

SAM FARR COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

Thank you President Ochoa. I am proud to receive this honorary degree from California State University Monterey Bay -- a university that, as you will see, holds a special place in my heart. This isn't the first award I've ever received. But it's the first since I left Congress and no longer sit on the Appropriations Committee, where I could give people money. So I know it's sincere.

Doctor Ochoa, mil gracias for your gracious introduction.

And thank you wonderful CSUMB faculty, trustees, parents, and friends for being here – at a great university in a great location.

Most of all, thank you class of '17 for allowing me to share your special day.

For those graduating with honors or special awards, I congratulate you. Very well done.

For those of you whose grades weren't so hot, or who might have messed up, you're kind of like me when I graduated. Which goes to show, that ... you too can be a Congressman.

We are all here today for a graduation that wasn't supposed to happen, at a university that wasn't supposed to be built, on land that wasn't supposed to be ours.

Very quickly I want to tell you how we all got here, what I learned, and how it can help you.

First a little history. We're here at what once was Ford Ord, a community of about 33,000 military and civilian residents. It closed in 1993, as I was running for Congress. At the time,

access to convenient, affordable higher education was an issue on the Central Coast, particularly for traditionally underserved and low-income populations.

The need for education was great, and a huge swath of land was about to be vacated. So to State Senator Henry Mello of Watsonville and myself, it made perfect sense to *connect the dots*, and create a university... here, right on this very spot.

We didn't have a lot of local support. There was much fear that a new university would attract radical students, who would change peninsula politics -- just as they had in Santa Cruz.

I remember an Army Colonel telling me that getting a campus here would never happen. He said I was naïve to think I could get the land from the military and money from the federal government.

But I never take no for an answer to a good idea.

I got elected to Congress. And with the help of Senator Mello, we got the land title transferred to the state, and I got \$65 million in federal funds to help get the campus started.

One of the proudest moments of my career was being able to take a vision of higher education in California, and get a new local university placed right here on the sand dunes of Fort Ord.

CSUMB is a pioneering campus. It promotes a progressive learning atmosphere, and was the first to incorporate Service Learning in the curriculum – for which the university has received national accolades.

You graduates showed initiative in choosing to come to this innovative campus

You chose to join a different kind of student body, at a different kind of university, for different reasons.

Some came for the beauty of the Central Coast; others for the proximity to home; some for affordability, some for the chance to study art and theater in an abandoned army base. Many came for the friendly staff. Whatever your reason, you had options. After all, you could have been a banana slug ... but chose to be an otter.

I met your **College of Science Senator Kate Ingram** who said, “What attracted me to campus was the sense that we are all part of something bigger.” And you are.

This journey has been hard for some -- first time away from your family -- facing the challenge of a collegiate culture. Others had to work full time and care for their families, while carrying a full load. Still others were living in fear of deportation – now even with the protection with DACA. For all, CSUMB has been a secure home. And now, you’re leaving it.

I know how you must feel. I was excited about graduating from college, and terrified about what I was going to do next. As I told you, my grades weren’t so hot, so graduate school was out. Military service offered a lot of benefits, but my eyesight prohibited me from being a pilot. I wanted adventure. I wanted to help people.

A lot was going on in the sixties. It was a time of turmoil – much like today. Vietnam was starting to heat up. We were in a cold war with Russia. My generation was marching for civil rights, questioning the status quo, and looking for different opportunities.

Fortunately a new option was available. Our country had elected a young president, John F. Kennedy. In his inaugural address, he said “Ask not what your country can do for you... but ask what you can do for your country.” And he gave us an option – he started the Peace Corps, which sent volunteers to foreign countries to work with communities on their most pressing issue – poverty.

I applied and was accepted for a program in urban community development in Colombia S.A. I had no idea where Columbia was. I found its capital Bogota on a map. But I told everyone I was going Boe-got-ta.

In training. I excelled in the outward-bound challenges, but didn't take the Spanish classes seriously enough. So, I was de-selected and sent home.

I arrived home ashamed and defeated. It was then that my mother said, “If you really want the Peace Corps, thank God you live in America where decisions are appealable.” She was right. I appealed to the Peace Corps, and enrolled in MIIS for entry level Spanish. My appeal was accepted and I was assigned to another Colombia program.

I worked hard in my second training program and was assigned to Medellin, Colombia. Fortunately that was before the Narco Wars and Pablo Escobar.

Living in a poor barrio I learned some things. I learned to listen to the local people to find out that what they wanted – to listen to their felt needs, rather than imposing what I thought they needed. I learned that people without access to education, without access to healthcare, without access to a safe place to sleep, are caught in a cycle that creates generational poverty. To break the cycle, they need schools and teachers, clinics, and doctors and nurses. And safe shelter

I learned the effects of poverty the hard way. My family came to visit. We all went to a finca (an estate) in northern Colombia to explore the countryside by horseback. My youngest sister Nancy was thrown from her horse and landed on her head. We got her to a rural hospital in Monterria for X-rays, and the doctor said she was OK, just a concussion. But things got worse, and the hospital was not equipped to handle head trauma. My sister needed a neurosurgeon and they couldn't get one there in time. She died in that rural hospital.

The realities of living in an impoverished region in a far off country had hit our family hard. It was a devastating experience, and one that made me realize how important access to education and healthcare in rural areas was to everyone.

As hard as it was, it was this very personal experience that gave me my sense of purpose. I knew I wanted to fight in the War on Poverty and create access to education, healthcare and housing. I came home, and got involved with poverty programs on the ground. I wanted to be a change agent and push local, state and federal governments to be responsible for social change. I had no idea I would be elected to public office to do those things – but street work, staff work and yes – family tradition got me started.

Politics gave me the ability to make law and policy. And that's how we got this University.

Did we win the War on Poverty? No, but we're making a difference.

CSUMB is making a difference. Creating the National Marine Sanctuary and Pinnacles

National Park is making a difference. Creating affordable housing and access for senior citizens

to Medicare has made a difference. And now, the soon to open Veterans DOD clinic will make a difference.

It's not only about institutions, but also jobs. I'm fond of saying "it's not just pretty scenery that we protect here, its also jobs." Your jobs...

I tell you this story not to tout my legacy, but to illustrate how passion, coupled with education and experience, empowers you to recognize opportunities, and turn your visions into reality.

You've done service learning. You've presented your Capstone Project. And YOU are already putting this into practice.

I learned of an incredible project you students started on campus. By listening, you heard that some of your peers were having a tough time making ends meet. After paying for tuition, books, and housing, some students didn't have enough money left for food. You identified a problem -- food insecurity among students, and you did something about it. You started a food pantry. It's a work in progress, but you can now reach out to community partners, and replicate this model across the country – and even other parts of the world.

You'll find that employers and educators love this kind of initiative – it will open doors for you in higher education, and in your job search.

As you head into the future – without the structure, the fellowship, or the comfort of campus life - know that your professors, your family and friends, your community...we all want you to succeed. We have your back.

But it's up to you to seek out internships and volunteer in areas that are important to you; adopt mentors and reach out to your old professors, counselors and even people like me for guidance. People usually get where they're going, no matter where they came from.

The world is changing rapidly, and that creates opportunities and uncertainty. But remember that throughout history, there have always been builders and destroyers: people whose mission is to build and improve things around them; and people whose mission seems to be to criticize and tear things down.

Let me tell you, builders always win. If they didn't we'd be living in the dark ages.

By coming to CSUMB, you have empowered yourselves to be builders and change agents.

Your school magazine, Monterey Bay, features a quote from student January Cornelius that captures the spirit in each of you: "I feel like I belong here, we all have the same mindset – let's go save the world."

Empower yourselves to be effective citizens. Register to vote – and then vote... in every election. As we've seen, elections have consequences. And if you really want to save the world, run for office!

Make today's graduation ceremony the cornerstone of your new life. Take your can-do attitude and find things that are missing in society and build them. And find things that are broken in our society and fix them. You have the skills, the spirit, and the vision to make things better than they were when you started – better for everyone.

In closing, I encourage you to

Go forth and stay curious.

Seek adventure.

Have fun.

Embrace the creativity of the arts

Enjoy the teamwork of sports

Leave things better than you found them

Listen to others before you judge.

Be proud of yourself and your family and your cultural heritage.

Don't hesitate. Go for it.

You are the Class of 2017

Congratulations!

Thank you.