



The Bell Policy Center

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Commencement Address Lamar Community College Lamar, Colorado • May 13, 2006

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(As delivered)

Congratulations to those of you who are graduates, and to your families. This is an important day in your lives, and I am so pleased and honored to have been asked to be a part of it.

But, you know, being a commencement speaker really isn't all it's cracked up to be.

First of all, no one really cares what I have to say. Be honest – you came here to get your degree. You undoubtedly have parties to get to – parties that will go “All Night Long,” according to the 17th Avenue All-Stars. I am now the only thing that stands between you and those goals – like a very long spotlight when you're in a hurry to get somewhere.

And the second reason being the commencement speaker isn't all it's cracked up to be is – these speeches are hard to write.

I've written a lot of them. This is the first time I've actually delivered one, but I was a speech writer and I've written a bunch of these things for other people. And trust me – they're all the same. That's because everything that can be said in one of these addresses has already been said – many, many times.

You know – commencement is not an ending, it's a beginning; today is the first day of the rest of your lives; go forth and achieve greatness; blah, blah, blah.

I was best man at my cousin's wedding, and when I went to make the toast – which I had carefully practiced – my brothers started yelling, “Sum up! Sum up!” I got so flustered that I totally forgot what I was to say and ended up with something like – “Oh, Hell, here's to the bride and groom.”

It was a short and memorable toast.

So here's the deal. Where are the horse management folks? Let's synchronize our watches.

Right now, by my watch, it's 10:38. If I'm still talking at 10:58, I want the horse management folks to yell, "Sum up!" And I will try to do so. Deal? Deal.

My family and I are honored by the recognition that you have paid to my grandparents for the role they played in the founding of Lamar Community College. Grandpa was always proud to have served as this institution's first president. The hospitality you have shown has been wonderful, and the presentation last night at the Antelope Dinner was very meaningful for all of us.



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I want to thank President Rizzuto, Dr. Smith, Anne-Marie Crampton, and the entire LCC community for the honor you paid our family.

My brothers and cousins and I grew up quite proud of our grandparents – for who they were and what they achieved in life. To know that, 63 years after they moved away from Lamar, and nearly 70 years after the birth of this college, they are remembered and appreciated in this community is deeply moving to us.

I am joined by as many descendants of James and Helen Buchanan as could make it today. They had two children – my father Jim and my aunt Sara. Unfortunately, my father and mother could not be here today because my niece is also graduating this weekend a couple thousand miles away from here. They are very sorry they could not be two places at once.

But Aunt Sara is here – and she looks pretty good, considering she closed down the Antelope Dinner last night. Also here are four of the six grandchildren and four of the nine great-grandchildren of James and Helen Buchanan.

And it is to them, seated here in these two rows over here, that I say, from the bottom of my heart – None of you – none – is allowed to yell "Sum up!"

We are a family of story tellers. In fact, ask any of the in-laws present today and they will assure you we tell the same story over and over and over again.

But story telling is important to us. It's a tradition we inherited from my grandfather, who inherited it from his grandfather.

So I want to tell a story today. A story of two people, both born in the Heartland just over 100 years ago, whose families uprooted themselves and moved in pursuit of education and a better life for their children, who met and married and spent much of their lives together expanding educational opportunity for others.

It is the story of my grandparents – James Harry Buchanan and Helen Elaine Weddle Buchanan.

Their story is the story of many of their generation, and it tells us a lot about why Lamar Community College was needed. Perhaps you will hear in it truths about your own lives or your own families – truths that tell us a lot about why Lamar Community College is still needed today.

My grandfather's father died before my grandfather was born. He died after being kicked by a horse.

Hence the need for degrees in horse management. If we'd had those degrees back then, my entire family history would have been very different!

But it was obviously a great tragedy. His widow and her two young daughters moved back to Missouri to live on the farm with her father and brothers, and there, in November of 1901, my grandfather was born.

It was a marginal farm, and by the age of 12 or 13, Grandpa was carrying a full load of the

work. He was able to attend school less and less, and he never really got beyond the eighth grade.

But his mother wanted a different life for her son, and my grandfather desperately wanted to learn. And so, in 1919 they auctioned the farm and the family moved to Englewood, just south of Denver.



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Grandpa was 17. He and his sister went to work and pooled their resources. In the evenings, Grandpa went to Emily Griffith Opportunity School in downtown Denver – the closest thing in the day to a community college. He later attended night school at the Central Denver YMCA.

After four years, he had his GED.

By luck of birth, my grandmother had more opportunities than my grandfather. She was born in July, 1905, on a farm in Kansas and grew up and went to school in the nearby town of Lebanon – the chief claim to fame of which is that it is the geographic center of the lower 48 states.

Grandma was the only child of a relatively successful farming couple who had waited late in life to have a child, and so she enjoyed an easier childhood than did my grandfather.

But she, too, had to move to pursue higher education. There was nothing beyond high school where they lived, so in 1923, my grandmother came to Colorado – to Boulder – to attend college, and her parents came with her.

They said they came to provide their daughter with adult supervision, but we suspect it really had to do with wanting to retire in Boulder.

In any case, Grandma attended CU and graduated with a degree in English literature. Literature and poetry were her life-long passions.

My grandparents met at a meeting of union and labor organizers. I can honestly tell you that I owe my life to the labor movement in Colorado.

It was the summer of 1927. After teaching for several years in Brush, Grandpa had returned to Denver to enroll at the University of Denver. To pay the bills, he went to work as a window washer in downtown Denver, and he got involved in the Window Washer's Union.

Grandma was a new graduate of CU and had come to Denver for the summer, according to my father, to work in a laundry “to learn about the plight of the working girl.”

They met at a union meeting, and by the end of the year they were married.

Grandpa graduated from DU in 1928, and after stints in teaching and administration in Boyero and La Jara, he was hired to be superintendent here in Lamar in 1933. He got his GED at 21, his bachelor's degree at 27, and by 31 he was superintendent of schools.

My grandparents and their two young children lived here for 10 years. My dad and my Aunt Sara remember Lamar as a wonderful place to grow up – with good schools and strong churches, the sort of place where you could send a young child on an errand downtown alone and know she would be safe.

Their memories are the happy memories of childhood – playing kick-the-can under the street light on a warm summer night, making a sling shot from just the right willow branch, pheasant hunting, the cool sanctuary of the movie theater, the smell of cottonwood leaves in the fall, delivering the *Lamar Daily News* after school.

Dad's stint as a paper boy for the *Lamar Daily News* actually came to an abrupt end when he

had the bright idea of trying to unionize the paper boys. Pay was low, and he thought they should withhold their services until that changed.

The strike lasted 45 minutes, just long enough for Dad to be fired – an example that was not lost on the other paper boys, who jumped on their bikes and went right back to work.

Dad later got a job delivering *The Denver Post*, which paid better. It was a morning paper, and he has wonderful memories of riding his bike around a darkened town while everyone else was asleep. It was on one of these mornings, on Main Street right here in Lamar, that he tried his first cigarette.

And he discovered that not quite everyone in Lamar was in fact asleep at that early hour. One of his last stops was a hotel lobby where there always happened to be several attractive and friendly women hanging out. It was only later that it dawned on him that this was the local . . . how shall I say it? Let's just say they were working girls.

But despite these childhood memories, my family lived here in the middle of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. It was the most challenging period in this town's history, and the brutal realities of the times found their way into the awareness of even these happy children.

For my grandfather's funeral, Aunt Sara wrote a wonderful poem. The part I remember best, now almost 30 years later, was about how her father taught her to use paper or cardboard to re-sole her shoes, since they couldn't afford new ones. For the daughter, it was one more nifty trick her daddy knew. For the father, I'm sure it had a more unsettling meaning.

My dad has written a fair amount about his childhood, including his time in Lamar. He writes of living for a while in a house on 6th Street just south of the Santa Fe Railroad tracks, of putting pennies on the rails for passing trains to flatten.

Through the open doors of passing boxcars he often saw men standing or sitting. He writes, "Many unemployed men . . . rode the rails aimlessly from town to town, from hobo camp to hobo camp, human flotsam on a sea of despair, drifting nowhere."

"Occasionally, when a train did stop or slow down, two or three of these men would throw out their swags and jump. A few came to our back door, never the front door, and asked for something to eat. Mother usually fed them as they sat on the back steps."

Once, my father found a whittled piece of wood hanging by a string from the back fence. He thought one of the men left it as a thank-you, but Grandpa told him he probably left it as a sign to others that this was a house where you could get a good meal.

"I was still quite young when the Depression was at its worst," Dad wrote, "and some of the talk left me bewildered. When I'd hear adults talk about someone having been let go, I imagined that person had slipped from another person's grasp and had dropped off a cliff."

Both my dad and my aunt remember the pervasive poverty of the time – friends whose clothes were tattered, whose homes were little more than shacks, whose fathers simply disappeared.

And, of course, both my father and my aunt remember the dust. Playing outside they would keep an eye on the horizon for the black clouds that signaled a dust storm. When one appeared, they would rush inside and close up the house. They would put tape around the doors and windows and pack wet towels and blankets under doors.

"Within minutes the chocolate scourge engulfed us," Dad writes. "It became dark and on came the lights. Wind driven grit peppered the house, and over time etched the windward windows.

"It could last a few hours, or all day. Even though we sealed ourselves indoors in this way, our



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eyes itched and our nostrils and teeth caked with grit. When the sun reappeared, there was a new layer of dust over everything. Some as fine as flour seeped under closet doors and impregnated clothes and bedding.”

For my father, one side benefit of the dust storms was that it made arrow-head hunting easier – heavier artifacts left behind when the wind took the top soil. That’s the sort of thing a child remembers.

But the backdrop to the childhoods of my father and aunt was great economic despair and environmental calamity, and Lamar was at the center of it all. It was a time of profound change in this community, this country and throughout the world.

War raged overseas – a war that would soon engulf this nation and define a generation. Clouds of dust literally engulfed this town, borne on the winds that tore away the topsoil and the livelihoods of tens of thousands of families and forever changed the face of this part of the country.

How did this community respond? It founded a college.

It didn’t fall apart. It didn’t say, “You’re on your own – every man for himself.” It didn’t look for scapegoats in the form of people who were different, such as the nameless men in the boxcars.

This community responded to hardship by becoming a college town – it looked to the future and created an institution that would both strengthen the economy and provide new opportunities for students and families facing great uncertainty and dislocation.

It reached back to what is best about this country – optimism for the future, faith in the power of education, belief in community action, and undying trust in the resilience of the American family and the individual.

And it *was* the community that did it. Reading the newspaper accounts at the time makes this obvious.

And, Mr. Springer, this week I had the privilege of chatting with one of your classmates from that first graduating class, Yvonne Parker from Springfield. The community spirit dominated her memories as well.

Some names are still familiar and even adorn buildings on campus. Others are less-well remembered. John Bruckner, who was president of the chamber of commerce, was the one who originally pushed to turn the idea into reality.

Mr. Bruckner’s daughter, Karen, is with us this morning, sitting next to my Aunt Sara.

There were Neil and Billy Burch, my grandparent’s closest friends here. Donald Smith and his wife (whose name I cannot find), Gale Lee, who was president of the bank. There was Chuck Bowman, Fred Betz from the newspaper, Alfred Todd, R. L. Christy, Glen Kirkpatrick, Harry Nevius, Maybelle Pillar, and many other men and women whose names are not known to me. It was truly a community effort to build a community college.

And it was a community effort to sustain the college. The truth is, my family moved away from Lamar in 1943 – 63 years ago. We are proud to come back to honor my grandparents. But we also are here to honor this community for sustaining this institution for so many years.

My grandparents helped get it started. But it was this entire community that kept the college going – you invested in it, and you turned it into a powerful instrument for opportunity.

What struck me, as I prepared to speak with you today, was how similar my grandparents’ backgrounds were to those individuals and families the college was created to serve – and in



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many ways still serves today. They came from farms and small towns, and their only educational option beyond high school was to move away – often at great cost and great sacrifice.



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It was an option that few took. And those who did seldom returned.

But for almost 70 years, Lamar Community College, like the other community and state colleges and area vocational schools across this state, has provided another alternative. It has expanded opportunities for students and families. It has strengthened this town and this part of the state.

My grandmother is quoted as saying, “Lamar Junior College was a child of the Depression.” It certainly was a bold and positive response to great economic uncertainty and dislocation.

Today is also a time of economic uncertainty and dislocation, as Dr. Smith noted last evening. You know that very well here in southeastern Colorado – with Neoplan closing as well as the pickle plant in La Junta, with challenging prices for agricultural products, with the pressures of globalization, with state budget constraints that led to a 30 percent cut in state funding for this college in recent years.

My fear is that in these times, Colorado may not respond with the same foresight that Lamar showed in the 1930s, the same wisdom and commitment that brought about LCC.

There is a lot of talk about rationalizing systems, about making them more efficient and accountable. And I am all for efficiency and accountability.

But let’s not forget that the purpose of a community college is not just to be efficient. It is to bring opportunity to more students and families and vitality to more communities.

It is to help ensure kids all over Colorado don’t have to move to Boulder or Fort Collins just to go to college.

[Horse management students: Sum up!]

You’re a minute early! I think I’m just going to ignore you.

The purpose of a community college is to ensure that employers who want to come to or expand in towns like Lamar, La Junta, Springfield, or Eads have a partner in building the workforce that will make that possible.

This college serves 14 area school districts with enrichment programs. It provides most of the nurses for the hospitals throughout the region. It contributes, by one recent estimate, \$17 million to the local economy every year – more than three times what the state spends to run it. In cold economic terms, community colleges are a good investment.

And in human terms, community colleges are essential because communities are essential, and because it is critical for all Coloradans to have access to further education, regardless of where they live or what they can afford.

So community colleges may not be models of efficiency. But they are gateways to opportunity. Their products – educated citizens and skilled workers – are instruments of social and economic change

That’s why my grandfather and grandmother and the other leaders of this community founded this institution. That’s why the people of this area voted back in the 1940s to support it with their taxes. That’s why, for nearly 70 years, families from throughout southeast Colorado have sent their kids here.

And that is why this state must renew its commitment to the entire higher education system,

including community colleges. That's why this state must renew the promise that every student who wants to go to college – and every family who wants to send a son or daughter to college – will have access and the ability to do so.

Fifteen years ago, when Sen. Rizzuto served on the Joint Budget Committee in the Legislature, Colorado dedicated over 20 percent of its state budget to colleges and universities. Today, it dedicates only 10 percent. For the first time in our history, families are asked to contribute more through tuition than the state contributes through tax revenues.

Today's ceremony is the legacy of the sacrifice, foresight and commitment of previous generations.

President Rizzuto last evening expressed a fear that we have become a society where the word "I" has become more important than the word "We." Let's not let that happen here. Let's commit that *our* legacy will be such that, 67 years from now, this college is still here, still thriving, still affordable and accessible to all, still serving this community's needs, and still sending graduates into the world ready to meet the challenges of the day.

So I am very proud to be with you today – to remember my grandparents, to celebrate this institution and the commitment of this community to it, to reaffirm our belief in what my grandfather called "the democratic traditions of American education."

And I am very proud to congratulate you, the Class of 2006 – the 67th graduating class of LCC – for carrying on that tradition, for your hard work and accomplishments, for the support and sacrifice of your families, and for your successes, which we honor today.

May you go forth to lead happy, productive, meaningful lives. May you prosper. But wherever you go, don't forget how you got there. Remember how you benefited from the wisdom and investments and sacrifices of previous generations, and resolve to do the same.

Give back to your community, to your country, to your world. Go forth and plant a tree – not so you will have shade tomorrow, but so your children and grandchildren will have shade for years to come.

Thank you again for the privilege of speaking to you today. Congratulations and enjoy your day. Here's to the Class of 2006!



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