

'ONLY YOU UNDERSTAND YOU!'

Dascha Polanco stars in *Convocation: The Next Generation*

There was no red carpet (we opted for purple), but Hunter gave Dascha Polanco '08 an ecstatic reception when she took the stage at Convocation. The audience of new Hunter students was star-struck.

But Dascha didn't talk about her role as Dyanara Diaz on Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black* or what it was like working with Jennifer Lawrence and Bradley Cooper on *Joy*. In fact, the word "Hollywood" never passed her lips. Instead, she shared the story of her four years at Hunter, which she

described as an exhausted blur of juggling school, work, and single motherhood. Her days, she said, consisted of "working from 11 at night to 7 in the morning, rushing to an 8 a.m. class, living on coffee and a croissant. Every day, I had to rush home, pick up my daughter, and go to work, over and over."

Those trying times (she got her acceptance letter from Hunter soon after her mother's death), "were moments in my life here that may seem negative," she said, "but they prepared me for being who I am today. When

I walked down the aisle with my diploma, I said to myself: 'Who is going to stop me from what I decide to do next?'"

Nobody, it turns out. While majoring in psychology, Dascha also took theatre courses—and that turned out to be the path she would follow, all the way to Hollywood. After four years at Hunter, she's part of another multicultural cast of characters. "I'm very proud," she tells *At Hunter*, "to be part of such a diverse cast on *Orange* that has changed the way people stay in tune with programming."

Re-entering Hunter's auditorium for Convocation, she says, brought back some raw memories. "I would go there and cry," she recalls. "I remember how during that time in my life I was so depressed due to my mom's recent passing."

And if Dascha's story now sets her apart from her peers, her advice to the new students is something they can connect to their lives—and their hopes for their own futures. "Possibilities are endless," she told them. "Let you be the one to make the right decision for you. Only you understand you."

