Thank you, Linda. It is an honor to be here with all of you tonight. I want to especially thank Linda for reaching out to me and giving me this opportunity to re-connect with a place that has been near and dear to my heart for over a decade now. As a mentor, I saw firsthand the challenges that many of you face on a daily basis in providing the tools for families and individuals to become self-sufficient and lead productive and fulfilling lives, and I applaud all of you for your commitment to this important mission.

And I want to thank Baha for introducing me to the two amazing people who inspired me to write my book, Fake Smiles and Lasagna.

I remember meeting the siblings the first day we spoke to Baha about being mentors. My whole family was there. My husband, Wayne, and my two shy daughters, Rachel and Sydney, who were 8 and 11 at the time. Baha explained to us that our mentees (who I call Sonia and Eugene in my book to protect their privacy) were teenagers from Rwanda who had arrived in the US just two weeks prior. Both of their parents were deceased.

That afternoon, Sonia and Eugene were in a classroom learning how to make a Jiffy Cake. When the class was done, Baja brought them over to us. I think it’s safe to safe that we were all pretty nervous. The language barrier made communication difficult, but the truth was, we weren’t sure what to say. But we did all agree to meet up the following week. And the week after that. And the week after that. And the week after that. And what started out as a relationship filled with awkward conversations and uncomfortable silences grew into something so beautiful – I felt compelled to write a book about it. The title, Fake Smiles and Lasagna, comes from this early part of our relationship. You see, I really wanted Sonia and Eugene to like me and in hindsight I know I tried too hard to make that happen. I didn’t think they’d want to see me unless I brought them something - English language CD’s, fans for their apartment, kitchen utensils…. lasagna. And chitchat and laughter was how I filled the voids of conversation.

But some of my favorite memories were from those awkward beginnings. One of the first places we took them was to my favorite place - the beach. Their friend, Jean Pierre, came as well. He was much more outgoing than the siblings were, so that made it a little bit easier. Still, the 45 minute drive was filled with long silences interrupted by random questions that would pop into my head like, Did you eat pizza in Africa? What kind of TV shows do you like? I rambled on and on about our dog and our chickens, though I wasn’t sure how much they were understanding.

The boys loved the ocean, though, and as long as everyone was laughing and having a good time, there was no need for conversation. I remember walking along the beach with them and Jean Pierre running ahead and then doing 3 consecutive backflips like he was a human slinky. He did it again, recomposed himself and walked alongside us as if it were as easy to him as breathing – which apparently it was. “It’s easy,” he said. “I learned it in my home country.” But I had never seen anything like it.

On our way back, we stopped at a fast food restaurant. Wayne and I were in line when I noticed that the five of them, crammed in a booth together, were not speaking. Oh no, I thought, not another long awkward silence. I always felt I had to swoosh in to fix these situations when the truth was, they were probably just exhausted from the beach. I instructed my younger daughter to grab some cups and bring them over to get their sodas. A few minutes later, I looked over and one of the levers was stuck. Diet Coke was pouring everywhere. As I say in my book, “The cumulative giggling gained momentum and erupted into full blown belly-laugher that seemed to burst out from each of them as if it had been held captive deep down inside their souls. Tension released its grip on my shoulders, and I joined the laughter, no faking this time.

As time went on, things started to change. Life happened – to all of us, and we learned to lean on each other. For me, it was the death of my mother after a year and a half year battle with cancer. I stopped by to tell Sonia the news in person. We sat together on her sofa and shared stories of our mothers. I tried to imagine what it was like for Sonia to lose her mother at such a young age… I remember an e-mail she sent me: “Stay strong. We are together.”

During the course of the three years that the book covers, Sonia and Eugene also had unexpected challenges, ones that I felt helpless to do anything about – making me feel like I had in some way failed them, though I see things very differently now. In fact, they didn’t need me to fix anything. They were equipped with resilience, faith and family – I was merely a supportive bystander.

Sonia did marry into a large family, and I was glad she had the support of a wider network. I was grateful for the times that they included me in their family gatherings – always filled with laughter, love and intelligent debates.

I reflect on this in my book: Perhaps it was *because* of what they had weathered that they were able to cherish every moment with each other, laugh so easily. Maybe I could learn a lesson from them. Maybe just showing up was the first step to being present. Cooking utensils, fans, English language CD’s – sure, these were nice things to have and I’m glad I was able to provide them for Sonia and Eugene. But that’s not what made them like me, accept me as their friend. No, that was much simpler. It was only a matter of being there for them over time; And it was a matter of letting them be there *for me*. Because the truth was, we needed each other.

Sonia and Eugene have, above all, have blessed me with moments of pure pride. Pride at seeing Eugene graduate from high school, pride at seeing them become US citizens, and pride at watching them grow into loving parents and spouses.

When I told Sonia my idea to write a book, I was surprised by her reaction. She said, “That’s fine, but do you have time to write a book.” In that same conversation, she commented on her concern for my stress level and how she had noticed that I had looked too skinny a while back – probably because of dealing with my mom’s illness. I tell you this because it’s a reflection of how much our relationship had changed over the years.

Eugene’s response was more enthusiastic. He was so excited, and he kept asking, “How’s our book coming along?” And letting down that boy was not an option.

Of course, when I made the decision to write a book, I knew zero about how to go about it. So, I started a blog with my cousin as a way to get my feet wet and hone my writing skills. I’d like to finish by sharing with you one of my blog posts, which I called Why I Write:

My first writing workshop was a weeklong course in Provincetown. We started with introductions. Mine went something like this: “I’m a math teacher and I have no idea what I’m doing, so please don’t expect much.” Then we were asked to read aloud something we’d written in ten minutes. My heart raced and a premature hot flash came over me. I thought I might be sick.

A few years and half dozen workshops later, I was in a different place. It was sort of like shedding my modesty after birthing two daughters: I began to let it all hang out. I was even writing a blog.

Lest you think I threw myself clear of my comfort zone for the heck of it, let me be clear - I had an ulterior motive. I started my writing journey to share the story of two amazing people in my life. Their courage, resilience and faith inspired me to write a book; it was my way of sharing the gift of their friendship and lessons they’d taught me over the course of the three years my pages covered.

One sunny weekend, I was reminded of this gift. Through these friends, I met another extraordinary person – a twenty something year old who came to the U.S. as a refugee. He had recently graduated from Bryant University with two degrees. I watched him run the Newport marathon - with one sock. Dang it, if that boy didn’t come in 28th! Can you say GRIT?

So I plodded along, revising and revising the manuscript, snatching precious moments from an already packed schedule. The good news was I no longer suffered panic attacks when someone else read my words. If frustration came knocking on my door, I'd think of my friends – who were much like the marathoner. I considered all they had overcome to get where they were, and that provided inspiration to keep going, albeit ever so slowly. No matter. I knew I'd get there eventually. I had great role models for perseverance.

Another early memory that stands out is when my girls and I decided to take Eugene and Jean Pierre sledding. We brought them bags of boots, snow pants, mittens, etc. and tried to explain what we were about to do. Jean Pierre was excited – he said he had sledded on Mt. Kilimanjaro. Eugene, on the other hand, seemed confused by what we were telling him, but he’d pretty much do anything we told him.

There’s a huge hill in Johnston, whose name I can’t pronounce, but it was at one time a ski slope. It levels off a bit about halfway up, and that’s where everyone else was sledding from, especially on this day because the ground was particularly icy. We had to grab onto tree branches just to get ourselves up the hill. When the girls and I arrived at the landing (halfway up), we saw that the boys were climbing to the top. A father with his kids gave me a stern look and told me that what they were doing was dangerous, but at that point there was no stopping them. But once they were up there, it took them what seemed like an eternity to muster the courage to come down. The people who were starting from a safer distance were waiting for them to descend. We were ALL waiting. And I was praying – please God – no concussions, no broken bones. Then I saw Jean Pierre poised for take-out. He came down in a flash, Eugene riding his tailwind. Jean Pierre was beaming; the look on Eugene’s face was one of pure terror. Nervous for him, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

On one hand, I was grateful to see emotion in Eugene’s face –even if it was mostly fear. His adrenaline was rushing and his heart was pounding. For sure, he would talk about this with excitement later on. On the other hand, I felt guilty for letting him put himself in harm’s way. Lucky for us, he survived the trip – even decided to go back up the hill. But only halfway.