Last week, I introduced the Vice-President of the United States Joe Biden. At the Father Damien events, I had a speech to thousands of Belgians including the King and the Prime Minister. I have talked to most of the leading business organizations in Belgium, to the Harvard and Yale alumni, at Leuven and Louvain, and made dozens of other addresses. Yet this is without doubt one of the most important speeches or talks I will give in Belgium. You are among the most important audiences I will meet. So the second question arises: How could that be true? Why is a multicultural group of high school students among the most important audiences for a busy United States Ambassador?

The answer to these two questions- why are we spending so much time together and why is this audience so important- is that we have a future to build together- an important part of the future for the world. And we have so many past mistakes of my generation to overcome together. This time, in building the future together now, we have to get it right.

For far too long, my generation has built a world with far too much distrust between people of different nationalities, between East and West. Distrust and misunderstanding has sometimes bred violence and violence has led to greater violence and war. In some countries today all over the globe, some people make judgments about foreigners whom they have never met and in other countries some people make judgments about neighbors whom they see daily based primarily on name, skin color, ethnic background or religion.

Can we not do better?

This group – at Serge Cruz School, right in this room – has a unique opportunity to do better. To lead in building a more peaceful and prosperous society based on our shared brotherhood, rather than focusing on our individual differences. To unite, when others try to divide. To foster hope when others urge hate. To work among yourselves, to work with your neighbors through Belgium, with your neighbors in Europe, with your fellow world citizens in Morocco, Turkey, Rwanda, Algeria, Israel, Canada, the United States, and the rest of the globe to build that more peaceful and prosperous planet.

This group has that unique opportunity because you have roots in regions around the globe, and many in the East, and you live together in the West. By spanning many cultures and by bridging from an old generation to a new one, you are all ambassadors among people of the World, between East and West and between the past and the future. By your actions, by your words, you have the ability to build a better future and a better world.

How you help build that better future for yourselves and for us all, how you correct the mistakes of my generation is easy to describe, but admittedly harder to achieve. The range of possible contributions is quite broad. At a minimum, all of you can foster that new world by studying hard, getting a steady job, joining the community while always preserving your identity, and being a productive member of our society in practice. You can simply by your actions be a role model for others. We have choices in life – every one of us – we can either be part of the problem, or part of the solution.

Some can perhaps do far more. Become an advocate for mutual understanding, for social progress, for a world of shared justice and mutual respect. You can not only be part of the solution, you can shape that solution, indeed you can lead it.

But isn't it hard? Can we really do it? It takes work, but the truth is that that is in some respects the easiest and certainly most fun path.

Surely that is easy for me to say. What does an American ambassador know about mothers who want to work two jobs to support their families but cannot find one? What does a fancy lawyer know about discrimination and prejudice? About knocking on doors that no one wants to answer?

Well, I know a story of a boy whose father was an illegal immigrant. When his father came West, the father did not speak a word of the local language. The boy lived in a 2 bedroom, 1 bathroom apartment that he shared with his sister, his parents and his grandmother. His father died when the boy was 16, causing the boy to take public transportation home from high school for an hour and a half and then go to work after school cleaning tables in a restaurant and washing dishes.

I know that the boy studied hard, excelled in public school and made the best college. He waited tables every weekend to pay for it. And again, he studied hard and graduated at the top of his class in college. To become the first one in the neighborhood ever to go to Harvard Law School, the top of the pyramid. And I know that that boy became a leading lawyer and an advisor to Governors, Senators and even Presidents. He became an Ambassador.

That boy is me. But it could well be you. Every one of you.

We all know the story of a black kid born into a country where parts of the country did not let black folks ride on the bus, or use the same bathrooms. He grew up without a dad, raised often by grandparents. We know that boy studied hard and became a professor. But he understood people – he inspired all regardless of race or background. Is the next Barack Obama in this room?

And if algebra and trigonometry begin to frazzle your brain, college and law school need not be the only route to personal success and social contribution. I know florists and farmers, mechanics and military, and so much more, who give back so much more than they take. Who support families and friends and leave the planet a far better place than they found it.

Belgium and Europe offer some amazing opportunities and present some difficult challenges. I have met minority leaders of every stripe in governments across Belgium. And every one of you can attend Leuven or Louvain-la-Neuve or any of the many wonderful universities for free. So wash some dishes, wash some cars, sell waffles, while you walk into the future.

There are difficult challenges. Hazardous traps await at every step. First, as long as there are two people on this planet who differ, racial prejudice will always exist. But it never prospers. Be better than it. There will be peer pressure-to hate others; to take easy ways out. And sometimes those peers in narrow worlds may look like they do prosper. Broaden your sights and it is apparent that hate, indifference, laziness or illegality, are just tools to protect the ego of those who can never truly succeed.

There are pressures all around. The high road always leads right over them. Tension between the police and the neighborhood? Become part of the solution by building a better bridge—volunteer to work with the police to understand the neighborhood.

Teach others to celebrate our diversity while adding to the greater good of the society in which you live. Study language: English, French, and Flemish. Volunteer to teach others. And wash some dishes along the way.

Thanks so much and all the best.