

Alex Montoya

Cuyamaca College Commencement: 7 Recommendations for Life

Thank you, President Zacovic. Graduates, staff, and families, what an enormous blessing to be here tonight! What an amazing night. What an amazing country we live in. What an amazing city, what an amazing campus! What an amazing time.

I say all this because this is YOUR time. You live in the most incredible time in our world's history. You can press a button on your phone, and talk to someone on the other side of the WORLD. Technology and communication are better than at ANY TIME in world HISTORY. And how far we will go, is determined by you. What our future holds, is determined by you.

So tonight, we celebrate you.

But within every celebration is a story. Be mindful of your story. How you got here; what hurdles you overcame.

I know about hurdles and difficulties. I'll show you how. If you can, please lift.....

<LEFT ARM, RIGHT ARM, RIGHT LEG> What if someone told you that you'd go through life missing those 3 limbs? What if you had to wear 3 prosthetics while at Cuyamaca College?

That was my situation. Due to a rare birth defect, I was born as a triple amputee. I wear 3 prosthetics and I'll show you how they work. <DEMONSTRATION AND DODGER JOKE>

Now what I've learned, in overcoming my disability, are lessons you can take as graduates. My favorite number is 7. So here are 7 pieces of advice:

Number 1, Stay Connected. Just as I need my cables and straps to stay connected, do the same with your values. When times get tough – and they will get tough – stay connected to your ideals, your beliefs, your convictions. Stay connected to YOUR reasons for pursuing an education. Stay connected to the people that love you, and the dreams you possess.

Number 2, CHERISH your education. Not just your degree, or what that degree may provide. But your EDUCATION. Where'd you go? What'd you learn? Who have you BECOME?

In my life, being a triple amputee meant I had a harder road than most. I moved from my native Colombia to the United States when I was 4. And I saw that my pathway to success would be education. A good education provides opportunity; and equality; and allows you to see promise, where the world sees challenges.

Which leads to my third point. As you leave Cuyamaca, know that the most important thing you have is your relationships. With your friends, your classmates, your professors, and your staff. Cherish them. It was Duke basketball coach Mike Kryzewski who said, after losing in the championship game several years ago, "I hurt, but not for me, for my players. Relationships are the most important aspect of my career." This from a man who has won national championships and Olympic gold medals. Make relationships the centerpiece of your life.

Number 4, strive to leave a place better than how you found it. In 2008 I was blessed to publish my first book, Swinging for the Fences. In it I talk about my friend Scott Delgadillo. Scotty was 14 and leukemia had him in and out of hospitals for a good 3 years. By his third stay, Scotty focused not on himself, but on others. In case I don't make it, he said, how can I improve the lives of others around me? And he did, visiting other kids, encouraging them, lifting their spirits. Telling them BEAT THIS THING and then go run this world.

Scotty passed away in January 2001. And his friends encouraged his parents, Carmen and Eric, to create a group to help families battling cancer. Ten years later the Friends of Scott Foundation, of which I am a proud advisory board member, has raised millions to assist families. How can you, like Scotty, leave a place better? You can, here, and in future schools, and workplaces, and organizations, and relationships.

You know, my mom used to ask me, "Alejandro Montoya Gonzalez..." – and you know you're in trouble when they say your whole name right? – "what do you want to do in life?" And I'd say, change my world. Because I knew how hard it was to change THE world. I recognized you change the world by changing YOUR world.

And that starts with my fifth recommendation for you. Dare to be Different. Turn on any TV; open any magazine. We are FLOODED with ads saying we need to look a certain way; dress a certain way; do what everybody else does. Why? Why? The great leaders in history have dared to be different, in their paths, and in their thinking. You too can dare to be different. Where there is cynicism, cast light. Where there is division, be a unifier. Where there is hate speech or bullying, be the brave one who stands up to it. Where there is a void, be a LEADER.

Because ultimately, that is what you have been equipped with here at Cuyamaca College. Not just facts. Not just formulas. The ability to LEAD and be a leader.

And with that you need 2 final things, numbers 6 and 7. Live with passion and live with humor. You will never know your destiny until you resolve: what IS your true passion? Seek that passion because you were made to pursue it. My passion is sports and my career is to help the Padres connect with the Hispanic community. Your passion will become your calling.

And never underestimate the power of humor as you pursue your goals. A good sense of humor is crucial in overcoming a disability. And it's crucial as you become a leader. Laugh. Poke fun at yourself. People ask me how much college was for me and I tell them: It cost me an arm and a leg.

Show that humor. Show that joy. Because ultimately it's about setting the tone. With your challenges. With your peers. With the place you are leaving better.

You know, when I was invited to speak tonight, truly I say I was humbled. Not only is this a marvelous institution, but this is a significant date in my life. One year ago today, my family lost my sister, Elizabéth, to cancer. She was 42 and battled it for over a year. That, my friends, is strength and resilience, to see someone fighting for their life.

I think about her every day and I know she would give ANYTHING to be where we are today. Staying Connected; cherishing our education; treasuring relationships; leaving a place better; daring to be different; living with passion; and living with humor.

If a young man from Colombia, South America, missing 3 limbs can do it, graduates, why can't you? Why can't you?

You can. Because these are the best times ever. And you're the best class ever.

In baseball we have a saying. Don't get frustrated if, or when, you strike out. Pick up that bat. And Always, Always Keep Swinging. ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE! YOU CAN DO ANTHING!