Jocelyn Rodriguez, Ed.L.D.

The spreadsheet that Ed.L.D. student Jocelyn Rodriguez opens on her laptop in Gutman Cafe is impressive, but not because it contains data that will help her as she starts her second year in the doctoral program. It’s impressive because it includes information that’s even more important: the birthdays, anniversaries, phone numbers, and email addresses for 156 aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, siblings, and grandparents.

And that’s just on her dad’s side.

It’s these family members, plus dozens more on her mom’s side, that make up what she says is the core of her identity as the daughter of immigrants from the Dominican Republic who settled in New York. “My family,” she says, “is my greatest driving force.”

For most of her life growing up, family was also the core of her community, especially when seven families’ worth of relatives went in on an entire apartment complex in Queens.

“We called it ‘The Building,’” she says. “Those seven apartments became our family hub. Doors were always unlocked, and we had Sunday dinner and lunch together often, along with other relatives. If you needed help, there was someone there. If my parents, Jose and Ana, couldn’t bring us somewhere, an aunt or uncle would. Cousins helped with homework. And whenever we had any kind of event — birthdays, anniversaries, first communions, a cousin finishing potty training — there was a celebration.” Every other November they hold a family reunion with at least 150 people.

“Our grandparents were incredibly intentional about bringing us all together,” she says. “There’s a huge sense of responsibility for one another and for the collective good.”

This way of thinking found its way into her work, most recently as director for the Early Care & Education Institute at the Committee for Hispanic Children & Families, Inc., in New York.

“I consider myself a convener of thoughts, of people,” she says. “I fully recognize that one person and one entity will never have all of the answers, and the most effective way to transform education is to deeply engage all stakeholders. In my family, I have to understand the needs of my aunts, uncles, adult cousins, teen cousins, and baby cousins. We need to understand what we each need in order to help one another. We need to understand the implications of decisions on one another. The way I see the education sector is just that: We all need to actively understand what we each need in order to succeed.” LH