
Community Letters

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Communication and Engagement Officer
National Urban Fellows

As we celebrate Pride Month, I'm honored to share the story and reflections of Orlando Gonzales, a proud member of the Class of 2012 whose journey as a National Urban Fellow continues to inspire.

For Orlando, the National Urban Fellows experience wasn't just a career pivot—it was a life transformation.

At the time, Orlando was living in Miami and contemplating his next move. "I was 34, almost 35, and thinking seriously about graduate school. I had considered business school, law school... but I knew I wanted to deepen my understanding of the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors."



Orlando Gonzales, National Urban Fellow, Class of 2012

"A chance encounter with Bahia Ramos ('10), the National Urban Fellow placed at the Knight Foundation, turned into a leap of faith to apply. "She said, 'I think you should apply.' So I did. I quit my job, sold my business, sold my house... even had a breakup. I had to clear the slate to make room for something bigger" said Orlando.

With that leap, Orlando joined the NUF class of 2012, serving his mentorship at the Aetna Foundation in Hartford, Connecticut—what he calls "the mothership of corporate philanthropy." There, he met Anne Beal, the executive who would become his mentor and lifelong friend. "And as I like to tell it and as she liked to tell it, it was love at first sight... and I have a relationship still to this day...She said, when she signed up to be a mentor, she signed up to be a mentor for life...Still thirteen years later, we're still going at it."

"Beyond the professional experience, it was the values embedded in the Fellowship that shaped Orlando's path as a leader. "NUF isn't just about getting a degree. It's about responsibility.



Orlando with his Mentor, Anne Beal

The kind of solidarity Orlando found through NUF has endured far beyond graduation. “My NUF cohort is the group I turn to for everything—personal, professional, the in-between. We vacation together. We show up for each other. And it’s not because we’re all alike. We’re not. But we believe in each other’s dreams. That’s solidarity.”

When asked what message he would share with the NUF community of supporters, he doesn’t hesitate: “Support for equity isn’t a trend. It’s not another ‘Keto diet’. It’s a reflection of your values. And values don’t change just because it’s politically inconvenient. This work is the soul of our country. If we want a society where everyone can thrive, we have to invest in the leaders who are making that happen—especially now.”



At the 2022 NUF Homecoming with NUF some of his class alum (from left to right) Jonathan Vallejo ('12), Erica Acevedo ('12), Cynthia Wong ('12) and Orlando Gonzales ('12)

As a gay Latino man, Orlando brings an intersectional lens to his leadership. Pride Month, for him, is not just a time of celebration— he said, “as a queer man, as a gay man, I have pride year long. I’m waving that flag year-long, but it’s actually an opportunity for our allies, the people who support us, who are not part of the community, to express and show their support.”

He challenges us to think more expansively about that term. “We don’t often use the term ally in the context of race and ethnicity...We don’t say, Oh, that person’s an ally to the black community. That person is an ally to Latinos or to the AAPI community. We don’t use that term that way. But I want to acknowledge that allyship in the movement is actually how we win, and... how the bridges get made.”



The NUF Class of 2012