Good morning everyone.

A tremendous thank you to the San Mateo County Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Planning Team, and to every individual who nominated and selected me as this year’s recipient of the Dorothy Boyajian Honored Teacher Award.

I am beyond humbled and immensely honored to receive this award. It would have been impossible to achieve without the last nine years at a school that has become a second home to me, and co-workers and students who have become a second family - South San Francisco High School, affectionately known as South City High. The lessons I have learned there have molded me into the teacher I am today.

When I spoke with Rabbi Jay Miller about the topic of my short speech, he said, “Talk about what this day means to you.” To me, the meaning of today can be summed up in one word: inclusion.

As a young student growing up in a rural town outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, I witnessed the daily harassment and bullying of multiple close friends. These amazing individuals would go on to become confident, successful gay and transgender adults - but how they overcame their initial hurdles to be contributing members of society is nothing short of a miracle.

As a college student in Birmingham, Alabama, I was horrified to learn that my younger sister was being viciously bullied, verbally and physically - even having her life threatened by her peers - at the same high school I attended some years before, all because she had chosen to come out as a lesbian during her senior year of high school.
All my friends and sister wanted was inclusion, without judgment or harassment - the exact same right Dr. King and his contemporaries fought for decades ago. Their work paved the way for me to fight for inclusion for all students today.

It was for my sister, my dear friends, and students everywhere who are scared to go to school and frightened of rejection and ostracism that I took on the role as advisor of South City’s Gay Straight Alliance - the GSA - in 2008. Their inclusion became my passion. I wondered, how can young people contribute to and help build a community that they are afraid to be a part of?

For the past two years, I’ve had the wonderful fortune to attend Sojourn to the Past, an educational journey for high school students to the Deep South that explores the Civil Rights movement, with one of the greatest teachers I’ve ever met, Jeff Steinberg. This life highlight only further fueled my passion for full inclusion for all students. I discovered that what Dr. King had been fighting for was the same thing I was fighting for - basic human rights and dignity for all people.

One of the last stops on the trip is the Lorraine Motel, the sight of Dr. King’s assassination. In front of the balcony room where he was murdered is a plague that states: “They said one to another, behold, here cometh the dreamer...let us slay him...and we shall see what will become of his dreams,” from Genesis 37:19-20.

Friends, WE are what became of his dreams - people like you and me, who fight for inclusion for all on a daily basis. When we get weary or disheartened, all we need do is look to the life of and lessons left by Dr. King, and realize that it is up to us to carry on his legacy. As he instructed, “If you can’t fly, run - if you can’t run, walk - if you can’t walk, crawl - but by all means, keep moving.”

Thank you.