

Evergreen Charter School
17th Anniversary Celebration

17 Years of Evergreen: A Journey of Resilience and Gratitude

January 13, 2026

Remarks by Gil Bernardino

Dear Staff and Students,

Seventeen years ago today, we sat in a room in Albany, New York—our State Capitol—waiting breathlessly for the Board of Regents to vote. We were waiting to see if our charter school would be allowed to exist.

Some of you know our story; many do not. A year before that vote, Sarah Brewster and I formed an advisory board with a single idea: to create an alternative for families who wanted a better education. At the time, the dropout rate in Hempstead was nearly 50%.

Think about that for a moment. Today, our school is home to over 1,200 students. If that 50% rate applied to us today, 600 of you would not graduate. We started Evergreen because we believed in a world where **every** student graduates.

Building this school required a 3,600-page application that filled three massive binders. At the time, we only planned for Kindergarten through 5th grade. We hadn't even dreamed of a middle or high school yet.

The opposition we faced was intense. Many people in high levels of leadership—including those who oversee charter schools—fought to stop us. We were originally on the agenda for approval in December 2008, but we were suddenly removed by powerful forces who did not want us to succeed.

We spent the next month fighting back. We sent over 40 letters to different Senators, Assembly members, the Commissioner of Education, and the Governor. Our advocacy worked. On **January 13, 2009**, Evergreen was finally approved.

The last 17 years have not been easy. We have faced opposition at every step, including financial tactics meant to "strangle" our funding and prevent us from paying our staff. We are forever grateful to **Círculo de la Hispanidad**, who provided the seed funding and support that allowed us to survive the beginning.

Our growth has been the result of students, families, staff and the Board of Trustees. You asked us to expand so you could finish your entire education here. We fought for the middle school, then the high school, and finally, for a building of our own. This past August, that dream became a reality when we inaugurated our new **Evergreen Secondary School**.

Even this new building faced hurdles—permits, zoning, and political forces tried to block us. But we continue to make history because we refuse to give up on our dreams.

Success is a team effort. We still have dreams of building more spaces to support you, but we cannot do it alone.

- **To our students:** You must do your best. Study hard and challenge yourselves.
- **To our staff and families:** Thank you for believing in the dream of Evergreen.

Today is a day for gratitude. Use the education you receive here to make this world a better place for everyone.

With pride and gratitude,

Gil