

2016 Free Minds Speech
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"If it was easy, everybody would be doing it."

Hello and Hola! My name is Shirley Jane Treviño. I am a Native Austinite and graduated from McCallum High School in 1978. Right now, at this very moment, I am exactly where I want to be. I am honored and extremely proud to be standing here as class speaker for the 2016 Free Minds graduation and ten year celebration. It is thrilling to see how everyone here took time out of their schedules to join us on this occasion. We sincerely thank you from the bottom of our hard working hearts and souls.

How did we all get to this point? You've heard about how Free Minds began and you've seen graduates from the first nine classes. What about the class of 2016? For me, I found a bright red pamphlet on the table, in the lobby of a computer class I was taking. I saw interesting words like literature, field trips, humanities, food, college credits, and the perfect word: FREE. My curiosity convinced me, "I'd like to do this." A happy life has to be more than just working and sleeping—I believe it's just for generations to seek out education as a way to broaden one's view. Everyone who has graduated this class can relate their own story on how Free Minds hooked them. But let me back up.

In 1984 I started working at the Tamale House on Airport Boulevard. When I began that job, I was a single mother with three kids under the age of four. The owner, Robert Vasquez, treated me like a daughter. El jefe, as we called him, is the man who "changed my life through migas!" He also taught me to be a people person and how to create a cheerful business atmosphere. He believed you have to show gratitude when someone is letting you take their hard earned money from them. You want them to know after the transaction they will be pleased and then you gain respect. I sat and listened to all of his advice, but I knew I was a handful when it came to lessons about customer service. Sometimes I had too much to say! But I'm grateful he put up with me for so long. Because of that job, I was able to raise my children into adults.

When Robert passed away in 2014, the doors of the Tamale House closed. I immediately realized there was a loss to the community and a gap to fill. So by completing the Cooperative Business Institute Academy both, Raquel Banda and I decided to create the very first worker-owned Tex Mex cooperative in Austin. I knew I had a lot to learn to meet this goal, so I took that computer class and business seminars to get ready. When I saw Free Minds, I opened up another can of determination and applied.

I felt relief and excitement after being accepted, but it was followed by that nasty word fear. I had never been in college before. What if a college class had teachers with a ruler in one hand and the right to spy over us while addressing hostile orders? It's great to be wrong! From day one, the promised food was there and the tables were set up in a circle to provide a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Our anxiety was decreased by a smiling staff that just welcomed us. We were given a syllabus, reading assignments, due dates, and books like Plato's *Republic* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We were required to write response papers and essays. My fear surfaced slightly, but thanks to the open honesty of the class discussions which included guest speakers and former students, I found out that I wasn't the only one who felt this way about failure. Confidence pushed my fear aside, and my thought of no way vanished into YES WAY.

On the bulletin board where I work is a quote: "If it was easy, everybody would be doing it." I walk past it all the time, and it's my inspiration.

Now let me introduce the people who run this program.

Amelia is the first person on the staff that most of us talked to. She sounds so nice over the phone, but I wondered if it was really true. It was! When I met her for my interview, she was not only friendly, but it was clear she was also smart. Even though she left in the middle of the semester to have baby Mira, we all felt and knew she was always there. Congratulations, Amelia, for jumping into motherhood.

Irene is a graduate of Free Minds, and she gave so much to us. About two weeks into the program, I thought about quitting. I didn't know how to type my papers without a laptop. Irene showed me that I could type my assignments on my phone, then e-mail my work to myself, pull it up in the computer room, do all the corrections, and print it out according to college standards. Aha!! She made what seemed a barrier into what became second nature. Irene really changed this for me by just being Irene. Irene is an excellent example.

The Staff's final secret was Mr. Freddy and his sidekick Molly who were Free Minds' children's teachers. Their expertise provided an assortment of amazing entertainment from cheerful children that were unquestionably priceless. You can't go wrong when you have a grown man who carries a guitar on his back. Right on, Mr. Freddy, the guitar man.

Now naturally, our professors became friends to us. We started out with the Master of Philosophy, Matthew, and no one was spared. We had to read Plato's *Republic*. Now who can take a dead guy and make it fun too? He really knows his stuff! He knows how to write in Greek, speaks German, and took something serious and made it both serious and entertaining. I told many of my coworkers about Socrates and his questions about justice. Matthew deserves respect.

We give a big applause to our wonderful professor in literature, Pat for bringing out the sparkle and magic in Shakespeare for all of us, and for getting us out of the classroom and to a Shakespeare play. For me, it was the first Shakespeare play I'd ever been to, and I loved it. In fact, later I passed on a Shakespeare ticket to one of my amigas, so Pat helped me pass the enjoyment on to someone else. Pat has excellent connections.

A knowledgeable Polly taught us history through American Autobiographies. This professor of Anthropology retains so many facts and details--How does any woman keep all that in her brain? Then she went to Pakistan and brought back knowledge about that to us as well. She was always gracious with her students. Polly is incredible.

As everyone knows, every great writing class has a person who grades your work. For us that person was sharp as a paper cut, Michael, our writing instructor. It's an important job because it showed us where we were at. Michael taught us all the rules of correct critical writing in such a positive way by occasionally asking, "Is this all making sense just now?" and we would all shake our heads YES. But he helped us get to the next level. We valued his input. We wrote; we passed! Michael also possesses the ability to fill the air with delight and anticipation by entering with a handful of graded papers. Michael is powerful.

Last of authority is the remarkable Vivé as the overall director, but she also taught us creative writing. There is something about her lovely voice that made us all feel attentive and disciplined. For me it was tranquil and seductive. Vivé also had a bell. Somehow Vivé made every one of us open up and bring something deep inside us to the page. Then we read it in front of the whole class, both, our poems and This I Believe credos which she went out of her way to make complete editions for us so that we may share. Vivé is a real pro writer.

I speak for all of my classmates when I say thank you to our outstanding professors and staff for making this such a great experience and journey.

Finally, my spectacular fellow mates. We all came to the class with different backgrounds and different goals, but we shared the goal of wanting to motivate, and challenge ourselves to expand our minds. The students became a unique circle together. Hopeful future writers were there, there was a boxer, mothers of children, someone who works in the neonatal ICU. There were AISD bus drivers, an unfortunate ex-Uber driver and one special strong woman warrior named Tinisha who delivered her baby on the last day of class. Fortunately we came to know about each other's lives. We not only ate together, we fed each other sweets, treats, and advice, scheduled study time together, formed a facebook group, and walked each other in the dark to our cars. I know everyone in the class feels the same way I do: we couldn't have done it by ourselves. We needed each other. We all worked hard—that's for dang sure—and we knew completing the program was going to be an accomplishment. It took courage. We did it. We are awesome.

I'm in my fifties, and it's the first time I've ever gone to college, and that's big to me. I have earned my start up of six itty bitty college credits from Free Minds. I took the class because I wanted to be able to talk about something other than tacos. Now I corner anyone who will listen, about Sandra Cisneros, Virginia Woolf, Mary Rowlandson, and can you believe it Plato's *Republic*? But I also gained other things. I have lasting new friends, a nice book collection, and newfound inspiration. I, as a woman, know how to write a college essay and analyze a book with a pencil in my hand to circle, underline, or make a remark in the margins. I've even written poems that I plan to include in our taco house cooperative website.

I appreciate the opportunity to be part of Free Minds commencement and to represent my fellow classmates. I firmly believe education trains the brain.

Attending friends and amigos, it's celebration time for the 2016 Free Minds graduating class. I look forward to serving you soon at Our Taco House Co-op.

Muchas gracias / Thank you!