

# **We Live in a World of Firsts!**

**Masters of Public Administration Commencement Address  
California State University, Northridge, CA  
May 21, 2008 – Jeffery J. O’Keefe**

WOW....what a privilege it is to be here today! I would have never thought that I would be standing here before you making this address. Eight years ago, I was sitting right where you are, extremely thrilled and proud to be achieving something that I believed was beyond my reach – My very own Masters Degree in Public Administration! First thing I did was buy one of those expensive, cherry wood frames and hung it on my office wall. I was so proud that day, just as you should feel proud today!

## **We Live in a World of Firsts!**

This is my first ever-speaking engagement on a college campus and I appreciate Dr. Minassians for inviting me to make it!

For the first time ever we may have a black American or female President, Vice-president, or even both! We have a new Cuba, where for the first time ever Cuban residents can now buy cell phones and microwaves (can you imagine not having a microwave or cell phone?). Who knows, we may soon be able to buy Cuban cigars, (legally).

Hot technologies like blogs, mashups, YouTube, Flickr, and social networking are among the most notable of new Internet technologies. These technologies offer great possibilities for the future of government, business, planners and educational institutions. ECards, Podcasts, Virtual Worlds and Social networks are fast becoming the norm and the new way in which we relate to the world. Social Networking has become a global phenomenon.

**Yet**, while we have all these world of firsts, we have many opportunities as well. The public leadership challenges are tremendous and there is a great deal of public service work for you to do.

Today you graduate at an unprecedented time in public administration. Lee Iacocca in his updated and revised book, *Where have all the leaders Gone*, highlights these challenges quite well, he writes: “We’re immersed in a bloody war with no plan for winning and no plan for leaving. We are running the biggest deficit in the history of the country. We are losing the manufacturing edge to Asia, while our once-great companies are being slaughtered by health care costs. Gas prices are sky-rocketing, and nobody in power has a coherent energy policy. Our schools are in trouble. Our borders are like sieves. The middle class is being squeezed every which way. These are the times that

cry out for leadership -- Your leadership!" You now have a responsibility to engage yourselves into these issues.

The timing of your graduation is important for another reason as well! The need for public service professionals is critical and far outweighs the available supply of graduates.

The General Accounting Office—the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of the U.S. Congress—reports that 53 percent of the middle managers in the federal workforce qualified for retirement in 2004. In addition, because five out of eight public sector employees work in local government, city and county governments are particularly at risk.

Deborah Gilburg in a recent article she wrote for CIO states; “The United States is on the brink of a generational transition the likes of which has not been seen before. The largest generation in history to retire – some 77.5 million people, according to the AARP – will begin vacating the work place in the next five years. The reign of the seemingly omnipresent Baby Boom generation is in its final season and in the next 15 years, our workplaces will continue to shift to a new generation of leaders....YOU! Your appointed time is now!

Another challenge confronting us in Public Administration is that we must regain the respect that public service once held. *Frank Benest*, City Manager from Palo Alto, California insists that we “Stop bashing government.” Political incumbents as well as first-time candidates for local office have long taken their cues from national leaders who have run against government in general and disparaged bureaucrats—public employees—in particular. Elected officials need to demand excellence, but demanding exemplary performance is a far cry from running against city hall, which has become the norm in campaigns, and bashing staff, which is common in many council chambers. If our elected leaders tear down government, what young person today will ever choose to work in public service?

I am not so sure you realize how privileged you really are today? And, that today is your very own “world of firsts.” Less than one-quarter of one percent of the entire U.S population will be graduating with a Masters degree during these next few weeks. One of which is you and this is awesome!

However, this privilege comes with responsibilities as well. You cannot just sit back and hope for things to change. You have to take an active role in making things better. There may be criticisms as to how the “baby boomers” may have mucked things up in this world; and there is this age old adage that each successive generation needs to make reparation for the previous one, the point, however is, that its now your turn to take a swing at the bat!

Remember too, that at the same time that you celebrate, fifteen percent of all high school students throughout this country will not complete their high school education and will

drop out. In addition, of those fortunate to go onto to college only 1 out of 100 will ever complete their post secondary education.

As you move into your new leadership role in public service, you will be in a position to promote the value and necessity of a public education in your organizations, in your community and in your own family. It is my hope that some of you will even go on to choose work that will begin to explore ways to address the education crisis that exists in America today.

Senator Edwards has built his reputation fighting against poverty. He recently announced a new initiative to “Cut Poverty in Half in 10 Years.” One of the many initiatives he highlights revolves around public education. Senator Edward states: “we must enact a College for Everyone program to pay public-college tuition, books and fees for students who agree to work part-time during their first year at a school.

Paul Barton in an article he recently wrote for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching wrote; “One thing we know for certain, is that on average, people who earn college degrees and other postsecondary certification are paid more than people who do not...*a lot more.*” We know for a fact that college graduates make 100% higher pay than high school graduates. What better way to address the poverty question than by insuring a good public education to all.

Senator Clinton as well has recognized the value of a public education; in a recent address before the International City/County Mangers Association, she spoke about a program she would implement to promote the pursuit of a graduate degree in public administration and a career in public service. Her program would pay graduate students costs in exchange for a two-year commitment to public service.

I know each of you could answer the question: Why is this public education so important? I know for me, that when I finished this graduate program, I was able to hit the ground running. I learned about the importance of intergovernmental relations and how important, even though painful at times, it is, to insure that a good unbiased public policy planning process is in place. I learned how to “elevate the scope of conflict” and how to negotiate through the “interdependencies” that we hold with the various governmental agencies. I learned the value of good public financing and budgeting and about the dangers of overstating revenues or holding too much debt service.

I am certain as well that you spent a lot of time on leadership and organizational development, exploring the qualities and traits of a leader. Who they are and where do they come from? How one becomes a leader? I hope you never stop learning about leadership.

The one thing that I do know about Leaders is that they come in all shapes and sizes and from all sorts of venues; they are courageous, curious and steadfast and hold certain convictions. Some have degrees others do not! The one common thread, however, that I

see in all of them is that they are unique and are not afraid to share their life or their experience.

I am reminded of a story about a young boy whose name is Steven! Steven was 4 years old when he was diagnosed with neurofibromatosis. Neurofibromatosis is a disease of the central and peripheral nervous system that can have devastating effects on one's life.

Steven spent his life in and out of hospitals having one surgery after another. When he was 10 years old, he needed to have an anterior and posterior spinal fusion that left him in a body cast for 10 months. As Steven struggled through his little life, he did so with courage -- humble and gracious of those around him who came to help. On only one occasion did he ever say to his Mom, while being put in a full body cast after a 14 hour surgery, "Why me?" While filled with her own pain of watching her son go through so much pain; when he should be out playing with the rest of the children; she replied, "Steven, we all come to this world with a gift! You have a gift to share and have given me so many gifts." Steven had given his mom the gift of patience, perseverance, the ability to become a leader herself in order to advocate for her son, and the true meaning of what stress really was. He gave her the gift of teaching and empowerment.

Steven spent most of his adolescence in and out of hospitals and was never able to socialize or play as much with the other kids. He spent a great deal of his time learning how to be okay with his aloneness.

One day, while at a Special Olympics Basketball game a mom came up to Steven's mom and said, "Are you Steven's Mom?" When affirmed, the woman started crying and said do you know about Timmy and what your son Steven did? Thinking Steven did something inappropriate Steven's mom replied, "oh no", "what did Steven do?"

Timmy was a fifteen-year-old boy who was born autistic and the Doctor's said that he would never speak. Apparently, Steven started calling Timmy every day after school and would have a one-way conversation with him, conversations that went like this: "Hi Timmy, its Steve, how are you? I bet you are playing Nintendo. How was your day today?" Steven was reaching out to Timmy understanding what it was like to be alone and not like the rest of the kids. Timmy's Mom listened to the calls fearing that the child on the other end of the phone was making fun of her son. Months later, Timmy spoke for the first time; and it was to Steven...he has continued speaking since.

Steven's mom could not believe that Steven or Steven's teachers had never said anything about this. Later that evening Steven's mom spoke to Steven about what he had done and applauded him for being a leader, a teacher a mentor and a friend. Steven said, "Mom, it's no big deal!" She went on, "Steven a child who was never supposed to speak now talks because of you!" Steven said, "oh Mom it was nothing, it was just my gift!"

Everyday when we look at our son Steven, my wife and I know how powerful and miraculous one life can have on another.... As you go out and become leaders look around at those who give you gifts and share your gifts with them as well.

I encourage each of you to remain humble! Long ago, I read that man in his altogether best state is nothing more than vain ambition. Remember, we judge ourselves by our intentions and others judge us by our actions!

Thank those who helped you get here today. It may be your spouse, or the support and encouragement from your children. You might be here today because of your boss, a mentor or a very close friend. On the other hand, it might have been a college professor who provided the support and encouragement you needed to continue this journey, as Warren Campbell and Christopher Leu did for me! There are those behind the scenes like Alice Lu or Patti Burlison who first reached out to you and paved your initial entry into this whole new world of firsts.

Thomas Merton wrote, "No man is an Island." We are fortunate, actually very blessed indeed, to meet so many awe-inspiring people along our journey.

I hope that by now you do not need to be asking, "What do I do now, what next?" You know what you need to do! Whether you realize it or not you came into this program for a reason. Consciously or sub-consciously, you had a plan! It is now time for you to execute your plan! Take that next step! This world desperately needs you!

Go out and create your own ***World of Firsts! Be a Leader! Share Your Gift!***

Thank you so much for allowing me to share in your very special day! Each of you should be extremely proud of your accomplishment! It will open up a world of opportunity and challenge and I congratulate every one of you.

I wish you all great success!

Resources:

*Federal Employee Retirements: Expected Increase over the Next 5 Years Illustrates Need for Workforce Planning*, report no. GAO-01-509 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, April 2001), 17–18.

Samuel M. Ehrenhalt, *Government Employment Report 6* (June 1999): 19–22, quoted in Marnie E. Green, “Beware and Prepare: The Government Workforce of the Future.”

National Center for Education Statistics

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

CIO Newsletter