

**Honorable Pedro A. Cortés
Secretary of the Commonwealth**

**Penn State Harrisburg
Commencement Address
Giant Center
Hershey, PA**

Saturday, December 20th, 2003

Right away, let me share with you the secret of success:

Rise early....work late...and strike oil!

I cannot think of more appropriate words to start this morning as I share with you my thoughts on this most joyous occasion.

Today's graduation ceremony recognizes the time and effort you dedicated in pursuit of your degree. It also marks the beginning of another chapter in your life.

Today, I want you to think about reaching ABOVE and BEYOND.

It is all about rising early...working late...and striking oil.

Do not be satisfied with just meeting expectations...strive daily to exceed them!

(PAUSE)

Before I go any further, please allow me to thank the entire Penn State Harrisburg family for giving me the opportunity to deliver your commencement address. I am particularly grateful to my dear friend Dr. Madlyn Hanes and her staff.

(PAUSE)

Your late nights as students included coffee mug rings on your notes...yellow and orange highlighter stains on your fingers and dog ears on your textbook pages from turning them so much.

Some of you remember taking very loud music breaks to get away from the printed word just for a few precious moments...and some of you remember just how hard you had to work just to eek out a passing grade.

No matter what dusty and sweat-covered path you chose to get to this sunny destination, you did it.

You are examples of perseverance, persistence and patience. You focused yourselves on success. And success has arrived.

As a child I learned the value of perseverance, persistence and patience.

I remember growing up in a working-class neighborhood in Carolina, Puerto Rico. My mother, whose love I cherish today and forever, was my earliest source of inspiration.

She worked tirelessly to provide my sister, Mayra, and I with the very best that she could afford. My sister, who is here today, can tell you just how much our mother struggled to make ends meet and provide for her family.

We did not wear designer clothing. We did not eat steak three times a week. But our clothes were always clean...we were always presentable and we never went hungry.

At a very early age, my mother taught me the value of education. For me, mastering my studies was the key to improving my life and achieving my dreams. As you know, having a degree provides many more opportunities to grow and to sustain a family.

So I decided to go to college and pursue my bachelor's degree. Eventually, I returned to school and obtained my law degree. While some people told me that I no longer needed or would benefit from additional formal education after law school, I believed differently. Therefore, I chose to go after a master's degree from Penn State Harrisburg. You see, I WANTED that degree.... I WANTED to go ABOVE AND BEYOND.

(PAUSE)

Let me share with you the story about a young man that I know...after living in Puerto Rico for 18 years, he went to New England to obtain his bachelor's degree. His plans were to attend law school immediately upon graduating from college.

On the day that he was to take the Law School Admission Test, he wound up in bed with the chicken pox. He was unable to leave his house, much less, take this strenuous exam.

He was a bit disappointed in having to postpone the exam because he felt strongly about becoming a lawyer. Taking the test was a significant step in accomplishing this dream.

But he went on with his life. He graduated from the University, married his college sweetheart and moved to Pennsylvania.

After managing the day-to-day operations of a movie theater for a couple of years, this young man looked at another opportunity.

He took a job as an Income Maintenance Caseworker with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. He worked with public assistance clients and encouraged them to succeed. He established professional relationships with some of the less fortunate in our society. While his compassion had always been evident, he further developed his gifts of patience, understanding and empathy.

This man was not afraid to work. Some days, he would awaken when it was dark, drive to work, only to leave when it was dark again. The only daylight he saw was when...and if...he left the building for lunch.

He volunteered for overtime...took on tasks that went ABOVE AND BEYOND his scope of responsibilities. He did things that were not part of his job description.

In short, he was a “go-getter”...someone who did not wait for opportunities to arise, but someone who created them.

And when the next opportunity arose, he took it. While he was pleased with his work at the Department of Public Welfare, he came across another position within the state’s Civil Service Commission, the agency that administers the state’s merit system of employment.

There, he also applied himself. Once again, he worked long and arduous hours...sometimes not getting home to his family until eight or nine in the evening. Each of his work evaluations had glowing praise and remarks from superiors who commented on his ability and desire to go ABOVE AND BEYOND.

While his life had meaning...his work was rewarding...and he felt a sense of personal fulfillment, one thing was missing...the law degree.

So he talked it over with his wife. They planned their finances...looked at making it on his wife's income, and he went for it. He went for the law degree.

The hours were long...the sacrifice heavy. Days were filled with classes and frequent visits to the law library. He read more in law school than at any time prior to that.

Sometimes the briefs he prepared were longer than the cases that he read due to all of the notes he took.

And he was patient. He knew that the short-term sacrifice would pay off in large dividends later in life.

Upon his return to state government, the law degree came in handy. His ability to think better, read better, write better and analyze situations better was put to the test at the State Civil Service Commission.

(PAUSE)

Then, a huge opportunity came. This young man was asked by then Governor Tom Ridge to fulfill a critical role in his Administration...Governor Ridge wanted this recent law-school graduate to head up a key agency that administered services to the fastest-growing population in the state.

To the young man, it was an honor and an opportunity to combine his love of people with his administrative training.

Again, he took the job seriously. He traveled throughout the Commonwealth...alone...to make as many substantive connections as possible. He wanted people to know that he was sincere and accessible. People responded.

In three years, this young man transformed a little known state agency to the best that it could possibly be...and he did it with a small budget and with a small support staff. He kept the Governor and Administration well informed. He also created access and developed numerous programs for a traditionally under served population.

(PAUSE)

Imagine his surprise, one day, when he received a call from Governor Ed Rendell asking him to become a member of his cabinet AND the first Latino Secretary in the history of Pennsylvania.

For, you see, I am that young man.

I share my story with you not to bring attention to myself, but to provide you with a living, breathing, walking example of how going ABOVE AND BEYOND can bring you much success.

Luck has often been defined as opportunity meeting preparation. While you can argue that I was lucky...I would say that I was also prepared for the opportunity.

And I am very grateful to be part of the rich history our Commonwealth.

(PAUSE)

Remember, the diploma that you will receive today is more than a piece of parchment...more than a memento that goes up on a wall. It is a reminder of the struggles that you had to overcome to get to this day, December 20th, 2003.

Your degree is a part of you. It signifies a major success in your life.

And with great success, comes great responsibility. It is a call to go ABOVE AND BEYOND.

Today, our society is filled with those who tackle their day-to-day lives without enthusiasm. Workplaces are filled with individuals whose zest and passion for life has been drained. Today, the realities of commuting, deadline pressures and the desire to increase profits take their toll. Many in our workforce complain of tiredness...an increased workload and little job satisfaction.

But you do not have to accept this as your reality.

I happen to love my job. Often, I am asked what it is like to be Secretary of the Commonwealth. I reply, “It is the best job in Harrisburg, because the Department of State positively affects people’s lives from start to finish.”

Each and every day, I go ABOVE AND BEYOND to savor every personal encounter. Every meeting and every phone call is interesting to me.

Every day, I challenge myself and ask “how can I do better today for the people of Pennsylvania?”

I do something. I apply myself.

Lee Iacocca, the world-famous and successful carmaker, once said, “Apply yourself. Get all the education that you can, but then, by God, do something. Do not just stand there, make it happen.”

Create opportunities for yourself...and also create ways to serve others.

It is not enough for you to make six figures, purchase a two-car, four-bedroom house in the suburbs with a lush, green lawn and a crystal-clear, swimming pool...it is not enough to wear famous brand names like Gucci and Armani.

Material things will only bring you so much satisfaction. Why? Because they are tangible...they can break...they can be taken from you...and they only represent a part of you.

What you should be looking for in your lives is “meaning,” not “things.” Also, strive not only to do well, but also, to do GOOD!

One of my favorite quotes COMES from John Gardner who simply said, “When people are serving, life is no longer meaningless.”

Each of us has 24-hours a day to live life. Most of that time is spent sleeping, eating and working. The rest, can be pretty much utilized any way we like.

I am a realist. I know that many of you have borrowed student loans to make this day possible. I understand that many of you had mortgages while you were at Penn State...I realize that you also had to make car payments.

The economic realities are not lost on me. But do not forget those who are less fortunate than we are. Make sure you give something back...whether it is your time, your talent or a donation.

I realize that we need to spend time socializing and having fun. After all, you have a right to enjoy life. But imbalance and emptiness take place when our pursuit of material goods and fun outweighs our purpose in life.

What you have done is significant. It is admirable and you should celebrate this occasion heartily and with joy.

Graduating from Penn State places you in the ranks of some of the finest minds in Pennsylvania.

I wish you much success and prosperity...and I urge you to take advantage of the many opportunities we have in Pennsylvania. We live in an extraordinary state, one filled with promise, prosperity and opportunity.

For those with a higher education, like yourselves, you will have many doors open to you.

The Commonwealth is fortunate to have you. Stay in Pennsylvania and help us shape the vision of the Commonwealth. We have much history and many assets of which to be proud. We also have an abundance of natural resources that make Pennsylvania one of the most beautiful states in the country.

Furthermore, you have a tremendous supporter in Governor Ed Rendell who values you.

In conclusion, let me share with you yet another quote that sums it up best: “You are embarking on the greatest adventure of your life. One that will allow you to improve your well being and to positively affect the life of others.”

Remember: Rise early, work late...and strike oil!

Thank you! And congratulations.