

## '34 Years Ago Today'

Delivered by Irvine Mayor Sukhee Kang

Chancellor Drake, Dean Jenness, faculty, staff and parents, it is, indeed, an honor and privilege to stand before you to thank you, and especially to the graduating seniors, for allowing me to spend a few minutes sharing my American Dream.

I must say, only in America is a day like today possible.

34 years ago today, on June 11, 1977, I was on a plane to a country that I only knew about from history books. As a young man, restless to begin my professional life, I didn't have a particular goal. My wife Joanne and I arrived in Orange County from Seoul, Korea, to begin our journey in America.

As I flew to my destination that day, I asked myself: What will this country afford me? How quickly will I learn English well enough to speak my mind? But, most importantly, how will I make a difference in this new land of opportunity?

When I arrived in the United States, I had to work hard to make a living, support my family, and master a new language. I went into business, into sales, and over the years rose to a Senior Management position.

But I kept asking myself, what would be next? What would be my calling?

In 1992, the L.A. riots captured my attention and seared my heart.

There was looting, assault and arson. People died.

Wonderful businesses, burned to the ground. Hard-working merchants, watching their life's work disappear.

I felt a great injustice had occurred, and I realized I had to get involved ... because I could either watch and do nothing, or learn and become someone.

1992 changed my life.

Out of the flames of destruction came my personal inspiration to build – to build coalitions; to build friendships; to bridge gaps and create trust; to focus on the strength that diversity holds if we work together, not apart.

I became deeply involved politically and in community service. In both passions, you build foundations to strengthen people and community; at the same time, you break down walls of misunderstanding and misery.

As you develop a position of strength and observation, you need both a steady hand and a compassionate heart.

I learned that I wanted the most from both worlds.

So I ran for Irvine City Council and won a seat where my vote could make a difference; subsequently, I ran for Mayor and became the first Korean American Mayor in Irvine history – a City that prides itself in being thoroughly integrated.

Just look around this hall; I see the diversity of people ... the diversity of cultures ... and the diversity of talent. THAT is what will define our future generation of leaders and THAT is what will enrich your experience as you embark on this next phase of life.

As part of my personal story, one can say: “Here is the young man who left his homeland and became the Mayor of a major U.S. city. He is symbolic of what we can do when we step into the waters of the world and emerge in another culture.”

34 years ago today, being Mayor was beyond my wildest dreams. But making a difference was part of my upbringing ... it was a lifelong calling from my soul.

So, how will you make a difference? How will you grow, change and adapt? How will you build on the foundation that this great institution has provided you?

Here is my challenge to you: Make the most of every minute of every day. Embrace not just the rights and privileges that come with living in a great democracy, but the obligations as well.

If you see things that need changing, don't wait for someone else to step up to the plate. Roll your sleeves up, and do the hard work necessary to address the challenges in your family, your community, our country and our world.

America needs all of you sharing your wealth of talent.

As social ecology majors, you have the opportunity to accomplish the extraordinary in your field – whether it be in law or social behavior or policy planning. You deeply understand human behavior and the need for environmental protection; you have debated the justice system as well as social justice.

You are educated – now be proactive as you realize your aspirations, listen to others, and set your goals.

Wherever you land – whether it is on an airplane to a new destination, or to a job down the street, know that you will have one distinct advantage: You will have

yourself, with all the tools that you have learned at this great university ... and gathered in life ... to make career choices and life-changing decisions.

While I am here on this stage, my heart is with all the parents gathered here today. As the parent of two UC graduates, I know the pride you will feel as your children cross this stage to receive their diplomas. You have invested a lot to give your children the tools to succeed.

Let me ask all the students to show your appreciation by giving your parents a big round of applause.

Making a personal difference is indeed a symbol of America.

50 years ago, John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address spoke of a “torch that has been passed to a new generation of Americans.” I, too, challenge you, as the next generation of leaders, to take the torch from this time and this place and quickly plan for tomorrow.

Time is on your side, but the clock is ticking; the torch is passed today. As opportunity flows to you, let it flow from you.

Make the leap in your lives to the highest ground. And be the best that you can possibly be.

My life has taught me – whether 1 mile from where you begin, or 6,000 miles from home – that no matter where you are, there you are.

There you stand – on a hilltop – as the world waits for you.

Don't let the world wait for long.

Congratulations. May god bless you. And may god bless America.

Thank you.