

Obligation and Reward

ON MAY 17, 2008, Claremont McKenna College graduated 281 bright, productive men and women. One of our own, Tom Leppert '77, delivered the Commencement address (I'll say more about his comments later.) Unlike many of our graduation speakers in recent years, Tom is an alumnus – and this year an obvious and desirable choice.

Tom earned our attention because he has not only had a career as a corporate leader, he has adjured retirement to become a *civic* leader. After heading one of the world's largest construction companies, he "retired" – until last fall, when he was elected mayor of Dallas.

Why did Tom step away from a retirement his success had merited? In his speech, he said,

In the end, my reason was pretty simple: I thought I could make a difference...touch people's lives...and use some of the approaches I learned in business to lead a large urban city and leave it better than it was when I entered.

And from my perspective, from where I came from, I felt that was more an obligation than a reward...Through my life, in a variety of roles, I've gained an appreciation for leadership...especially the idea that the first role of a leader is to serve.

Tom had shown CMC his leadership skills many years ago. He has served as a member of the Board of Trustees and has chaired its Buildings and Grounds Committee (sharing that heavy responsibility with David Mgrublian '82 since the Dallas election). He was true to CMC.

Others show similar dedication. Thousands of alumni have responded to the Alumni Census and Survey initiated by Laura Grisolano '86 when she was president of the CMCAA, and they show time and time again that they see no narrow limits to their life's work and passions: They coach, they sit on boards, they lead fundraising drives and huge campaigns. They found schools, they teach Bible study, they establish local theaters. One leads "an organization in Africa that is creating systems to treat HIV in a country with just 200 doctors and a million HIV+ people." They mentor. They run for office. They volunteer for everything imaginable: "I have started a tutoring program in Chiang Mai,

Thailand for students struggling in their English courses in high school." They are to their children, mothers and fathers, to their communities, inspiration and example.

When Tom Leppert spoke to new graduates – urging them to collect life experiences, to master the art of empathy, and to know their principles – he embodied ideas present from CMC's very beginning. Ten years before our College opened, the Board of Fellows received the recommendation that Claremont welcome a third college, a college for men "interested in careers of public service, whether in the employ of the state or of great private enterprise, or in independent professional practice." To fulfill great roles, these students needed "a broad, liberal, historical outlook coupled with a deep conviction regarding the contribution which men of vision, scholarship, broad training and moral courage can make to the secure establishment of the commonwealth under a democratic form of government." Those who wrote the report hoped "to recast the popular conception of public affairs in terms of dignity, honor, faithfulness to duty, and conspicuous ability." (I am grateful to Professor Charles A. Lofgren, whose *Claremont Pioneers: The Founding of CMC* records the inspiring stories of those who believed in the potential of the Claremont Group.)

The style of language we use to state our goals has changed since then. The world has suffered war and famine, and tyrants have afflicted much of the world's population, and perhaps our words have been shorn of some of the nicety that appeared in the 1937 document. But CMC men and women pursue goals with dedication and fervor that would have pleased those who established principles for our foundation.



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