

## "Voices In Our Blood"

Saturday, August 19, 2006

*Remarks of Representative Aaron Peña  
Edinburg, Texas*

Thank you President Cardenas, members of the faculty, distinguished guests, proud and relieved parents, friends, family members, and -- most importantly, to the outstanding Class of 2006.

Thank you. It's great to be at the University of Texas - Pan American!

I especially want to thank you the graduating class for inviting me. It's good to be back.

When I was invited to speak, I had just one concern - that some former professor would grab me and tell me that there is an exam or course I forgot to take and that I had not graduated.

My memories of Pan American can be summed up in one word - struggle.

I was the kid who was last to turn in his test. I was the kid that took classes over and over again until I got it right. I was the kid, quite frankly, on the 8 year graduation plan. If there was a least likely to succeed - I was it!

I was lucky because I had great teachers. So they pushed, prodded, challenged and eventually molded me into something useful. At that time, there is nothing that drove me more than the thought of finishing, of making it to this - Graduation Day. I am glad I could join you on this special day and I am privileged to have the opportunity to extend my congratulations to you.

This is a day that you will always remember. So take a moment and enjoy it. You've earned it.

All the late nights in the library and the long hours studying and struggling have finally paid off. You have succeeded in achieving a goal that so few have accomplished. Today the future seems limitless and brighter horizons await you. Congratulations!

But let us take a moment to recognize those who were your first teachers, those who made you the focus of their lives, those who themselves have struggled with you at every turn. From diapers to diplomas they remained a constant in your lives. At this very moment they wonder how their baby grew up so fast and today is able to fill them with such pride.

Right now they are struggling to contain their hearts from bursting with joy. You

have made them so very happy. Students, faculty, guests let us all give a rousing applause to the real heroes of this day - the parents.

More than any other influence they, and the dreams they carry, have helped make you what you are today and what you might become tomorrow.

Now if you want to be a further success in their eyes, your parents have all asked me to inform you that it is your responsibility to pay off your student loans. One more thing, they need you out of the house by the end of the week because they need the space - and it's their turn to start living.

I have to say that I'm pretty humbled to be here. This commencement marks the first time in over a decade that this university is compelled by growth to have a summer graduation ceremony.

More than that - the promising statistic that should awaken a nation - is that nearly 70% of you are the first generation in your family to attain a college degree. As some in this country take a misdirected and regrettable course of fear of everything that is foreign, of everything that is different, here in this room lies the reality and promise of our shared future.

It is the stuff of dreams coupled with the power of an education!

The phenomenal growth and increase in the number of graduates coming from the University of Texas - Pan American is not only a testament to the hard work of this institution's faculty and it's leaders it is also a testament to the struggles and success of our parents and those that came before us.

And so it is there that I first look to find the wisdom that will carry you past the obstacles of life.

In addition to the great education this wonderful institution provided you, the timeless values of our parents, our ancestors, and our community will provide the framework upon which such knowledge will grow.

**HARD WORK, DETERMINATION, FAITH, FAMILY and SACRIFICE ...** these are the values that have served our people through the ages.

You didn't need a formal education to learn these values; we knew them instinctively by watching your parents and grandparents. These values flow through you like the blood that flows though your body.

Now more than ever before, we must learn to listen to the voices in our blood.

My grandfather, like so many others, came to this country with nothing more than a second grade education. He picked oranges and worked in the sweltering fields of South Texas, barely making a living to support my father and the remainder of his family. But in his veins flowed powerful stuff - these values and the dreams of

a better tomorrow.

In the end that hope came through the education of his children.

One of my favorite stories from history is the story of the Frederick Douglass. As a child born into slavery, he was separated from his mother at six and by law, punishable by death, was kept from an education. Douglass eventually learned the alphabet and the basics of reading by listening to his master's wife recite the bible to her child.

He went on to learn to read and write and become one of this nation's strongest voices against slavery. Slavery ended, in part, because a woman taught a small child to read. From such small beginnings and yet history was changed when you coupled a dream with an education.

Think for a moment of the struggles of our own parents and our grandparents. At times, I imagine a conversation between my grandparents before coming to this country. They came with nothing to their name but the clothing they were wearing and the dream for a better future.

No skills, no education, no family in the new country. They did not speak a word of English. Yet they were willing to work and more importantly determined to see that their children lived a better life and received an education.

I am glad to say that my grandfather, like your parents today, saw his dream fulfilled - two of his children graduated from college and became superintendents of schools here in South Texas. Another went on to become one of the early Mexican-American lawyers in this state.

Sir Isaac Newton was once asked, to what did he attribute his great success, his response is as true today as it was then. He said - "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

We are the lucky ones. When we confront obstacles and think life is tough, we should learn a lesson from their lives.

"With great power comes great responsibilities" - such is the quote from one of this generation's popular films. I would ask that you accept this truth.

On behalf of your parents and this community, I would ask that you accept the responsibility of our future. Yes, we all want to see you go out and make a comfortable living. This is an important aspect of life, but you must remember - "You don't make a living by what you get, you make a living by what you give."

Let me give you a short cut on your journey, after you get your new job, buy yourself a new car, buy you a nice house in one of the nicer subdivisions, somewhere along the road you will realize that objects do not buy you happiness. Happiness is found in giving to others.

At a time when the country's obsession with the glamour of wealth continues to grow this task will be challenging. Consider the woman that changed a nation by teaching a slave child to read. It is service to your fellow man that will change the world and give you life fulfilling purpose.

Find your purpose in life. Reach back and help others on their journey. Help those least likely to care for themselves - the sick, the elderly, children afflicted by drug addiction. Remember that "A man never stands as tall as when he kneels to help a child." There are so many from our community that need that help.

Be bold and change a nation. What you are, our state and nation will be. You have an absolutely idealistic opportunity to change the world for the better.

Learn to think outside yourself; learn to think outside your city, your state and your country. We now live in a global economy and share global responsibilities. Continued change is inevitable. We can react with fear and distrust of others as some suggest. We can build walls and fear our neighbors or anyone who is different.

We can deny that we are responsible for world problems - disease, poverty or responsibility for our environment or we can embrace the challenge and accept our place in this world.

One of our country's greatest strengths is in the diversity of its people. We can not allow our darker fears to control the destiny of this nation. We must act on love, intelligence and mutual respect of ourselves and our neighbors.

As President John F. Kennedy once told us, "For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

Lastly, never give up. Never, never, never give up!

I stand before you, not because I was the smartest guy in school - because I was not. I stand before you, not because I had the best grades in my class - because I did not. I stand before you, not because I was the most popular - that I was not. Anything I have come from the lessons of perseverance that I witnessed everyday from my parents and grandparents.

Be willing to make mistakes - learn from them- embrace them - but never give up. Look around you the person most proud of you today and you will find out that is their greatest gift.

And now, in closing, on behalf of the many people who have brought you to this place, let me ask you to be true to who you are.

You are blessed with the simple values of a determined people that have overcome great obstacles. Our hopes, our faith and our love travel with you. Continue

dreaming big dreams.

Find purpose in the service to others. Learn from our struggles. This world will undoubtedly test you. If you are willing to take risk and willing never to give up, success will surely be your own.

Thank you so very much Class of 2006, congratulations on your graduation.

May God Speed You On Your Journey!