

Political Science Alumna Lands Job with Bernie Sanders Campaign by Marlo Goff



Now a state director for Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign, alumna Dulce Saenz (BA '11, political science) first discovered her voice in a public policy class taught by former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm, co-director of DU's Institute for Public Policy Studies.

The class was talking about immigration, and Saenz found many of the viewpoints — including Lamm's — difficult to hear. So she mustered her courage and shared her thoughts: "The immigration system is broken, and there are families that are suffering because of it."

Saenz's views grew out of personal experience: Her family was directly affected by a broken immigration system that ultimately separated Saenz and her sister, also a DU student, from the rest of their family. That happened when, worried about Dulce's father's undocumented status, Saenz's mother and youngest sister followed him to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico — then billed as the murder capital of the world.

"Especially during that time, I would feel guilty when I had the opportunity to go to dinner and be safe and comfortable" Saenz says.

One day the political science major stayed after class to speak with Lamm and was surprised to find that, although the two had polar opposite views, he was willing to open a dialogue.

"He became a mentor for me, and he would enlighten me on his perspective," she recalls. "I would challenge him to view the world through a different lens. It was the first time I was able to engage in such an open conversation with someone I disagreed with, particularly with someone who held such different views."

Later, Saenz organized a silent protest at an event where Lamm was the keynote speaker. When she told him what she planned, he said, "Way to exercise your democracy!"

Shortly after the protest, Saenz attended an immigrant rights conference in Miami. Upon her return to DU, she was determined to accelerate her activism, putting her unique voice to work on behalf of others who were feeling and experiencing similar things. She found support through such organizations as the Social Justice Living & Learning Community, targeted at students interested in addressing social, political and economic injustices, and the Excelling Leaders Institute, which seeks to help first-generation students from diverse backgrounds transition to DU.

"All of my best friends from the University of Denver, I met in ELI. We always knew we were an ELI family," Saenz says.

In December 2015, after positions with nonprofits Conservation Colorado and Colorado Commits to Kids, Saenz was hired as Colorado state director for the Sanders campaign. After helping the Vermont senator win the Colorado caucus, Saenz served as the campaign's Washington state director, delivering another big win. Much of her work has involved hiring, recruiting and building structure, as well as strategic program development and execution.

"When we talk about being innovative over other campaigns and doing things better than anyone has ever done them, or trying things that no one has ever attempted, it's because we are bringing unique perspectives," she says of the Sanders team. "That may be because your gender is different, or your race

or sexual identity. But at the end of the day, it's not about the colors of the individuals; it's about what those identities signify to the makeup of the team."

Saenz does not expect all of her new hires to come wrapped in a perfect package. As a trainer and coach, she believes she can give people the skills and resources they need to elevate their work and be successful.

"I've seen firsthand how challenging it can be to get a foot in the door," she says. "Internships are an important way to develop experience, but when an internship at the Capitol is unpaid, it can limit opportunities to advance. I've had to work since I was 16, and I found my own chances to get experience as a political leader. I believe leadership is about seeing potential in people and being willing to invest in them."

The campaign work has also given her the opportunity to work on a broad range of issues — a challenge she has welcomed.

"When your job is based on your identity, all you see is that identity," she says. "You're paid to become an expert within your community, so it becomes difficult to separate certain feelings and you can really internalize a lot. It's been fulfilling to step out of the Latino role for this campaign and inject my perspective into a statewide campaign strategy."

As her career has progressed, Saenz has learned how to teeter-totter between different worlds. She is able to be a messenger with whom people in the dominant culture are comfortable, while remaining true and authentic within her community.

"I've contemplated whether or not I would have been hired in the past if I had looked differently or talked differently," she says. "What if my skin was darker or my accent thicker? People always say what an eloquent speaker I am, and I can't help but wonder why there was the assumption that I wouldn't be."

In December 2016, Saenz expects to marry her fiancé, whom she met through ELI during her time at DU. "Our maid of honor, best man, two groomsmen and my two sisters all graduated from DU and are all in our wedding," she notes.

After she finishes with the Sanders campaign, Saenz wants to take a break from politics to become an entrepreneur. "I'm a pioneer," she says. "I love being in spaces where no one else has ever been, and I'm ready for my next challenge."