

Silver Spur Comments 2011 – Diana Cusumano

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is Dianne Van Hook, and I am proud to serve as Chancellor of College of the Canyons in the great community of Santa Clarita. It is a pleasure to be with you in such a spectacular setting for such a special occasion with the honor of recognizing such an amazing woman.

Diana Cusumano is many things. Wife, mother and grandmother. Successful business owner. Ardent believer in education. Talented artist. Reluctant tractor driver. Friend to College of the Canyons. And that's why we're here this evening, to celebrate her life of service to our college and our community.

Seeing those pictures of Coalinga took me back to my own childhood in rural Minnesota. There's something special about growing up in an agricultural setting. Farming is a challenging occupation. Its timeline is not your own, and your livelihood is at the mercy of factors beyond your control. Weather. Pests. Prices in the marketplace. And so much more.

As you work on the land, the land works on you. It shapes you and leaves a lasting imprint on your character. It makes you humble, yet forces you to be resilient and bounce back. It fosters ingenuity and resourcefulness. It keeps you true to your roots. And perhaps most importantly, it teaches you that results come only from digging in, getting your hands dirty, and working very hard.

Clearly, Diana learned well from her experiences, and today she continues to apply those lessons – as only she can. She set her roots deep in Santa Clarita when she moved here with her young family 29 years ago. She immediately got to work, giving of herself where she could help others and make an impact. Not surprisingly, her service was very much intertwined with the needs of her family. A talented, committed educator, she volunteered at Wiley Canyon Elementary School where Antonia, Dino and Michael were in 4th, 2nd and 1st grades. That was the first of many Santa Clarita organizations to be blessed by her creativity, devotion and leadership.

Her active engagement in our community has never stopped. Her record of service is extraordinary and extends into almost every facet of life in Santa Clarita. She was a pivotal force in growing and developing some of our most vital and recognized community organizations from the Heart Association, to the Child and Family Center, to the Henry Mayo Newhall Memorial Hospital Foundation.

John F. Kennedy said, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” Diana’s devotion to the community is rivaled only by her dedication to learning – something she inherited from her father. A first-generation Italian-American, he passed up a college scholarship because his parents needed him to work. He returned to community college when Diana was working on earning her B.A. in English from UC Davis, and was fond of saying “nobody can take away what you put into your mind.”

With three young children, Diana made a commitment to earn a master’s in education and reading specialist credential from Sacramento State. Later, her intrinsic creativity drew her to design work. She completed a certificate course in computer graphics and launched a desktop publishing business. That flair for design led her to pursue art, and start Interior Dimensions, an entirely new business. She even found time to support Gary’s farming habit by learning to drive a tractor.

Diana is gracious, humble, and quick to recognize that to whom much is given, much is expected. Her success is rooted in the opportunities she has received. She was only one of three students from her graduating class of 93 who left Coalinga to attend a four-year college. Her education was made possible by an annual scholarship, as well as the baby-sitting, house cleaning, and retail jobs she undertook. Ensuring others have a chance to pursue their dreams is a passion that fueled her journey and inspires her service to College of the Canyons and Santa Clarita. When she is committed, she follows through with character, integrity, purpose, compassion and care.

Her ties to College of the Canyons date to our very first Silver Spur held in 1989. She was part of the organizing committee that infused this special evening with a sense of significance and elegance, and she lent us her creativity and style for the first five events. It wasn't until 2005 that she joined the Foundation's Board of Directors at the suggestion of Frank and Charlotte Kleeman, two other Silver Spur honorees. As we all know, Frank and Charlotte can be very persuasive. Once engaged, Diana jumped in with both feet. She brought her zeal and vision to the Education Scholarship Committee, which provides more than \$54,000 in direct aid to College of the Canyons students each year. She also joined the Library Associates Committee. Together, she and Gary made a generous contribution that helped us bring the University Center from a dream to a reality.

And most recently, she graciously accepted our invitation to co-chair the capital campaign committee that will raise the funds needed to build a Culinary Arts Institute on the College of the Canyons campus. In the midst of a very busy week, she took time on Wednesday to meet with the committee leadership team to plan our campaign strategy. Then she went home and focused on her own cooking. With family coming into town from all directions, there was baking to be done! And, because family always comes first for Diana, she made everyone's favorite goodies.

The Silver Spur Award reflects our valley's Western history. And its recipients embody the spirit and character associated with the American West. Innovation. Energy. Creativity. Restless curiosity. Concern for others. The importance of family. These things are all true of Diana, and make her a particularly worthy recipient of the award.

Her fervent belief in the power of education, and her work as a teacher also set her apart. Henry Adams said, “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” That is certainly true of Diana’s work in the classroom. But some of her most important lessons are those we can learn from her own life. Vision. Commitment. Generosity. What you can accomplish when you dig in, get your hands dirty and give the best of yourself. As Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.”

When we think of specific people, certain words come to mind that represent the essence of who they are, what they stand for, and what they are known for. When I think of Diana, and how she conducts herself, I think of:

- Character
- Compassion
- Family
- Integrity
- Vision
- And Passion

We can never repay what she has given to each of us individually over the years and to the organizations we care about. But we can say a heartfelt thank you, and that is why we are here this evening; to thank Diana, and to publicly acknowledge our debt of gratitude. It is a special joy to celebrate her service, and honor her dedication to College of the Canyons and our students by bestowing on her this special award.

Please join me in honoring Diana Cusumano as she comes forward to accept the 2011 College of the Canyons Silver Spur Award.