COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

FOR

RANDY VELARDE

Hello everyone. I am honored to be with you today at this commencement ceremony. I want to thank Dean Checci for that generous introduction, and yes, I am a proud graduate of the UNM College of Engineering. Being here brings back so many memories and of course I am reminded of my own graduation. Your college years are a time for dreaming your dreams and going forth to make them realities. Boy did I have dreams “**back in the day**”…. Yes. I had **BIG** dreams as a small boy growing up in Albuquerque. In fact we might almost say that one of those “visions” is being fulfilled **right this very minute**… sort of…You see, throughout my days here at UNM, the **ONE DREAM** I had (**If you want to go for a little laugh you can say**)… that I **REMEMBER**… (**And wait for the laugh**)… was to **be right here**… **right in this spot**…on the floor of “the pit.” **AND HERE I AM**!!! It just shows what perseverance, determination and belief in one’s abilities can do…. of course back then I dreamed I was a point guard for the Lobos…and we were **WINNING**… but **Hey**!! I’m still thrilled to be here!!! (**Wait for the laugh**).

I want to congratulate all of today’s graduates and I want to acknowledge the family and friends who are here in support of their sons and brothers, sisters and daughters. As the formalities wind down and this year’s graduating class prepares to take their final walk through the campus, the excitement is palpable. **(If you want to make a joke you can say**)… or is that everyone’s collective hunger speaking up? (**And wait for the laugh**). We might have all heard the slogan, “You’re not **YOU** when you’re hungry,” but to all of the members of the senior class of 2016, get ready because the hunger you might be feeling right now is just beginning! You are all standing on the edge of your future. Many of you have already determined and committed to the next steps of the rest of your lives. Some of you will go on to graduate school, some will enter the professional sector, and others will continue the quest to discover the next chapters on your own unique paths in life. Wherever you find yourself at this point is valid… as long as you understand this is now YOUR life and no one else can live it except YOU. Every challenge and every situation is an opportunity to further your education. If you thought that once you graduate you’re done with learning…. you’re right!!! You **ARE** done!! You see learning is a life long process and you’ve all really just begun to understand what true education means. Your school and college years merely lay the foundations and provide the basics for what you will need to navigate this increasingly complicated world. Now it’s time to truly experience life, appreciate the process, discover the lessons to learn even within the mistakes you make…. and you WILL make mistakes…. and use those mistakes to find the wisdom you will need to inform the rest of your lives.

There have been many wise and witty souls who have preceded me in offering bits of wisdom to young people. Benjamin Franklin taught us, “You will find the key to success under the alarm clock.” When I think of this quote, I kind of have to believe him…. after all, didn’t he have quite a bit of success with keys in his later years? (**Wait for the laugh**). Yes… If it weren’t for Benjamin Franklin, we’d all be sitting here in the dark and I would be screaming this speech through a megaphone! The famous American humorist, Will Rogers, also managed to school us with a witty warning about betraying one’s ambition. He said, “Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over **if you just sit there**.” Someone else said, “Success is often the result of taking a misstep in the right direction.” I think by now that you get the idea that it’s time to move forward in your lives and walk the walk.

As you strike out on your professional path in life, and as you begin to fully manifest your personas, there will be times you will long for the safety of this environment, the comfort of the quad, the aroma of (**Name some really classic snack or legendary food that everyone associates with UNM and wait for the laugh**)…. Growing into your own skin and having the chance to take on major adult responsibilities can be very daunting. There will be times when you feel trapped, isolated, detached from your friends and family and the comforts of adolescence. At those times I want you to think back on this day and all you’ve accomplished so far. Remember the feeling of achievement that fills you with pride. Keep in mind the vision of a bright and promising future…. and most of all, remember the words of Earl Wilson, the newspaper columnist who said, “If you think nobody cares if you’re alive…. try missing a couple of payments… for anything…” (**Wait for the laugh**). Yes… You’re never alone with a mortgage… or a car loan… or any monthly payment. It’s time to get to work!

I’d like to share a little bit of my own personal journey since my days at college just off Central Boulevard, and what it’s been like working, learning, and building a life from then until now. I remember when I was a student here at UNM and I look back fondly on those days. I can’t believe that thirty-five years have passed since I was in the audience sitting in your seat. I remember many things about that day but not so much about the person who delivered the commencement speech to my class. I also have a very vague recollection of what was said, so I want you to know that it’s my intention to leave you with an impression… and a good one at that. And if I can’t make it poignant and memorable, I will at the very least aim for pleasant and brief to allow you to get on with your celebrations and of course… to prepare to meet your destiny….

Upon graduating from UNM I got married and moved to Houston, Texas, where I joined Shell Chemical. It was a great first job and ten years later I moved to Texaco Chemical. In both places I trained and served in many roles. From sales to business management and other steps along the way in both organizations, I honed my craft, got great training, made meaningful business contacts and even got my MBA. I was on a career trajectory that looked very promising to those who observed me but the truth is, I was suffocating in that type of corporate environment. I was getting excellent training and meeting professionals and all of that experience really trained me for the future…. especially when I did my hard time working for **HIM**…. yes… in everyone’s professional life, sooner or later, one meets… The **BOSS**…. no… not Bruce Springsteen, the **BOSS** boss… the one from you-know-where… rhymes with “shell” and no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, no matter how contrite you might be, **NOTHING. IS. EVER. RIGHT**. That was a really difficult time in my professional life. No matter how hard I tried to overcome the feeling of defeat I experienced under the supervision of this man, I found that I too, was down on myself. I had to find a way to make sense of my time and to reclaim my self worth. As I look back on those days I realize that they served me well. I learned how determined I was and **am**. I found my resilience and resourcefulness, I began to acknowledge my abilities, and I realized that if I wanted to accomplish my dreams and goals, this man’s attitude was HIS problem and not mine. I learned a great deal from him and mostly I learned how NOT to be. I found one effective tool to overcoming the feeling of self-doubt was to break down my actions and tasks for the day and find a sense of accomplishment even in seemingly simple actions and interactions. I realized something really basic but so profound. **If you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day**. Small steps and actions to induce a sense of pride encourage bigger and more impactful actions. Ultimately, making the bed and doing even small gestures reinforces that little things in life matter. As I healed I went to the second and third tasks and found that every accomplishment reinforced my determination. It may sound simple or facile to you now, but everyone has those days, or weeks, or months of having to endure situations that are less than… oh… who am I kidding… they can be **soul crushing**! (**Wait for the laugh**)… but that guy didn’t get me and his “brothers” or “sisters” that show up on **your** journey will not get you!

So as we get back on the career path, I realized I was determined to follow my passion and while working at both of those jobs I was relentlessly crafting dozens of ideas to start my own business… and yes, I did this in my “off” hours. The one thing I discovered, and you will too- if you’re observant as well, is that when one is truly dedicated and passionate about one’s career, the mental intellectual adventure doesn’t end at the close of the workday. I found that one of the most valued assets that a professional can possess is to be interested, involved, and engaged about the work.

So I made my plans and I plotted my course… or courses… In my dreams they looked great… just like the skills I demonstrated on the floor of this very Pit…I did my due diligence. I made astounding discoveries… like if I followed those plans I was hatching… within six weeks to six months… **BINGO!!!** I’d be… **BANKRUPT!**! (**Wait for the laugh**).

Since I am not the type to abandon plans immediately I even tried a few of my “brainstorms”… Home Solutions was a forerunner to Angie’s List. I thought up a computer venture with a local university… something akin to the Internet. Hey! As an engineer I’m a designer… I envision and design solutions to society’s challenges… and with these two beauties I was **0 for 2**!! (**Wait for the laugh**).

Once again, I made some “lemonade” from the lemons I had and found the lesson I was destined to learn… undercapitalization and lack of management commitment- **MY** lack of commitment doesn’t get the job done. The good news? **YOU. WILL. FAIL**. And you may fail often and it will not feel very good. You will be tested and you will learn. You’ll learn that “when something doesn’t work, do something else.” Remember the words of Babe Ruth, “Don’t let the fear of striking out hold you back.” Embrace fear! Embrace rejection! Embrace failure! And **LEARN** from all of it!

Before you begin to feel **really bad** and start a collection for me… Actually these days it would be a **Kickstarter** campaign… (**Wait for the laugh**)… there was light at the end of that long career tunnel and in 1993 my perseverance finally paid off and the stars aligned. While I was working for Texaco Chemical it was announced that they would be selling their chemical company. A good businessman has to be alert to hear the knock on the door of opportunity, but as the comedian Milton Berle said, “If opportunity doesn’t knock, **build a door**.” All we have is ourselves and in business we must be vigilant. We have to be educated, informed, attentive and relentless. Intuition doesn’t hurt either. Keep in mind that sometimes the opportunity isn’t necessarily right, but you need to find the door, listen, open it, or build it as necessary.

At the time I happened to be managing a chemicals business that produced within a facility… it was in a refinery that was not being sold by Texaco as part of the sale to Huntsman. Luckily for me, I had gotten to know a key decision maker in the professional process…. remember contacts are key in every and any phase of business… this VP of Refining and more importantly his trusted assistant who was preparing all of the materials and options for the VP proved to be a valued and strategic connection…. and the rest is history… we were to take over the job of running that business (**Please explain this more clearly as needed**).

We really had no idea at the outset of our venture the full impact of what we were doing. Our concept involved working with non-core co products and producers. We literally took the road less traveled and it paid off. Our business has grown from one contract in 1994 worth about $20 million to TWENTY CONTRACTS valued at about $300 Million in sales. We’ve expanded our outreach and our territory now includes a nice Latin America business. We are always looking for niche manufacturing and non-traditional routes to expand the business. Twenty years later I still get up every morning and make my bed, and I am as excited as ever about our future. I love my work and in retrospect I am grateful for every challenge, each mistake, and all the roadblocks that failed to break me or my professional mission. It’s been said, “That which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” I am proud to share my story…. and it started right here at UNM.

Throughout your lives as kids and here at UNM you have learned the importance of building strong and meaningful friendships and relationships. You’ve made great friends here at school, but you also have a gold mine in potential professional connections. Stay in touch because you truly like each other… Reach out to one another with leads, encouragement, and creative ways to problem solve. Also remember that one of the most important components of successful personal and professional relationships is the ability to listen and truly get what the other person is communicating. Pay attention to others as you would want others to really respect and pay attention to you.

Someone once said, “All real education is the architecture of the soul.” I hope that my education has led by example and has inspired my children. I have four terrific kids and my two sons are now in the business. I did my best to discourage them but hey… I am honored and humbled that they choose to work with me side by side. My two daughters are younger and they’re not working with us… yet…. but who knows what the future might bring…

Graduates, you have received a quality education from a great school. I know that I wouldn’t trade my UNM experience for anything, but it’s up to **YOU** to make the most of your life with the tools and education you’ve received. **You can do anything**. That’s the key. You have to **do it**.

I will leave you on this note. It was the great humorist Garry Trudeau that said, “Commencement speeches were invented largely in the belief that outgoing college students should never be released into the world until they have been properly sedated.” (**Wait for the laugh**). Rest period is over!!! **STAY HUNGRY!!** Time to conquer the world!! I wish all of you the best of luck for a fulfilling, exciting, happy, healthy and productive life!! Thank you all!