

Stevenson College Commencement Comments – June 12, 2011

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. It is an honor to share one of the great days in the lives of you, your friends, and your family. It is a particular privilege as someone who is a graduate of Stevenson College.

I was in the fourth full four-year graduating class at UCSC. It was an exciting time, as we all felt that we were part of a new campus that was different from others – no grades, only written evaluations, small student – teacher ratios, and residential colleges where we were building new communities.

Colleges were about half the size of what they are now – and our graduation ceremony was held in Stevenson’s lower quad just up the hill. We all wore street clothes and the one rebellious protester wore a cap and gown.

As my name was called to walk across for my certificate, a dog emerged from the crowd, and accompanied me across. Somewhere my Mom has a great picture of that dog at my feet staring up while the provost handed me my certificate. It seemed to encapsulate that unique UCSC blend of achievement amid complete informality.

I remember that at the time I had mixed emotions about graduating. I had made many great friendships. I was not happy to be leaving those friends as I made my way into what we used to call “the real world”.

Yet we all had our dreams, and we were anxious to get on with them. I have been very lucky to live out my own dream. I have served on a congressional staff and spent twenty-three years in elective office, had my own regular radio show and newspaper column, ran an AIDS service agency during the heart of the HIV crisis, and now find myself in the Governor’s cabinet. And last year, I taught at UCSC in the environmental studies department – and I can report to the parents present that these students are as bright as any I have known.

As a UCSC student, I wrote an honors thesis on the history of water development in California. As someone who was from the coast, and had an environmental bent, I researched this issue from the outside, believing that the large interests in other parts of the state drove state water policy and I would never be part of that. Now I am in charge of the Resources Agency process for determining California’s water future into the next generations.

Good friends at Stevenson have also lived out their dreams – as a congressman, Hollywood agent, journalist, top legislative staffer and professor and researcher. Others have been equally successful as parents, teachers, and childcare workers and in all walks of life.

I wish for the graduates today that you live out your own dreams as well – do what drives you and makes you happy – and in your years here at UCSC you've been given the tools to do just that. I might have complained at the time about all the writing I had to do in class, or about learning another language, or being tested as I was trained to think analytically and critically – but all those skills have made a major difference for me in life's journey.

One thing I wanted to do today is to briefly offer some advice that I wish someone had offered me when I was sitting where the graduates are today. For as good as the education was, there wasn't always life advice that came in the bargain.

When we graduated, no one ever told us to take care of ourselves as we embarked on a thirty-five or forty year career. I spent the first five or six years after graduation working around the clock in high-powered, jobs. It was great for my career advancement and professional growth – but I worked most evenings and weekends. Then I took a year off, cleaned up my Spanish, and took a lengthy adventure trip through Central and South America. Make sure you mix in time to take care of yourself as you move along.

I wish someone had told me during my college years to do a complete oral history with my parents and grandparents. They won't be here forever. You should ask those who know your family's story while you have the chance.

In that first two years after graduation, I was in a job where I opted out of the retirement program to make some extra money, as did many of my friends. Well, I have the sad duty to inform you that you will, in fact, get older. Think about and plan for your future.

Take risks. Don't be afraid to fail. You **should** be afraid of not trying. Some of the most successful moments in my life have come because I was willing to take a risk, and because I failed at something along the way. Being elected Mayor of Santa Cruz at a young age. Leading an AIDS service agency in one of the worse times of the epidemic. Running for the legislature – not making it the first time, but being better at it when I did get there. Serving as Chair of the Budget Committee. They all have been stretches, they all presented a ready opportunity to fail, but I mostly succeeded because I tried.

Be serious of purpose, but don't take yourself too seriously. When I campaigned for the legislature, I often said it was time to send someone to Sacramento who was **intentionally** funny. Having a sense of humor will be the best armor for getting through difficult times.

And use sun block. Your skin and your body are along for this long ride.

But my other message is what you've probably been thinking more about. You are moving into a very uncertain world, one where getting a job might not come easy right away. In a career that will likely span forty years, this isn't the end of the world. The important thing is developing the skills to navigate that uncertain world.

I could not have anticipated when I graduated that I would be running an AIDS service agency. We didn't have any idea AIDS was coming when I graduated. I didn't know I would be doing legislation on sea level rise, green buildings, or greenhouse gases. Climate change wasn't understood when I graduated. While I learned Spanish, and it has served me well, I didn't know that learning Chinese or Arabic would be as valuable.

And I hate to even tell you about what passed for the "computer center" when I attended Stevenson. I was at a Silicon Valley conference recently where someone said that in a few years we will be able to carry a small box next to us that will contain virtually all information known to human kind during all known history.

Imagine what you will face in your career that you can't understand now.

I am now clearly more near the end of my career than the beginning. When you face this moment, and someday all of you will – you will reflect on whether you have left the world a better place than you found it.

In asking that question of myself as an individual – there are many ways that I can answer yes to that question – whether it's my role in the establishment of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, authoring civil rights laws that the Supreme Court has used as the basis of decisions, or making the personal decision about being openly gay as a candidate almost thirty years ago in a way that served as a model for others at a time when there were not many of us doing that.

But I wish I could speak similarly positively for my generation. There are certainly great things. I am old enough to remember the civil rights movement, when African-Americans were denied the basic right to vote in parts of our country. We only dreamed that an African-American might one day be president – and I have lived to see it.

When I was graduating from Stevenson College a woman had never served in the California state senate, and no woman had served in the United States Senate unless she succeeded her husband. Although the dream of a woman as President still eludes us, there are women in every walk of life in jobs that they were not when I was graduating.

But in many ways my generation will leave the world in a less beneficial place. Climate change threatens endangered species. If we don't cut our greenhouse gas emissions, scientists project that the Sierra snowpack will be at least half of what it is now by the end of the century and the sea level will rise five and a half feet.

The amount of civic engagement in this state and country has fallen to dangerous levels – and the tone of public discourse is sometimes embarrassing for a country with our history.

During American history, so many events – whether the Civil War, the second world war, or the struggle for civil rights – were things that most in the country followed and were moved by one way or another. That isn't the case today – for whatever reason – it is easier to focus on the lewd tweets of a member of Congress than the climate change that might be causing extreme weather events. This, in a democracy based on your chance to participate and play a role in guiding your future.

When I was preparing to teach state environmental policy here at UCSC last year, one of the faculty members advised me that my biggest challenge would be to convince the students that they could in fact get something significant done within the current political process.

You have a gift. Not just that you attended one of the finest research institutions and centers for undergraduate education in the world – but that you get to take the skills and your education into a democracy. When it comes to leadership, it is easy to think that it's someone else's job. Well, I'm here to tell you it's yours.

And during your years as an active citizen, don't forget the very public education we celebrate today. The accessibility of an affordable, quality education made all the difference for you. It's at risk right now in California and around the country. We can't have a system that's affordable just for the wealthy. We can't have a system that doesn't turn out enough graduates to keep our economy competitive. And we can't have a well-functioning democracy without strong, open inquiry.

When you look back on your life and career decades from now, you will ask yourself the question about whether you have made this world a better place. Tomorrow, you will begin to take the steps that will lead to the answer to that question. No matter what you choose to do, and how you choose to do it – you can and must use that gift of a UCSC education to make a difference.

This is your post-graduate assignment and obligation, but your UCSC time hasn't quite ended. So today – celebrate your friendships and that spirit of achievement that got you to this ceremony.

On behalf of the people of the State of California – congratulations on your good, hard work and best of luck in your future endeavors. We're all counting on you.