

BY BETTY ROSA

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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Schools for all

(NICHOLAS KAMM/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

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We are living in uncertain times, and a recent incident at the airport brought to light some of my own fears and sensitivities — feelings that I imagine many others are experiencing now more than ever before.

As chancellor of the state's Board of Regents, which sets education policy in New York, I had arranged for some of my fellow regents to join me on a panel in Puerto Rico. I was appreciative of my colleagues' participation, as we were all taking time from our day jobs to attend and covered all costs ourselves.

I arrived at JFK with plenty of time to spare for my flight to San Juan, but as I approached the Transportation Security Administration podium I realized that I had left my driver's license at home. I began to panic. Would I be allowed to board the plane? Would I be publicly embarrassed? Would my colleagues be upset if I couldn't join them at the conference? Would the state legislators who had asked me to attend be terribly disappointed that I wasn't there?

For the record, I was born in New York City — at a hospital on Roosevelt Island, when it was known as Welfare Island — but moved to Puerto Rico when I was 5 months old and lived there until I returned to the Bronx as a 10-year-old. So despite being a citizen of the U.S.A. from birth, standing at the TSA podium that afternoon at JFK, I felt insecure and insufficiently documented — and it wasn't a good feeling.

To my great relief, I was eventually allowed to board the plane since I had previously registered with TSA and had another photo ID that was deemed sufficient.

During the flight, I began to consider why I had reacted so strongly to the situation. I came to understand that I had projected my own, albeit minor, circumstances onto a broader consciousness of what it means to try to live in our country as an undocumented individual.

When, as a child, I restarted my schooling in the Bronx, I spoke very little English. My grasp of the language became academically functional about three years later.

About that same time, I remember reading about how President John F. Kennedy famously declared to tens of thousands of people gathered on the streets of West Berlin, a city divided by a wall, "All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words, '*Ich bin ein Berliner.*'"

Never have those words meant more to me than they do today. My experience at the airport helped me to better understand what it may feel like to live in a land that feels like home — but in which one's presence is not accepted by all.

My colleagues on the Board of Regents and I fight every day to make sure that New York's students are free to learn regardless of their race, ethnicity, language spoken at home, religion, immigration status, disability, functional ability, sexual orientation or any other basis — in other words, to ensure that the state is an educational sanctuary. We embrace all children as our own, with warmth and compassion.

Since the election, though, we've all read about a number of disturbing incidents of hate-based acts in our schools and elsewhere, including vandalism, harassment and even violence. It is well past the time for this to end. And it must begin at the very top, with the President-elect.

Being a proud New Yorker who is cognizant of the fact that New York City has been a gateway during many eras, I am ever-mindful of the words of Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty welcoming people from all nations to our land of freedom and opportunity.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. believed that, "There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because conscience tells him it is right."

Heeding King's words, I would offer the following to the hardworking, law-abiding, undocumented residents in our country who realize and appreciate the promise of America. To them, I would say:

From whatever lands your family may have emanated, and for all who aspire to the ideals that have made this country so exceptional on this small planet in an immense universe, we welcome you to join our grand experiment in democracy, liberty and compassionate civility. And I hope the new administration in Washington believes that as well.

Our nation awaits a set of policies that will be measured against 240 years of American history. We have arrived at a critical turning point, and the whole world is watching.

Rosa is chancellor of the state's Board of Regents.

