

Park University Kansas City Area Commencement Keynote Address

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I'm humbled and honored to be standing in front of you today to deliver this year's commencement speech. Just two short years ago, after a very long journey that started in 1978, I received my bachelor's degree from this esteemed institution. When I was asked to be this year's speaker, I was truly terrified. First, because I am a wreck when it comes to public speaking, and second, because I would have to speak in front of so many people who are much more educated than I am. It just seemed too intimidating. But I always try to challenge myself and work through my discomfort. This helped shaped what I wanted to talk about — three topics: overcoming obstacles, setting goals and having a vision.

We all have our own stories regarding these topics. All of us have faced obstacles. Whether consciously or not, we set goals and we envision the life we want to lead. We begin life overcoming obstacles. Our first memories may include fitting in at school, trying to compete at a sport or hobby, or achieving good grades. You get the picture. But some of us have challenges that are more difficult. Handicaps, whether physical or mental, discrimination, prejudices or lack of resources. Mine seemed painful, but many of us here can relate to my challenges. For instance, learning English while starting school in America, name calling when I came to Kansas City because of my Mexican surname, being one of three women in my major, data processing, in the early 80's. Competing in a male dominated field as a young working mother in corporate America or being in a male dominated field of information technology specialists. Personally, I would prefer to talk about how we can turn obstacles into opportunities.

You see, when we challenge ourselves, we learn several things. One, do we sink or swim. If we make poor choices, do we learn from our mistakes and move on? Did we grow in the process of handling something that isn't comfortable or easy? Did we make ourselves better? Interestingly enough, as I look back at my life, some of my personal challenges really helped me grow as a person. Take name calling. So hurtful at the time. And even now I still revert to worrying if someone will not like me because of my ethnicity or because of some label that I may or may not have earned. But, I had parents who instilled in me a desire to be a good and kind person, to follow the "Golden Rule" and to constantly try to be the best I could be. I learned then that their prejudices could be changed. It was my first lesson that sometimes life isn't fair and you have to work harder than others to prove yourself. It wasn't an isolated incident and others suffered from far more hurtful situations. My parents wouldn't allow me to feel sorry for myself and having to face my fear, overcome it and move on helped prepare for more serious challenges.

As the oldest of six children, my parents made sure that I was the child that set examples and by virtue of birth order, a role model for my younger siblings. One way they shaped our character was to have us constantly set goals. When we were young, they set the goals for us. Like winning a spelling bee, being on the honor roll, winning competitions. They stressed how education and constantly striving to learn would be a lifelong endeavor. When you're in fifth grade you can't wait to graduate from high school. As a sophomore in college I had a hard time imagining that I would ever want to go back to school after earning a degree. My parents ended up being right about learning being a lifelong endeavor. In fact, if it

wasn't for the goal my parents had set for all of their children to graduate with a four-year degree, I may not have had the nagging desire to complete my degree. I was so proud of my youngest sister when she received her doctorate. And what really pushed me was having our oldest son graduate from college — on time with a double major while playing football and working. It made me realize that just because I was building a business, it didn't mean I couldn't work on finishing my degree. That particular goal helped round out a vision I've had since I was very young. That vision included having a family, being educated in a good school and having a great job. That degree made me feel like my vision wasn't just a dream, but living a life more fully.

I always wanted to go to college, but getting married, having children my junior and senior year in college, and doing an internship my senior year just delayed my progress. I was able to get an associate's degree after I started my career and at the time, I settled for that as being good enough. My parents would gently remind me that I should still get my bachelor's and I was the only one of their children without that distinction. Besides that, I really wanted to do it for myself. I am so glad that I did because there were so many things I learned and applied while taking those courses that I now have a new goal — to earn an advanced degree.

You can see where that's leading! I've earned my associates, now my bachelor's, and I've revised my goal to earn a more advanced degree. Which leads to the second topic. Setting goals. Year after year, especially after I entered the workplace, I set goals. As I accomplished goals, I would either raise the bar or create a new goal. Each goal always had one major objective — that I am better by accomplishing the goal I set. I've had goals that I didn't reach. I had to determine if I wanted to fight hard enough to reach that goal or if I needed to modify what I wanted. As an example, I started college as a broadcasting major. After meeting my future husband in college, I just couldn't focus on doing a good job at accomplishing that goal. Looking back, I realize I didn't have the maturity to understand that a lot of it was because I was very young and hadn't developed the poise to speak well under pressure. I threw that goal out but replaced it with data processing. Why? Well, basically I have very little imagination and my father was a data processing director. He wisely encouraged me to enter a field that was growing and would allow flexibility as a working mother. Life is funny, because while winning talent competitions as a little girl, my vision was to be a TV broadcaster, the next Barbara Walters. I changed my vision and my goals, but what I learned was that I liked what I did, it fit with my life and that I was good at it.

But the most glaring example of how these three topics helped shape who I am today is when I started ECCO Select. I started a business in 1995 without any entrepreneurial background and a very narrow view of how business would be conducted. To overcome the challenge of understanding how to run a business, I went to the Kauffman Foundation. I knew that I would have better success if I had a business plan. Even in corporate America you had to have a plan, including a personal professional development plan. You plan your work then work your plan. I went through the FastTrac program at the Kauffman Foundation and created a business plan. I also met other entrepreneurs and slowly a vision shaped. Not just the original business model I had of providing IT resources, but one in which I provided the highest caliber resources to help my clients realize their goals.

My own goals were shaped and modified year after year. Just like any other business owner, I faced challenges that included access to capital, hiring the right people, what to invest and when to make those investments, and how to grow the business. Over the years I have found out that I'm actually pretty resourceful. I've learned that I can't do it all. And I've learned from my mistakes. I rely on others to help me, including mentors who have advised me and held me accountable to reaching my goals. I've made mistakes. Some of them have been costly, but I attribute my strong work ethic, great employees and

dogged perseverance in helping me with challenges that have closed the doors of many of my competitors.

One challenge our whole nation faced was on September 11, 2001. Who would have ever imagined a catastrophe so horrific? Or one that would quickly throw our economy into a tailspin? I couldn't control projects being cancelled right and left while my clients tried to determine how they would deal with their stocks plummeting and profits falling. There were many sleepless nights in which I would just sob in my living room trying to deal with the stress of figuring out how we would continue to keep the doors of ECCO Select open. Going bankrupt was not an option.

Just like my other successes, I didn't overcome emerging from this disaster without a lot of help. Remember I said I was resourceful? So were my clients. They knew that I had lost a lot of business because of projects being cancelled. But they knew I could find talent. They recommended me to other business units to help them with their unique resource needs. Although 2002 was a rough year, we emerged with a more diversified client base and service offering. We now place professionals in other business units, like finance and accounting, marketing, training and translations, and human resources. Without 9/11, I may not have entered into these other areas or tried to figure out how to grow my business during a depressed time.

Those lessons learned were kept in mind as we entered into these current tough economic times. I felt better prepared to continue growing my business, and being flexible at how we would grow. I'm happy to report that we continue, year after year, to have double digit growth. Instead of worrying about how the recession would affect our business, I applied some of those lessons learned during 9/11 so that we wouldn't head into the same tailspin we experienced at that time.

The awards that our company has won are a testimony to our ability to turn obstacles into opportunities, to stay focused on our goals and to never let go of our vision.

And as proud as I am at the success of being a business owner, I'm most proud of the life I lead. I work hard to better my community. I try to be a good daughter, sister and friend. My most important job is as a wife, mother and grandmother, and I never forget and constantly thank my maker because I know that if it weren't for a higher power, I would have nothing.

I hope that you see a little of me in what you are learning and that you might be able to realize your own vision. I know that you are looking forward to the end of my speech so that you can receive your diploma. But let me leave you with this quote:

"Nothing happens unless first a dream. Dream big, dream bold and be the best that you can be."

Thank you.