

Class of 2014 Commencement Address

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Thank you so much for having me here today. Thank you, Provost Gillman and Dean La Ferla, for allowing me to share in this special commencement occasion with your students, their families and friends. Let's also not forget your amazing professors. They are the best and the brightest! Give them another hand. They're truly awesome!

Thank you Graduates of 2014. I am honored and humbled to be with you on the start of this new chapter in your lives. Since drinking the "UCI Peter the Anteater Kool-aid," I have become a

huge, lifelong UCI fan. I love the school. What a unique and wonderful university!

And to think that 42 percent of you are the first to attend college in your family is truly amazing. You are making your families so proud today! We all know you would not be graduating if it were not for the support of those families and friends. So let's thank all of your families and friends who are here today.

All of you are smart and clever (especially biology graduates!) or you would not be here today. Although being clever will get you so far in life, being driven will get you farther. But being KIND will truly give you the intrinsic success that money cannot buy.

Jeff Bezos, Founder of Amazon, said, “Cleverness is a gift ... but kindness is a choice.” It’s the giving back to others who are less fortunate than yourselves that will make you feel like you can move mountains in your life going forward.

Compassion, kindness and empathy are almost forgotten today. We are a tech-obsessed, multi-tasking, paper-free, fast forward, millennial generation which is super impressive. Don’t get me wrong. I’m impressed with your technology and skills. Yet, I feel we need to all “put the pause button on” and really look at how we can make the world a better place by helping our neighbor. It’s that simple.

My story is one of how kindness can make a real difference. “Giving back” and volunteering were a large part of my family’s life growing up. At age 11, my father dropped me off at a nursing home. A very bad one, it was awful. It was the “Dark Ages” and there weren’t even any cell phones.

He boldly told me, “You seem to really enjoy old people so it is time for you volunteer and help them. See if you really respect their wisdom.” As a kid, I enjoyed spending time with older adults. I loved their stories, amazing life lessons, and their patriotism gave me chills. Of course, their war stories were the best. Understanding how “The Greatest Generation,” made our county what it is

today was inspiring. They were the wisest people I'd ever encountered. I thank my father for all the time he spent instilling the volunteer attitude in me. As a result of his indoctrination of kindness, I would like to share my father's wisdom with all of you.

My father was born one of 17 children in Wisconsin. After his dad suddenly passed away, he was placed in a horrible orphanage. He not only made it out alive, he graduated from the University of Wisconsin and Loyola Law School. He was the first to attend college like many of you today. He did it all on his own with no family or support. He's a man of success from rags to riches, the epitome of the American dream, that

proves anyone can become accomplished with hard work and determination. He was driven his whole life. However, if you asked him how he got to where he is today, he would define his success by how he treated others. These three points made him successful and influenced me in my life to choose the humble route.

1. His famous saying, "Be a Changemaker."

Be different. Don't just show up for eight hours of work. Put in a full day of hard work, follow through and do not be on time ... be early! Be driven and detailed. Have the best manners in the room.

Always respect the person with less power than you. I do not care if you are the most

powerful or richest person in the room, you will be judged on how you treat the least in life.

When I interview a candidate for a job, I take them out to lunch and watch if they are kind to the staff or employees at the restaurant. I also do this with anyone I may go into business or partnership with. At a lunch or dinner you can see how people treat others. If they are not kind they are “off the list.”

In 1996 at age 26, as a new Gerontologist, I opened my first small facility in Irvine. In order to make a lasting difference as a “Changemaker,” I aspired to protect older adults from abuse. I felt older adults with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease could not speak for themselves. They could not

remember, they could not report events. What if someone stole something from them? And, most importantly, what if someone abused them? With memory loss anything tragic can happen to the person who cannot protect themselves.

Logically, I felt a rape or abuse would not occur in the living room. It would occur in the bedroom with the door closed. I applied to the State of California for a Memory Care-Assisted Living license and I installed video cameras in every room, including the bedrooms. Quickly, we were filled with residents in our first facility in Irvine and soon after the drama began.

After one month of operation, the State Licensing Evaluator came out and said, “We made

a mistake and approved Irvine Cottages' camera monitoring system. It seriously violates residents' privacy. We cannot allow you to videotape anyone in their bedrooms." We were asked to turn off the cameras or the State would pull our license and close our facility within 24 hours.

All of this was bewildering because we had informed consent from all our employees, families and even the residents. We even had potential employees that didn't want to work for us. They didn't want to be camera monitored -- what a great screening tool. Everything was going so well.

I kept preaching to them about safety. What about safety? What if they fell? The cameras could

show us how they fell. What if they lost their dentures?

However, then something amazing happened. In the days ahead, we were on the front page of The Orange County Register three times and I received thousands of letters applauding our choice to have cameras and no one mentioned the lack of privacy. The letters had such sad stories regarding their loved ones and the abuse they had endured in many other places.

Next we went to Sacramento with all our families. One of them is here today. She was one of the daughters – she really fought the fight with me. After three long years we won. We are still the only facility in America to have

comprehensive camera monitoring in the bedrooms for all of our older adults with dementia.

But during the fight, something interesting happened. We went on many shows from CNN, NBC, Fox News and even Dateline. The publicity was so good for our company that we were opening two to three facilities a year. People moved their moms and dads into the Cottages from as far away as Canada, New York and all over the country to feel the peace of mind that our cameras and care had to offer.

Being a Changemaker and being passionate about a cause can be devastating at times. But with conviction in knowing what you are doing is

going to help someone less fortunate, it can be so rewarding.

2. Dad's second point, "It is not all about you. Volunteer and make it a part of your life." Give of your time, your talent, and eventually you will give of your treasure.

Bob Hope said: "If you have not any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble." You may not remember Bob Hope -- he was the Jimmy Kimmel of the past.

Being passionate about anything from charity work to helping your neighbor feels good. There is no way to measure the serotonin that you will receive from helping others. When I volunteer for any charity I also meet the best and the

brightest . . . and, of course, the kindest people. Giving back to others blesses you beyond what you could have imagined.

Who are the most memorable people in your life? I am sure you all remember them. Your favorite uncle, grandparent, neighbor, teacher, professor at UCI? The kind ones, not the mean or arrogant ones. The people who took the time to talk to you with a warm heart or help you out in life. Those are the people you will all become if you are kind to your neighbor.

The opposite of kindness is "It's all about you." That leads to arrogance. The worst times I remember in my life are when I was not kind. So err on the side of kindness.

Now I have no doubt that all of you are kind, however the reason I am reminding you to be so kind is that life becomes more complicated. After you graduate college, enter the work force, raise a family, support yourself, life can become overwhelming. During trials and tribulations, you need the value of kindness to focus on. It will take you so far. Most everyone I know who is at the top of any organization is compassionate and has empathy for others. I hope you will keep your Anteater value of kindness as you enter the working world.

3. My father's third and final value is to "Be humble."

President Ronald Reagan said, "There is no limit to what a person can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit." He used that quote every day in office to his staff. He didn't mind who got the credit.

Being humble is difficult. It's the opposite of being proud or arrogant. When I was in my second year in Gerontology Graduate School, my Psychology of Aging professor had on the final exam the question, "What is the name of the janitor?" The question was worth 20 percent. I thought it was a joke. The professor felt a lesson

in being friendly to everyone was important and it would teach us humility.

I only received half-credit because I knew the janitor had six kids and many had already attended USC. But I did not know his name. His name was Hector and I will never forget that lesson. Be humble and treat everyone with dignity. Life will be for all of you a lifelong lesson in humility. In the end, we all get the credit. And no one gets out alive anyway, so make the most of being kind and humble.

Again, I am so proud of you all today and I know going forward life is going to have its trials and tribulations, but all you will endure because you are amazing Anteaters! The future of our

County rests in your hands. So remember: Be kind, be humble and be a Changemaker!

Congratulations!