

Opening Day Speech

As I traveled this summer and took part in some of my favorite activities – hiking, kayaking and photography – adventures that allow me the opportunity to reflect on the bigger picture – I had to admit that we are living in extraordinary times.

Gazing over the serene beauty of June Lake in the Sierras, I couldn't help but transport myself to the Gulf of Mexico and wonder how all of that oil is going to get cleaned up. In Lake Tahoe, I was startled by all of the empty rental units around me - that in better economic times would have been teeming with families on vacation. I can't help but wonder how many of those empty places represent lost jobs, lost homes and lost dreams?

Of course, no matter where I am, our college and our students are never far from my thoughts. I, like everyone in this room, wonder when we'll get a budget – and what it will look like. I wonder how students are surviving as colleges limit enrollment and turn them away. I wonder and worry about the students who can't make ends meet, who can't afford college, who need skills to get jobs but can't get into the classes they need.

Unlike here at College of the Canyons, I know other community college districts are struggling. In fact, several of my CEO colleagues, faced with the problems generated by reduced budgets, are really down and discouraged. They've had to cut back their services dramatically. They have had to cancel all summer sessions. They have furloughed staff, reduced hours, slashed the number of students they serve and have begun a spiral of decline from which it will be hard to recover.

Some of those folks – frankly – didn’t plan very well over the last five years and, as a result, have not had the ability to build new buildings or new programs on their campuses. At least six have declared since July 31st that they’ll retire soon because their energy has been sapped and they just can’t see past their current situations.

The story here at College of the Canyons is markedly different. We looked ahead. We anticipated. We planned. And we grew as a result. We developed our programs, our staff, our facilities, our external resources, and our partnerships.

Understanding that context, and maintaining perspective in challenges times is essential. For me, there is no place like a mountain meadow in summer, overlooking a mirrored lake – itself reflecting a snow-capped mountain, to jolt me back to reality and see things for what they really are. I see the pioneers on these trails and marvel at how they ever made it out West and wonder what that journey must have been like and what it took to get there. My thoughts then go to the incredible good fortune I’ve had by associating myself with this college, with all of you, and with the “magic” that makes College of the Canyons thrive. Lee Cockerell, a former Disney executive, said in his book “Creating Magic:” “It’s not the magic that makes it work; it’s the way we work that makes it magic.”

You might call it “magic” or “know how” or “up to the challenge” or “inspired” or “committed” or “accomplished” or “having what it takes” or any one of a number

of descriptors. But no one can argue that what we have at College of the Canyons is very special indeed.

As I was hiking or paddling, images of some of you, events here, moments of joy, our accomplishments as a team, the challenges we have overcome and our celebrations flashed in my mind. That's the great thing about special moments. They become memories you can call back at any time to relive the past and be grateful that you experienced it.

I was reminded of that as we have reflected this past academic year on all of the accomplishments and triumphs of the last 40 years. I have been truly humbled by what has been achieved here. You can string together words like: commitment, values, spirit, risk-taking, forward-thinking, innovation, creativity, energy, compassion, integrity, perseverance, tenacity, zeal and a host of other terms that describe the cultural underpinnings of our college – but at the end of the day, they still come up short in terms of defining and describing how we do what we do.

There is that “intangible something” that College of the Canyons possesses and which is expressed in its people, in its outlook, in its desire to deliver, in its courage, in its attitude, in its commitment to students and the community, in its need to reach beyond its grasp that makes it unique and special. So....I'll continue to simply call it “**the right stuff.**”

“The right stuff” makes College of the Canyons the unbelievably special place it is. It fuels our journey and enables us to do what we do. It inspires me every day, and it is why I know that our 40 years of service to this community have formed the foundation for nothing but the best—nothing but an unlimited future of possibilities for College of the Canyons.

It is that **spirit** that I would like to speak to you about today from my heart because that is where the drive of COC—that which has been created by its people, **YOU** and those who were here before you, lives. Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz said, “Victory is much more meaningful when it comes not just from the efforts of one person, but from the joint achievements of many. The euphoria is lasting when all participants lead with their hearts, winning not just for themselves, but for one another.” As I look back on the time I have spent here at College of the Canyons there are several significant events designed to create opportunities for students that symbolize to me that we have **“the right stuff.”**

The first was the 1994 Northridge Earthquake. Our response to that calamity showcased our courage and our character. We started the semester in tents, with very wet weather. We didn’t have supplies for instructors or computers to register our students. We couldn’t get into the buildings to get our things. We had no phone lines and no Internet. But, that is not what I remember.

- ✓ I remember the dedication and creativity of our staff;
- ✓ I remember the preciseness and quickness of our actions and communications;
- ✓ I remember the courage and risk-taking exhibited in 27-degree weather;

- ✓ I remember the heartfelt way everyone did what he or she volunteered to do, even though they had never done it before—nor had we ever done it before!
- ✓ I remember teams of dedicated people cleaning out rubble, unearthing files, reaching out to students, strapping things to carts, and running errands;
- ✓ I remember people acting silly to cheer each other up, and others driving three hours each way to get here to help for 3 hours when they didn't have to, and then turning around and driving home three more hours;
- ✓ I remember the California Conservation Corps setting up a camp at COC to help us clean up and then, many of them enrolling in classes because of their experiences here;
- ✓ I remember the 200-plus staff members cheering each other up and opening their houses to others—lending a hand, bringing in tools, and working and stepping up to do what it took;
- ✓ I remember the countless others who showed up with sleeves rolled up even though it wasn't safe to leave their own homes;
- ✓ I remember colleagues from other colleges who drove hours to get here to help us out by delivering big shop vacs, generators, or cleaning supplies;
- ✓ I remember Ken Stevens driving hither and yon to use another college's computer system so we could print rosters and start classes a week late;
- ✓ I remember the Fire City residing in our parking lot, as well as the firemen taking their baths in our swimming pool.
- ✓ I remember our staff being so flexible and reaching out to help students, doing whatever it took and just getting it done;

- ✓ I remember our tent city and our T-shirts to memorialize the event;
- ✓ I remember restacking 100,000 volumes in the library that flew from the shelves to the floor; and

I remember a team that, despite the mess we were in and the constantly materializing barriers, pulled together, kept their hopes alive, and got it done for our students. It was a monumental effort—with everyone acting as one team to get ready to open as soon as humanly possible for our students, some of whom had no place safe to go, except our college. It would not have happened without that spirit, without our staff and Board, and without **“the right stuff.”**

And, I could not have been more proud. I already knew that the core values and sense of pride the staff had in this college was strong—proven in the history they had helped to create. But it is easy to think that you’re doing well – that you’re good – when times are good. The real test comes when a crisis hits. And, COC’s response to this validated what I knew and why I was so proud of COC. Thanks to the relationships and processes we had in place, and because we trusted each to do the best we could, people knew what to do, where to go, and how to help each other. More importantly, staff members were prepared mentally and emotionally to let the spirit of COC and their confidence in themselves fuel our quick recovery and give the best of themselves.

All in all, what we saw in that tremendously difficult time is the kind of strong courage and character that any place can enjoy as long as people unite behind a common purpose and treat each other with respect as we do at COC. It was a

time I will never forget. It symbolized our spirit, and it paved the way for another significant milestone – **the passage of our Measure C bond.**

When pigs fly! At COC, that is the ultimate of positive statements and proof that we have **“the right stuff.”** The decision to place an \$82 million bond measure on the ballot to obtain funds to build our facilities was not made lightly. Going forward with a bond in 2001 was a huge risk. This is typically a conservative community that votes Republicans into office and does not support taxes. But that didn’t matter.

Ad it didn’t matter that only four colleges out of 108 in the state had passed bond measures. It didn’t matter that we didn’t have furniture or phones for our campaign headquarters – or a campaign headquarters, for that matter.

- ✓ It didn’t matter that the Hart District’s attempts to pass bond measures had failed on two occasions
- ✓ It didn’t matter that we had no money to run the campaign. None of that mattered, because we were out of space and our students needed classrooms.

What mattered was that we were up to the challenge. We geared up quickly, and the community stepped up to support us.

- ✓ From Barry Gump, a local businessman who used his trucks to pick up furniture for our headquarters,
- ✓ To Rita Garasi who stepped up to chair the campaign,

- ✓ To Newhall Land who donated the space for headquarters,
- ✓ To Pac Bell who donated the phones, to Ace Hardware in Belmont Shore who donated flying pigs, we got it done.

I don't remember the challenges. In fact, now it seems quite the adventure. But, what I do remember is:

- ✓ I remember you who worked at headquarters night after night.
- ✓ I remember you made thousands of phone calls.
- ✓ I remember you distributed flyers and assembled and posted yard signs.
- ✓ I remember you sold the idea to the community.
- ✓ I remember you were involved in an endeavor that was extremely important to the college and one that changed the lives of thousands of people.

Once again, you proved that College of the Canyons has **“the right stuff.”** The passage of Measure C was the single most significant thing to happen in this District since the passage of the original bond in the late 1960s. It enabled us to expand our capacity and add Aliso Lab, Aliso Hall, Hasley Hall, Pico Canyon Hall, an expansion of Towsley Hall, East P.E., and begin construction of the Canyon Country Campus. These spaces now house a wide variety of activities and programs that benefit our students, including MESA, the Friday Night Film Series, the Speech Team, and more. In fact, the number of degree and certificate programs available increased from 67 in 2001 to 151 today.

Five years later, when we needed to pass a bond measure in 2006, we again faced serious challenges.

- ✓ We only had three months to campaign.
- ✓ We needed a campaign headquarters when office space was in high demand and hard to find.
- ✓ The phone company dragged its heels on setting up our phone lines, costing us two weeks during our critical calling period.
- ✓ The doubters said gas prices were too high, that local K-12 district bonds had not been spent as promised, and that since we had just passed a bond measure in 2001, the voters wouldn't get behind us.

But that's not what stands out for me. That's not what I remember about Measure M. Instead,

- ✓ I remember that raising the money needed for the campaign was a team effort.
- ✓ I remember the flexibility of the office headquarters manager and her team of volunteers.
- ✓ I remember the great meals organized nightly by a band of talented chefs.
- ✓ I remember students from the soccer team, the biology club, the football team, and the Associated Student Government and more turning out to work the phones.
- ✓ I remember T-shirts, pins, buttons, and signs that appeared everywhere.
- ✓ I remember staff members unpacking and putting furniture together.
- ✓ I remember the website that was put together overnight thanks to volunteers.

- ✓ I remember staff going to K-6 open houses, Girl Scout meetings and dance recitals to garner support.
- ✓ I remember the faculty and staff calling and mailing their counterparts in our community to garner their votes.
- ✓ I remember the Saturday walking teams and daily callers and the resilience and dedication of the team.
- ✓ I remember your belief that we would get it done.

We knew better than the doubters and the naysayers. We knew we had **“the right stuff.”** We believed we could, and we knew we had the support of the community, built through collaboration and partnerships that you all took the time to develop with one community organization at a time. We had the confidence that working together, we would get it done. And we did. We passed with 63 percent of the vote, far above the 55 percent needed to pass.

And the results of our efforts are all around us. We built the University Center, the Canyon Country Campus, the Applied Technology Building at Canyon Country, and the Mentry Hall Expansion. M will also fund the Library improvements we are designing. New majors, new training programs, new resources and support will live in the spaces.

Our COC staff joins hands and works together to make things happen. We are confident we can accomplish what we set out to do, like turning 72 acres of raw land into a brand new campus within 13 months. That’s a tall order that brings with it innumerable serious challenges, like:

- ✓ Moving 1.3 million cubic yards of dirt to turn steep hills into flat building pads.
- ✓ Discovering underground landslides we didn’t know existed.
- ✓ A crane operators strike that hit just as we were moving our modular buildings on foundations.
- ✓ Late furniture deliveries.
- ✓ Unpaved parking lots and sidewalks the week before the semester was to begin.

Those were big problems, but for us they were not insurmountable. I don't remember that. What I do remember is:

- ✓ The enthusiasm about the center.
- ✓ Volunteers working to spread the word in the community about the new campus.
- ✓ The History Committee making a CD of the area's history across multiple agencies.
- ✓ Contractors from thirteen different construction trades working with each other, alongside each other, and around each other.
- ✓ People making food to feed the workers and further motivate them with chocolate chip cow cookies.
- ✓ Sue Bozman painting the artwork for the campus logo on a weekend.
- ✓ Local businesses bending their own rules to help us get it done.
- ✓ Staff working nonstop from Friday night to Sunday night to clean windows, plant trees, arrange furniture, assemble umbrellas and install computers in hot windy weather so the campus would be ready for students.
- ✓ 3,500 thrilled students who showed up the first day to find a brand new campus welcoming them.
- ✓ The joy and pride on the faces of those who made it happen against all odds.
- ✓ The doors it has opened for those who otherwise would not have gone to college.

At the same time, Hasley Hall appeared as if it too wouldn't be ready to host classes on the first day of the Fall 2007 semester. In true COC spirit, a whole different group of folks came together to sweep floors, wash windows, unpack desks, and install computers throughout the building. And by Monday morning everything was ship shape and ready to go.

That's not surprising. That's what happens when you have **"the right stuff."** You find solutions to the challenges. You beat the odds. You do what others say can't be done.

The most recent example that we have **"the right stuff"** is the University Center – a testament to our vision, our dedication, our creativity, and our persistence. Together we created a solution to the lack of access to higher education beyond the community college level in the Santa Clarita Valley. And we did it in a way that had never been done before. Consequently, our less-than-conventional solution was not easy to achieve. We raised funds from seven different sources, and we built the first public-private joint venture on a community college campus with state funds. Others said we couldn't do it. They said don't even try, you'll just fail. But we knew better.

What I remember, and will always treasure, is:

- ✓ I remember that 99 percent of our faculty, staff, administrators and Board of Trustees members believed in the vision and personally gave of their own resources to see it come to fruition.
- ✓ I remember that you believed in my dream and supported us to get there.

- ✓ I remember that we convinced our community that it could be done and businesses and individuals stepped up to the plate with significant financial contributions.
- ✓ I remember that we persuaded elected officials and leaders in the Chancellor's Office to back the concept and they responded by changing state laws and personally advocating for the project.

Although they couldn't see the University Center, they saw something much more convincing. They saw that you had **the right stuff**. They saw the power of your vision, your dedication, your creativity and your persistence. As a result, they got behind the project and we were ultimately able to gather the resources needed to make it a reality. And now, people have choices and chances they didn't have before.

As I stand here and tell these stories, you might think I'm some old fogey pining for the good ol' days. In fact, I prefer to look to the future. I'm fascinated by all that we have to look forward to, even if it seems mind-boggling. Why? Because I know this college has the spirit and "**the right stuff**" to thrive no matter what the future holds. We are ready to make the most of change. And there will be a lot of it.

Dave Evans, a futurist who works at Cisco Systems Inc., says that we actually only know five percent of what we will know in the next 50 years. "In other words," Evans said. "In 50 years, 95 percent of what we will know, will have been discovered in the past 50 years."

According to Evans, in terms of information saved and spent, we can expect our own personal computer storage needs to escalate from today's 128 gigabytes, to 130 terabytes by the year 2020. Also in 2020, he believes a run of the mill, \$1,000 quantum computer (harnessing the power of atoms and molecules) will contain the raw processing potential of the human brain. Once these systems have been fully integrated (2050), the raw processing power of that same \$1,000 system, will match the neural computing power of the entire world (which in terms of 2050, will be about 9 billion brains).

Thanks to popular social networking sites, the next generation of teenagers will find themselves with more friends (cyberfriends) around the world, than in their own city/school. By 2020, almost every electronic device will be capable of universal language translation. Thanks to accelerated 3D software, we will no longer be limited to web-cams and chat rooms, but will use our avatars (digital image of self) to meet up with other friend's avatars to shop, travel the world, and perhaps even attend class. Such popular websites as Second Life and Weopia have already opened these opportunities, but such interactions will only become more commonplace.

Fingerprint and iris (eye) scanning could replace the common wallet, but Esther Swilley, assistant professor of marketing at Kansas State University, believes consumers will also be pushed towards using wallet phones – combination cell phone, credit card, (electronic) car keys. That doesn't bode well for me because I misplace at least one of those once every day!

When it comes to medicine, nanotechnology will deliver drugs to the specific areas of the body where they can do the most good. This will decrease the amount of side effects from treatments like chemotherapy. Synthetic blood will save lives. Broken bones will heal in hours instead of weeks thanks to protein building bone injections. Nanobots in toothpastes could be programmed to attack plaque. Artificial brain implants will become a reality by 2030. Doctors will be able to fully regenerate artificial limbs in 2022. And tampering with DNA could become the hottest trend in performance enhancing drugs.

As the world around us changes, so too must we change. If we apply what Dave Evans said, then only 5 percent of what we are teaching right now will still be valid. Granted, that might be far-fetched, but it illuminates the magnitude of what we will be facing as a college in the years to come. It's a huge challenge, but one that I know we are ready to face. Why am I so confident? Because you are the right people with **"the right stuff"** and you have created pride, garnered the respect of our students and community, and set the stage for us to be successful as we go forward to the future.

We will continue to work together on common tasks -- to influence the present and future; to create a legacy for others to build on; to make a difference and to inspire, support, and enable others to do the same. We will listen to others, take risks, have the self-confidence and belief in ourselves to venture out and get involved, share our new and unproven ideas with others, let others see our dreams, and set the standards a little higher. We will connect our college

community with other communities and figuring out how college departments can work together productively. And through it all, we will care, communicate, anticipate, and move forward with enthusiasm and energy, and do so with the confidence, support and spirit of each other. To me, that's what commitment means and commitment is why COC is successful on a day-to-day basis. It is part of what allows the right stuff to shine. Our uniqueness, our collective vision, and our insistence on excellence in everything we do make an enormous difference in connecting with students and meeting their needs in the long run.

We will remain steadfast in our commitment to each other. We back up each other, we cover for each other, in most cases we like each other, and in some cases we love each other. We've got a number of married couples on staff. Could the married couples, or those engaged, please stand? We care for each other and we support each other. We often have many hands working as one.

And, I know we will continue another quality that sets us apart, which is our ability to have fun. Some companies aren't pleasant places to work. The people are grumpy, always complain, and never have a good time. That's not COC. We might as well rename ourselves College of the Celebrations. Whether it's a baby shower, Classified Appreciation Week, Halloween, the 40th Anniversary Picnic, or retreats, we know how to have a good time. College of the Canyons is anything but dull. It is infused with an infectious vitality that makes this an exciting place to be. As a team, we work hard – every single day – but we play hard too! It is so much fun to see staff members transform themselves from their day-to-day roles on campus to dunk tank victims at the Family Picnic, or dancers at Opening Day.

And who knew we had so many hippies on campus until last year's Halloween party? Keeping things in balance helps us maintain our creativity, and keeps us ready to take advantage of new opportunities. We compete in the Cougar Olympics; we wear funny hats and present awards; we sing, we dance, and we know how to party at COC! We work very hard, but we have a lot of fun doing it. We are an extraordinarily spirited team that I wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

"The right stuff" is always here; it never decreases in strength; in fact, it seems to grow from year to year. Even in these challenging times, I am, nearly daily, approached by a faculty member, a staff member, an administrator, a student - even a community member, and here is how the conversation begins: "Dr. Van Hook, I've got this idea....." And from there, some solution to a challenge emerges; some new or improved program is born; some new partnership is formed; some new potential is unleashed; or some new technology application is proposed.

Regardless of what happens – or doesn't happen – in the decades ahead, I know two things for certain:

First, College of the Canyons has earned the regard of this community and the state over the last 40 years as being a "can-do" place, resourceful, spirited, and with the ability to lead, to do, and to achieve excellence that others can only dream about. And second, College of the Canyons will continue to thrive. Our

spirit, our commitment, our character, our confidence and our courage will yield success as we begin a new academic year, and with it, a new decade.

As we start this year, I invite you to ask yourself four questions:

- ✓ What is one new thing I can attempt in the next 12 months to challenge myself and grow beyond my current boundaries?
- ✓ What can I do personally to create opportunities for our students?
- ✓ What bridge can I build to another department?
- ✓ What can I do personally to expand our community's connections with College of the Canyons?

I look forward to seeing your answers come to life and help create our future.

And, if the past is any indication of what our future holds for us, we are in for an amazingly wild ride!

My musings today have inevitably led me to compare COC's future with that of Star Fleet Captain Jean-Luc Picard's "Starship Enterprise." At the beginning of each TV show, we were reminded of the Enterprise's mission:

"To explore the final frontier

To explore strange new worlds...

To seek out new life; new civilizations...

To boldly go where no one has gone before!"

At COC:

- we explore,
- we discover,
- we seek out answers,
- we never give up,
- and I am extremely proud that - together - we will boldly go where no

community college has gone before!

Like my treks in the mountains, I know we can cross the wide rivers, hike the steep trails, and reach any summit we set out for.

We have done that for the last four decades, and we will continue to do so in the next four decades. Working together, we will accomplish great things and explore new worlds.

All because we have **“the right stuff!”**

Have a great year everyone!