

Commencement Address
Ortmayer Stadium - University of La Verne
La Verne, CA
May 26, 2001

Good evening, and welcome once again to the Undergraduate Commencement Ceremonies for the University of La Verne Class of 2001! Go Leos!

It's an honor for me to speak before you, the nearly 800 graduates and the thousands of friends, family, and alumni who are here to join you to celebrate this great day, this milestone in your life. Your dedication and hard work have gotten you to where you are standing today – in the warm Southern California sun wearing a long black gown, wondering exactly when this commencement speaker guy was going to end and you could get your degree!

Graduation Day is an opportunity for each of you to reflect on your academic career here at the University of La Verne. At the same time, you are thinking about the next phase of your life – whether it's going to graduate school, entering the workforce full-time, raising a family, serving your country, or travelling the globe.

It wasn't too long ago that I was wearing a cap and gown at my own graduation from college in 1994. The feeling I had at that moment was the same feeling you undoubtedly have right now. Each of you celebrating this great day today have received a gift – a chance to pursue a higher education that your parents, your grandparents, your brothers and sisters, or your cousins may not have had.

Although I was not the first person in my family to go to college, I was the first in my family to travel – in my case, 3,000 miles away from sunny Pacoima in the northeast San Fernando Valley to cold and windy Cambridge, Massachusetts to attend a school I had never even seen before in my life, MIT.

My parents were immigrants with very limited formal schooling. Making a living and raising a family with modest resources was their first priority. And even though my parents didn't know Shakespeare or geometry or sociology, they certainly understood the importance of learning and the need for their children to work hard. In the words of my father, it was important for us to have the chance to work with our heads and not with our backs.

In the Padilla house, there were hard-fast rules that my sister, my brother, and I had to stick to. Not done with your English homework? Then going to play baseball or hanging out with your friends is going to have to wait. Didn't finish studying for your math test? That TV is *off* and is going to *stay off* until it's done.

One graduate of my high school, San Fernando High School, was an MIT student who I had known while I was an underclassman. When he returned on break one year, he asked me where I was considering going to college. To be honest, I hadn't considered much of anything other than

what color tux I was going to wear at the junior prom and which friends of mine would be splitting the cost of the limo with me.

So, like you, I took my SAT's and filled out my college application, to several schools, and I was certainly happy to find out that I had been accepted to MIT, though at the time, I knew about as much about MIT as I knew about how to dig a car out of a snowdrift and to scrape ice off a windshield.

When I got to MIT, I learned very quickly that I was going to need to bring my study skills up a notch or two, because my fellow classmates were on top of their game. Many of them grew up in places that weren't like Pacoima at all – they came from boarding schools, science & technology magnet schools, and neighborhoods from all over the country and all over the world in much different environments than my hometown.

Do we have any engineering or physics majors out there this evening? Well, you'll appreciate this one – there was one course at MIT that I will never, ever forget as long as I live – Electricity and Magnetism.

I'll never forget it, because I failed that course.

So, I signed up for Electricity and Magnetism again.

And I failed – again.

I spent a bitterly cold Massachusetts winter wondering if I had what it took – if I should give up, if I should drop out, if I should re-enroll at another college. I met with college counselors and alumni, and I spoke to friends and family.

What I came away with was this: I certainly wasn't a model student my first year in college. But I was going to take Electricity and Magnetism – again.

I certainly wasn't going to be the “best” Electricity and Magnetism student in history, but I was going to take this class and do the absolute BEST that I could do. I was just one student at MIT – but more importantly, I was a representative of the Padilla family and I was a representative of my community, Pacoima.

A lot more than my letter grade was riding on this class.

There's a saying, that “luck” is when opportunity knocks, and you answer.

For me, the opportunity NOT to fail Electricity and Magnetism knocked, and I answered, and behind that door was...a C-minus. A passing grade, and I won't deny that luck was involved! And enough to keep me enrolled at MIT, where I improved my study habits, made up some ground, and brought home a college degree that's hanging up to this day.

Many of you here today have had challenges in your life – whether it’s your background, or whether you had your own Electricity and Magnetism experience.

But the experience you have had during your tenure here at University of La Verne has enabled you to learn in some areas that you will continue to build on throughout your life.

Over your coursework and in your interaction with your fellow students and faculty and staff here at University of La Verne, you have learned values that will serve you well for the rest of your life – values of hard work, friendship, and dedication.

You have been an integral part of a university environment with students, faculty, and staff in which you have interacted with people from all over Southern California, across the State, and from around the world. You have made lifelong friendships that you will carry with you for the rest of your life.

You have learned academic skills that will serve you forever – critical thinking, scientific reasoning, and information preparation that you will incorporate in your careers, in further academic study, and in your work outside the office in community-based organizations.

Lastly, you have been part of a University community that values service and dedication to one’s community. As a public servant, I have a personal bias towards community service. But you can easily serve your community without having to run for office.

The great American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve.”

Service to one’s community – and the global community can manifest itself in many ways.

- You can organize a cleanup in your neighborhood, improving your physical surroundings
- You can begin a neighborhood watch in your community, keeping your neighborhood safe
- You can coach a soccer team, giving children a positive after-school activity
- You can adopt a “little brother” or “little sister” and serve as a tutor and a mentor to a young person in your community
- You can work as a volunteer – or a doctor – in a community hospital, keeping families healthy
- You can help design energy-efficient products and develop new, renewable sources of energy to help California and the rest of the world succeed in an era of energy scarcity
- You can pursue a career in foreign service and help to resolve the centuries-old conflicts in the Middle East
- And yes, you can knock door to door in your community for six months, shake countless hands, and lose your voice running for office to serve your community and to give your home neighborhood – whether it’s Pacoima or Pomona, Lake View Terrace or La Verne – a voice at City Hall.

Today, each of you receives your college degree.

But, as the great American writer Mark Twain once said, “Never let your schooling get in the way of your education.” You will continue to learn – and receive an education – throughout your life, from your family, your friends, your co-workers, and your community. Make your service -- your contribution to your community -- personal and meaningful to you, because only then will your service be meaningful to those you serve.

Today is your day – and it will always be extraordinarily meaningful to you, your family, and your loved ones. My warmest congratulations to you, the University of La Verne, class of 2001! Enjoy this very special day in recognition of your dedication, and in recognition of your graduation from college!

Thank you very much.

###