

Homero Gonzalez

2013 GGC Fall Semester Commencement Speech

December 19, 2013

Thank you, Dr. Preczewski, for your kind introduction, and also for inviting me to be here today. Thank you to the faculty and staff, honored guests, graduates, parents, families and friends, and my colleagues from Telemundo Atlanta. It's an honor and true pleasure to serve as your keynote speaker.

Today's a very special day, and believe me, it's not because you get to have me as your keynote speaker. No, today is a very special day because on this day the doors to the real world open for you, and your real adventures in life begin. Today, you reach a very important milestone for you and your families; and it's more than enough of a reason to be proud of yourselves and to celebrate.

But even though this is a moment to rejoice in your accomplishments, I bet that you probably have in the back of your mind that pressing question that you may or may not have an answer to the famous question ... now what?

You're most likely asking yourself ... What is my next move? Am I going to grad school? Where is my first real job going to be? Am I actually going to find a job in what I majored in, or now that I finally have my bachelor's degree, am I going to get that promotion I have been waiting for? You're trying to figure out how to get to the next level in order to reach success.

Success ... such an important word in today's society. Everyone is after it, but do we know what we're really after? Usually when we think about success we think about achievements, wealth, respect or fame, but success is such a vague word. What achievements, how much wealth, what amount of fame or respect makes us truly successful?

I want to share with you a very important story that set the tone for the way I want to live my life, both as a professional and as an individual. This story has been responsible for my life goals and has been my driving force in all I do.

It's a story about a child who was born to a very poor family. He was one of the youngest of seven children. Because of his family's economic situation, he started working at the age of five. Can you believe it? At the age of five...when most kids are entering kindergarten. But not this child. This child started helping his family as a newspaper boy, and then later he would walk around the streets of his town polishing shoes. He was born on a farm so he had to become a cowboy as well. In elementary

school, every day after class was over, he would go cut grass in the middle of the day under the hot beaming sun in order to feed his father's cattle.

Then, as an adolescent he started helping local orchards harvest oranges. By 13, he started doing construction and by the age of 14, he was already living on his own in the second largest city in Mexico, working 2-3 shifts back to back in factories away from his family. All of this while going to school. But his family's needs kept him from continuing his education. He was not able to finish his last year of middle school. Determined to change his life and the lives of his family members, he decided to chase the American Dream.

At the age of 17, he immigrated to the United States, leaving everything behind, without knowing how to speak English, all the while trying to adapt to a culture very different from his, and working for a fraction of what his wage should be.

When I hear this story, it makes me proud to know how he overcame those challenges, because as the saying goes, where there's a will there's a way. That child would grow to teach himself how to speak, read and write in English without ever going to school. He bought dictionaries and grammar books. He even wrote new words in his match boxes while he worked, and looked them up when he got home.

He became very well adapted to the American culture, and made a name for himself in the construction industry, building hundreds of neighborhoods and working day and night all to give his family what he believed they deserved...

That child I'm talking about ... the one who always thought about how to get out of poverty, the one who left everything behind to chase the American dream, and who, after becoming a U.S. citizen, brought the rest of his family here for a new life ... is sitting with us today. I'm speaking of my father. And it is him and my mother who have been my driving force. They have given up everything: being in their native country of Mexico, seeing their parents grow old ... all to make sure that my brothers and I get the education and opportunities they believe we deserve.

To me ...that is success. Not fame, not wealth, not awards, but overcoming your challenges. Fighting for and staying true to what you believe in. The awards, the money, the fame, the respect...all of that is the outcome of your hard work and perseverance. *True* success is proving to yourself that you did it, but most importantly, that you never gave up. You can always forge your own path.

(Parente papi y mami)... I want to introduce you to my parents, Homero and Olga Gonzalez. (Muchas gracias, mami y papi, por todos sus sacrificios, felicidades y por sus logros.) Thank you so much for all your sacrifices, mom and dad, congratulations on your success.

Thanks to my parents' hard work, I am here today. Two of the many qualities I admire in my father are his vision and determination. He's had clear goals of what he wants

to accomplish in life since he was young, and I think that for anyone who seeks to be successful, having that vision and that drive is essential for overcoming any obstacle.

I think my father knew, though, when he started seeking a better life that those challenges would come. He knew that there would be problems that would be tough to overcome... but he delighted in the unknown. He savored every new word he learned in English, even though they represented a world he had never seen before. He never wavered because he had a clear vision. He knew what rewards could result from overcoming those challenges.

Today as you graduate you owe that to yourself...do not be afraid of the unknown. On the contrary, enjoy the mystery of the unfamiliar and rejoice in knowing that the opportunities are endless.

My father and I share similar stories in terms of challenges we had to overcome. Like most immigrants, we came to this country with hopes and dreams of a brighter future, and just like many other immigrants, one of our biggest challenges was the language barrier and finding someone to truly believe in our potential.

When I came to this country, besides learning English, I also encountered having to adapt to the education system in Georgia. When I transitioned to high school, I had to sit with my advisor to see what high school route I would take. At that time they had two types of high school diplomas, college prep, which allowed you to pursue a college degree. And then the technical route, which pretty much limited you to technical colleges.

When I met with my advisor, she insisted that because I was still learning English I should conform to a technical diploma. She said that concentrating on improving my English and that learning a trade was probably a better option than a college degree.

That's the extent of the potential she saw in me... imagine if I would have "conformed." You should always forge your own path – and like my father ... I did.

I wish I could go back and show her these! (Hold the two Emmy Awards up in the air.)

Again, true success is proving to yourself that you have overcome obstacles, no matter what they might be. And, most importantly, that you never gave up.

As cheesy and cliché as it may sound, one of the biggest lessons I have learned from my father is to never abandon your sense of self. No one can determine your self-worth. The only person who can set limits on what you can and cannot achieve is you.

There is no secret formula for achieving success. Sure there are things you can do to prepare yourself for the real world, like finding mentors or volunteering, or graduating from Georgia Gwinnett College, but I think that the art of reaching success is much bigger than just simple tips on how to prepare for your life.

What I believe... is that each of you has a mission in this world. What is it? And when will you figure it out? Well...let's just say you will know. But what I can guarantee you is that you won't find it staying still. You have to search for it. You have to be at the right place at the right time to figure it out. And unfortunately, there is no address on a GPS where you can locate the "right place," or a clock where you can figure out the "right time."

In other words, there is no formula, no blueprint. And that...that is beautiful. "Why?" you ask, because that's what forging your own destiny is all about. It's like digging for gold. You choose to dig here and then to dig there, until finally you see the shiny metal. And it's then that you realize what your success looks like, and you begin to understand that all the wrong turns you took were because destiny was taking you where you needed to arrive.

I have no doubt that each of you will have your version of the type of challenges my father and I encountered. You will have your own version of our success stories, and you will have your own version of these Emmys.

How will you go about reaching success? That's up to you. That's the adventure. That's the thrill that makes life worth living. And guess what? The adventure, for you, starts today. And even though there are times our success and triumphs go unnoticed, knowing we fought and conquered is the most gratifying form of success. You can always forge your own path.

The trick in chasing success, though, is not being weak during times of hardship. Not taking the easy way out when you see that you're struggling. Always remember that those struggles are there to make you stronger. Remember to stay true to yourself. There will be many instances where you will have to decide between continuing to struggle or abandoning your sense of self and what you believe in. It would be a shame for you to reach success and not be able to recognize yourself anymore...

You are ending this chapter of your life today... maybe with doubts, and definitely with hopes and dreams, for yourselves and for your families. And I believe that every single one of you has the potential to achieve those dreams. All it takes is for you to be willing to work hard, willing to get through the challenges life will throw at you, and willing to take advantage of the unplanned opportunities that will present themselves.

Remember, delight in the unknown. The words that my father wrote down on match boxes sparked a fire in his belly to be more – to learn more – and to accomplish more. What will spark that light for you, Georgia Gwinnett College Class of 2013?

In the words of our beloved and late Nelson Mandela, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can choose to change the world."

You are leaving this ceremony today with a college degree – the most powerful weapon you can use to change your life, the life of your family, and even the world. Don't settle! Don't conform! Go on and do great things!

You are a Georgia Gwinnett College graduate. And I am here to tell you, everything is possible! (Hold Emmys up in the air again.)

Congratulations to you and your families! God speed, Go Grizzlies, and SI SE PUEDE
– YES, YOU CAN! AND YOU WILL!