I grew up in a low-income family in Colombia, and my mother sacrificed everything to give my sister and me a chance to succeed. She reminded us that because of our station in life we were unlikely to get second chances, so we needed to make the most of every opportunity—and enable paths for others. “Remember your origins,” she told us.

Those words gained new meaning when I arrived in the United States in 2016. My wife and I faced racism and xenophobia. As an international student, I was ineligible for many fellowships. Amid the complex and rapidly changing immigration system, I felt I was constantly looking over my shoulder, weighing whether each professional opportunity that came my way would affect my eligibility to stay in the country.

In the face of these challenges, I felt more strongly than ever that I should help open doors for others. I applied my engineering training, defining skills to acquire and milestones to meet. Like any graduate student, I wanted to expand my technical knowledge and secure fellowships. I also wanted to increase campus diversity and engage with activist groups. When I checked my progress after my first year, though, I was disappointed to find that I had fallen short of the inclusion goals. I was failing to honor the commitment I had made to my mother, and to myself.

Not long after, my first child was born, another reminder of my priorities. After finishing my paternity leave, I returned to work recommitted to fighting for a diverse, inclusive environment.

With my adviser’s support, I set aside time for advocacy work every week. In the years that followed, I orchestrated an agreement between my school and a Colombian nonprofit to fund Colombian graduate students at Duke. I launched an undergraduate Spanish course that included a project connecting Duke students with children in marginalized communities in Bogotá. I participated in committees advocating for inclusive education.

It was not always easy—or possible—to make headway on my advocacy as well as my research, and at times I didn’t get the balance quite right. But when I veered too far in either direction, my adviser, an extraordinary mentor who listened and supported my goals, helped me find my way back. And when one of my thesis committee members suggested I decrease my engagement in non-research activities, my adviser listened to my frustration about how some people don’t understand what it means to be oppressed.

I also found that some of the skills I developed fed back into my research. For example, I discovered that by dissecting my university’s current practices, I could identify ways the institution could better support international students. That same approach helped me formulate the analysis for one of my research questions about where to build solar farms.

Just before defending my dissertation in January, I visited the library exhibition for the first time. I had been interviewed about the course I created, and I was overwhelmed to find myself featured. And when I looked up, a proverb emblazoned over the exhibition brought me to tears: “They tried to bury us; they didn’t know we were seeds.”

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What I promised my mother
Edgar Virguez

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