

Congressman Henry Cuellar, University of the Incarnate Word Commencement Address

Class of 2016

May 8, 2016

Thank you, President Agnese, for that introduction and thank you for your leadership at UIW for the last 30 years. I would also like to thank the members of the Board of Trustees, Provost Light, faculty, parents and family, and the class of 2016.

In 1869, when three young French women, the first Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, came to San Antonio, they bravely left their homeland and overcame difficult obstacles to serve the poor and the sick. They were around your age. They came speaking little English and with little money. But they were driven and determined in the call of duty.

In this new land with all of its challenges after the U.S. Civil War, these young pioneers of faith saw something else. They envisioned a temple of learning. They established Incarnate Word College, which eventually became the largest Catholic university in Texas: the University of the Incarnate Word. And after 135 years of success, these founders would be pleased and proud. I know they would join us today in congratulating you, the class of 2016.

We recognize all of you for your hard work, dedication, and effort in taking this step, for choosing to pursue a college degree and completing your studies. Congratulations!

We also acknowledge all the parents and family with us today. The care, guidance, and love you have given your children are invaluable. We recognize your love and sacrifice. Give them a hand, because after all, your parents were your first teachers. To them, it feels as if it was just yesterday they were dropping you off at elementary school and today, you are an educated member of our democracy.

But remember, your parents will always be smarter than you. I think Dan Gilbert had children in mind in their relationship with their parents when he said, "Human beings are works in progress that think they are finished."

And of course, the faculty, administration, and staff; it is your dedication to your students that allows us to celebrate today. We thank you for your efforts at growing the next generation of thought leaders and professionals.

I am one of the most degreed members of Congress. I have studied at some of the finest institutions in the country. I have studied under world-renowned professors and read the works of great philosophers. But, today I want to share with you some life lessons I learned from a first grader and a third grader, both of whom barely spoke a few words of English.

They came to this country with no money. They grew up with no running water or basic utilities and lived in homes with dirt floors. They were migrant workers who had eight children. I love both of them dearly – my mother and father, Odilia and Martin Cuellar.

I share these observations of my parents because I want you to reflect on the lessons you have learned from your parents. It took me a while to appreciate these lessons because when we are young, we are always on the move, we are always on our iPhones, and we don't step back and just slow down to appreciate those who have molded and educated us: our parents. So in a way, this speech is about you and your parents.

These are my parents' life lessons:

1. Family comes first. My mother would say that friends come and go, but family will always be there. My wife, Imelda, has a special way of reminding me of that life lesson. School can be busy, but do not forget to touch base with your family. Work days can be very hectic, but do not do it at the expense of your family. Throughout your life, your family will always be there for you. Remember, you only think of them occasionally, but you are always in their thoughts. They hope for you, pray for you, and dream for you all of the time.

2. Education; the great equalizer in our country. My parents only received a first and third grade education, because they were taken out of school to work in the agriculture fields. In those days, the more hands you had working the fields, the more money you made. One of the earliest pictures I have of myself and some of my first memories are from working side-by-side with my parents to help make money for the family. My mother did not get an education, but she had a

basic instinct that education was the key to a better life. Working long hours in the hot sun as a migrant worker has a way of crystallizing that thought.

My mother would say, “Through education, you can be anyone you want to be; a doctor, a lawyer, anybody. Through education, you will have a better life than what your dad and I had.” I took my mother’s lesson to heart, and I told myself I would get the best education I could get; I got five degrees and am working on one more, in business finance.

My parents labored at the lowest level of the agricultural industry, but because of their hard work and the values they instilled, I won election to Congress, where my first committee assignment was the House Committee on Agriculture, where we regulated the agricultural industry from the very highest level. Because of education, in one generation my family climbed from the bottom of the industry to the top. My mother and father were there to see it, and for that I am very blessed.

3. Dream. “Dream big, son,” my mother would say, “You can be anything you want to be. You can do anything you want to do. Do not settle for just anything. Get a good education and work hard so you can achieve your dreams.” My mother was right. And as James Allen said, “The oak sleeps in the acorn, the bird waits in the egg. Dreams are the seedlings of reality.” Dream big. Dream bold. But go after that dream.

4. Have a plan; you need a roadmap to get to where you need to go. My mother would say, “Ok, so you have a dream of becoming a lawyer. How are you going to get there?” Dreams without a plan of achieving them are just that – dreams. My mother was right; do not be afraid to go after your dreams. And as Jarod Kintz said, “Wisdom equals knowledge plus courage. You do have to not only know what to do and when to do it, but you have to also be brave enough to follow through.” So graduates, be brave and follow a plan to achieve your dreams.

5. Work hard and keep a positive attitude. My father is a simple and humble man who has worked since the age of 7 as a laborer, migrant worker, gardener, and rancher. He worked long and hard hours, 7 days a week. I saw my father make an honest living by working hard.

At an early age, my father would take me with him every Saturday morning to work the gardens. I can still smell the freshly mowed grass as we worked together. My father would tell me, “You have to work hard in this life to get ahead. The more gardens we do a day, the more money we make.” At the end of the month, my dad worked 7 days a week for a total of about \$300; just enough for eight kids. My mother stayed home to care for us all.

I never forgot this lesson – you have to work hard every single day. You studied here at UIW and when you start your careers, always do your best and work hard. But always keep a positive, good-natured attitude.

6. Don’t burn any bridges; your adversary today can be your best friend tomorrow. My mother would tell me, “Do not get angry to the point where you burn bridges.” In Congress and when I was in the Texas State Legislature, if another member and I disagreed on a bill, I would say, with a big smile, “Today I cannot help you, but I may help you on another matter. Tomorrow will be another day and we could be on the same side. Let’s not burn any bridges, because tomorrow I can be your biggest advocate on another bill.” This advice helps me mend fences quickly. We all think we are correct all of the time, but we are not. Listen to the other side. And if you disagree, do not burn any bridges.

7. Pay attention to details; do not leave anything to chance. When my father would finish a garden, he would pay attention to all of the details: yard mowed, edges trimmed, sidewalk cleaned; everything was perfect. As I grew up, I also paid attention to the details.

When I ran for State Representative for the first time, I had a map of Laredo. My aim was to walk all of the streets of Laredo. Every time I walked a block, I marked that street in blue. Every day, I did the same thing over and over. I, along with my team of college friends, paid attention to each house on every street. We walked every single street in Laredo. At an early age, I won my first election with about 76 percent of the vote against a wealthy businessman and a popular school board member.

I paid attention to every aspect of the campaign. By paying attention to detail, you don’t leave anything to chance. In life, you have to see the big picture but you also must pay attention to details.

8. Never give up; even if you're tired and have the best excuse to give up, keep going. I admired my father as he worked steadily, hour after hour in the hot sun. He would dart from place to place, clean his sweat from his forehead with his red handkerchief, drink water and then continue at an ever-steady pace. If he saw me slow down, he would smile and say, "Don't give up." "It's all here," he would say as he pointed to his head. It's all in the mind.

No matter what your challenge may be, never give up. I know it may hurt. You may be tired. You may have an excuse for stopping. But, do not give up. Terry Paulson said, "Winners lose more than losers. They win and lose more than losers, because they stay in the game." Winners do not give up and winners stay in the game.

9. Give back; make a difference. My parents came to this country to live the American Dream and so that their kids could live the American Dream, but they raised us with the understanding that we each had an obligation to give back to the country and the community that gave so much to our family.

If you are not careful you can go through life only thinking of yourself, only doing things that benefit you. Just as my parents told me, I am telling you: look for any opportunity to give back to your country and your community. Volunteer. Give someone who is lost directions. Do something entirely selfless for someone you do not even know. Pay your blessings forward to others.

Throughout my career in public service I have taken the time every May to send certificates to every high school graduate in my district. I must have sent out tens of thousands over the years.

A few years ago I received one of the worst calls you can get as a congressman: A young man from my district, my hometown of Laredo, had given the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq while fighting for our freedom. I went to visit the family at his childhood home to tell them how much I appreciated his service and how I would help them keep his memory alive. As his mother showed us his room that she had kept the same since he left for the military, I noticed on his wall the certificate I sent him when he graduated high school. After all of the awards and recognitions he had received as a soldier, this certificate still held a prominent place on his wall. A small gesture on my part made a lasting impact on this young American hero and his family.

Regardless of your age, your economic position, or any other factor, you can make a difference. You must make a difference.

These are great life lessons that have guided me in my life. Reflect on your own parents' life lessons as well. They will guide you during good times and challenging times.

Some of you will continue your academic careers working toward advanced degrees while others will move into the job market to apply the skills you've learned. Whatever you choose, you must take the path that is right for you.

I encourage you all, no matter what you decide, to strive to be the best you can be. Your peers and the generations to follow demand nothing less as you are soon to become the leaders of this nation. My generation, our time is passing, we are passing the baton to you.

There are many, many challenges that lie in front of you and your generation. My generation saw the end of the Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, a technological revolution that put a phone, camera, camcorder, calculator, and access to every piece of information in the known universe in our pocket, the rise of terrorism and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a resurgence in political extremism, and an increasingly globalized world.

The challenges your generation will face are unknown and unpredictable, but will no doubt be more challenging and have even greater consequences. It is up to you and your peers to bravely face these challenges head on.

A challenge, though, can be as simple or as complex as you make it. Take the seemingly simple challenge of making change for one dollar. You can give me four quarters. Or, you can give me 10 dimes. Or, you can give me 20 nickels. In fact, there are 293 ways to make change for a dollar. You can choose how to address a challenge in the way that makes the most sense for your situation and your circumstances. You determine the difficulty and complexity of the challenge, not the other way around.

Let me conclude by telling a story that beautifully incorporates all my parents' life lessons. This is the story of the marathon race in the 1968 Olympics that was held in Mexico City. The marathon race had the best runners in the world. As the runners crossed the finish line one by one, the crowd in the stadium started to thin out. But as the last runner came into the stadium to run the last 400 meters, some people laughed because he was coming way in last place. As he slowly jogged around the track, they could see he was in pain, every step he took was painful. Soon the laughter from the audience turned into admiration. As he crossed the line, a reporter asked him, "Why did you even come into the stadium? You were so far behind. No one would have noticed you if you would not have finished the race." The young man looked at the reporter and said, "I come from a small African country; my country and family sacrificed to send me here. I practiced for years; I came here not to start the race, but to finish the race."

Now that you have gotten your degree from University of Incarnate Word, you have started the race. Now go and finish the race. Go discover new medicine to help the sick. Go discover new technology to better our lives. Go discover the call of service to better our world. Better yet, go do something no one has ever done before.

Thank you, congratulations, and God bless you.