

UOG COMMENCEMENT SPEECH MAY 29, 2011

Regents and President Underwood

Distinguished Guests, supporters of our graduates and 2011 UOG Graduates

Hafa Adai Everyone!

President Underwood -- thank you for that introduction .. With a little more embellishment you would have earned estufao for dinner tonight?

A couple of nights ago, I gave the commencement speech for our 2011 Simon Sanchez graduates. When I was asked by the class officers to be their commencement speaker I was honored but I also have been to enough high school graduation ceremonies to know that it was going to be tough, a daunting task to keep their attention beyond five minutes. So I resorted to threatening them .. telling them that it wasn't over until I accept their requirements. I told them to sit up -- pay attention or at least look interested as I gave my speech.

But I know I can't do that here today because one --- I am not in charge -- and 2 -- this is, as Vice President Helen Whippy had noted, a formal occasion.

All of us have dreams of being able to do that which at that moment seemed so impossible to achieve. Each of us have those moments in time when we see something, witness something that has a profound impact in our lives. Each of us experienced those moments when we can distinctly remember the place and period when we made a promise to do something if only we were given the opportunity to achieve something that seems so impossible.

I recall driving down Marine Drive in front of the old Town House Department Store, which most recently was the Calvo-Tenorio Head Quarters -- driving in my first car, a Toyota Tercel. At that time, I was a single parent of three children, struggling to make ends meet with my \$13,000 a year salary as a limited term teacher in DOE.

I distinctly recall talking to God saying ... if only you would equip me with the intelligence and the degrees that will open the doors for me to help others ... I promise to give back. That was 30 years ago. I was in my senior year here at the University of Guam, where I majored in Elementary Education and Special Education. I was an intern at Harry S Truman and it was also the school year that DOE had the teachers' strike. And because my professor here at UOG did not want to cross the picket line, I ended up spending the year treading water. I was assigned as a resource room teacher for students enrolled in K-6 because at that time we did not have the middle schools.

Of course when I made that promise, little did I know that I would be given a lot of opportunities to give back or use the graduate degrees that I subsequently achieved. Nor did I realize that giving back meant work, at times really hard work and a lot of sleepless nights. It's amazing how much we learn over 30 years.

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Today as your commencement speaker, I aim to give back to this institution that gave me the seeds of courage to push for what seemed to be impossible. It was in the University of Guam, College of Education, that I discovered my capacity to think independently and started believing that I can do more than selling the Revlon cosmetic products. It was at this University that I was encouraged, as a single parent of three children, to apply for the teacher training scholarship, the first time of which I was turned down because my essay was full of typographical errors. I can still recall Dr. Malkin scolding me for turning in such a shabby product given that I was being considered for a scholarship. Of course at that time word processors were not part of our world but we already had correct tapes installed in our type writers.

It was at this University that I learned the fundamentals of teaching from Professors such as Dr. Bernadita Dungca, Dr. Lourdes Klitzkie, Mrs. Gloria Peckens, Dr. Lorraine Yamashita and of course Dr. Underwood.

It was also at this University that I was mentored by Dr. Mary Spencer to conduct an independent research in the Disproportionate Ethnic Representation of Chamorro and Pacific Islanders in Special Education Programs. That study eventually gave me the opportunity to publish a paper with her guidance and support. More importantly the results of that study was used to implement more stringent procedural safeguards in the referral of students to special education programs.

But just as this great institution has provided much opportunity for me to grow professionally, UOG also taught me that making good choices do not necessarily mean you will get the results that you envisioned. As with most newly conferred Doctor of Philosophy, I assumed that my rightful place upon returning to Guam was at UOG as a professor.

UOG also taught me that even if the same professors who mentored me encouraged me to pursue my doctoral degree, it didn't mean they wanted me to come back and teach with them. I applied for a teaching position at the College of Education I believe, three times in a row – and each time was rejected by the search committee. In one of those openings I was competing with an individual who graduated from Harvard – so I did not feel as bad when I received my rejection letter. The only problem is that when he turned down the offer, they instead decided to open the position again instead of asking me to fill it. I even tried to ask the academic vice president if they would consider letting me teach the courses that I would have taught had I been hired for a semester – just to try me out. And of course he said, “No, I won't violate the process and supersede the recommendation of the committee.”

I cried a lot for weeks as a result of that rejection because that was my dream --- it was my dream to be a professor at the University of Guam.

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That was two decades ago and here we are today in a field house honoring you graduates for your achievement and I as your commence speaker. Lesson learned, be careful how you treat someone, you just don't know when you might need them.

Graduates and fellow educators,

Lessons learned since I received my diploma from the late President Carter are countless – some of which were learned through mistakes and others from the mentorship of professors, DOE supervisors and my family members. But there were three specific learning blocks that served as the foundation – the roots --- that kept me from toppling over when the storms came and it felt like I was stripped of every ounce of dignity as a human being.

The first learning block had to do with ambition. We often view ambition negatively because it is usually associated with the individual who is eager to pursue a difficult goal -- someone pushy, ruthless. When we have a positive view of the person who has ambition we call them motivated, go-getting – determined – goal oriented.

In my pursuit for a higher degree, I was ambitious and those who cared about me – the described me as highly motivated – while my detractors called me pushy. But what many people didn't know was that from the time I was divorced and became the single parent of three small children, I felt that I was running against time. My children were all born in the 1970's barely a decade since the civil rights act was passed by Congress and Blacks were allowed to sit anywhere in the bus instead of the back of the bus.

My children were the minority in an island community that still was not used to the color of their skin and the texture of their hair. People stared at us when we went shopping and while I eventually got used to it, I felt that I owed my children something more than the minimum wage I was earning as the sales representative for Revlon beauty products. I wanted them to be proud of their mother, in the midst of discrimination they experienced from being of a mixed African – Filipino race. I wanted them to witness the combined power of hard work and faith, the difference between blind ambition and setting high standards. I wanted to compensate for the alienation and bullying they experienced in school from time to time.

I wanted to give my children and I hope in the midst of human behavior that made us feel less than others.

The second building block was the belief that nothing was impossible to achieve with God. I grew up in a family that was fragmented but prayed a lot. I still recall my grandmother in the Philippines walking the rice patties with her rosary very early in the morning and just before dark in the evening even in the midst of fights among her children. Like many, I went through a period of questioning and rebelling against that basic principle, but at the end the belief in God has proven to be far more deeply rooted and continues to serve as the single most important guiding principle to this day.

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Believing that someone much bigger than me, someone a lot smarter, someone wiser and more powerful and who knows all things really exist has not only helped me overcome many obstacles to earn this degree. This belief in God has helped me heal from the rejections that I experienced as a child of a contract worker who immigrated to Guam in 1960. I recall how in the fourth grade, we had an election for the student council representative for our class. I was nominated and won. Our teacher decided to have another election because I only won by five votes – but I clearly won. Of course the second vote I lost and I was so disappointed.

President Underwood in his introduction talked about the number of times I was rejected in my application for the Superintendent's position in DOE and we can now laugh about the rejection letters I received from this institution. But he did not tell you that in 2005, a year after the Guam Education Policy Board selected someone over me to be the Superintendent of Education, I applied to be the Associate Superintendent of Special Education but lost to a 28 year old special education teacher who has never had administrative experience. This experience also caused a heart ache not only for me but my children, who already had their own families, could not understand how that young lady could have been selected over me in light of my credentials and more than a decade of experience in special education.

This was another painful experience that resulted in crying and getting mad over a period of two weeks. But when we got tired of crying and getting mad, we also reverted back to our belief that in all things, with our faith in God still in tack – this experience also had a purpose behind our disappointment.

To some who don't understand what it means to believe in God, this will appear to be blind faith. But believing in God's presence in my life and believing that each person I encounter, whether they are for me or against me, have a purpose in life, have consistently propelled me to get beyond the pity party after each disappointment.

The next learning block is equally important to ambition and belief but comes easily if you have both. Courage! Ambition is simply a daydream if you don't have the courage to step out and pursue that goal. My belief in God is empty if I don't step out of my comfort zone and courageously explore the unknown.

But courage today means a lot more than just climbing the highest mountain and taking on the giants, the bullies in our community.

Courage means letting someone else have their way, even though your way will lead you to your common destination faster. I am still learning this meaning of courage as a passenger in our car.

Courage means saying I am sorry even though you know you did not do anything wrong.

Courage means reaching out to that person that has hurt you by their actions and giving them another chance even though the chances of being disappointed is greater than rebuilding the trust that you once had for that person.

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When you have courage, you can affirm the best qualities of the person who had just stripped you of every ounce of your dignity.

My learning blocks – my ABCs – were not handed to me in a platter, nor was I born with these deeply rooted fundamental principles. I learned these from mentors who cared about me. I learned this from my parents who, in spite of my troubled years, kept reminding me that nothing is impossible to achieve no matter how slow you are in getting there.

I learned these from teachers in grades K – 12, from priests and preachers, and professors who believed that I can do more and took the time to mentor me to spend time with me and to tell me I can publish, I can do research, I can get my Ph.D. and I can be the Superintendent of Education.

I learned my ABCs from an aunt who only finished 6th grade but was so willing to babysit my young children as I pursued my bachelor's degree in this institution.

I learned my ABCs from students with disabilities, such as my grandson Keshawn who is autistic, but who easily finds joy in watching toy story over and over again.

I learned my ABCs from supervisors and superintendents before me – Dr. Katherine Aguon, Mrs. Gloria Nelson, Mrs. Rosa Palomo, Judge Anita Sukola, Dr. Quitugua, Senator Robert Klitzkie, Dr. DeTorres, Mr. Taimanglo, Senator Aline Yamashita, Mr. Michael Reidy, Mrs. Tainatongo, Mr. Flores, and Mr. Reyes. Despite what anybody thinks about how each of those former leaders of DOE performed – and despite their strengths and weaknesses – each one deserve to be honored for stepping up to the plate and batting for our students.

AMBITION,... BELIEF IN GOD ... AND COURAGE are my ABCs that have served as the roots of my being ... that have allowed me to be pruned by my teachers, without being broken ... those are the core values that have given me the strength to keep trying ... to keep applying ... to keep going ... to stay on as the Superintendent of Education to finish my contract ... in the midst of constant public deprecation. Those ABCs are what has allowed me to transform the painful experiences of rejection and disappointments that at the time blocked my progress, into learning blocks that can now be uses as building blocks for the future.

So I implore you to take the time to reflect on the heights and depths of your experience as a child, as a student, as a parent, as a spouse, a partner, as an employee, as a leader. I encourage you to reflect on the happiest moments in your life --- the times when you felt so special --- those times when you felt like the whole world was on your side --- and you had that extra bounce in your step.

But I also ask you to think about the saddest moments of your life -- those times when your trust was violated , when you were betrayed by those to whom you have given nothing but kindness and opportunities for growth, when you felt you were picked on, when it seemed like you could not possibly fix what you had broken and what has been done on to you ... those times when you shed tears that only God could have measured ...

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And as you do so --- and you reflect on where you are at today ... this very moment, celebrating your success as fellow tritons ... celebrating your success as support staff, professors and leaders of this great institution ... celebrating the success of our graduates as their family members and friends ... as our government leaders ... you will know that there is really nothing that we cannot accomplish with our ABCs.

As you take the time to do so and think about where you are at today --- this very moment --- you will discover that you too have your learning blocks --- your core values --- that can be used as building blocks for the future.

And as you define what your learning blocks are -- what your ABCs are -- I challenge each one of you my fellow tritons to use those as the building blocks not only for yourself and your loved ones -- but for our island community as a whole.

By crafting this message today, I came to realize just how much this University has done for me and I am ashamed that I have not done more to give back to this great institution of higher learning. So I ask each of you to join me in giving back to this institution when it celebrates its 60th birthday next year.

I'll walk this talk as I pledge to UOG 1 hour of my salary each day for the remaining days of my term as Superintendent of Education. President Underwood would only have to be prepared to support me when I retire.

Thank you and God Bless each of you!

Biba Tritons! Biba Tritons! Biba Tritons!