



Maga'håga Lourdes Leon Guerrero Commencement Speech

University of Guam
Fåñomnåkan 2019 Commencement Ceremony
May 26, 2019 | Calvo Field House

Hafa Adai and congratulations, graduates! Good evening Dr. Krise, Dr. Enriquez, Lt. Gov. Josh, senators, UOG faculty and staff, honored guests, and family and friends of these amazing people sitting before us.

Last month, during my first State of the Island address, I told the people of Guam that the state of our island is promising. That our economic, social, and educational future – holds promise.

YOU are part of that promise. Because acquiring an education – learning the knowledge and obtaining the skills required to earn a college degree – is a promise. It is a promise to yourself. To your children, or your future children. And to the future of our island community.

You may not know what that promise holds for you tonight. We can all plan, but none of us knows what the future holds for us. If someone had told me when I graduated from nursing school at California State University back in 1973 that I would one day become a senator in the Guam Legislature, and then the president of the bank my father had founded, and then ultimately the first female governor of Guam, I probably would've asked them what they had been smoking!

Seriously, though, your promise is still in the making. And it is being driven by the same force that compelled you to study hard, to work intensely, and finally to earn the degree being conferred upon you tonight.

Reaching the full potential of your promise will not be easy. But I want to offer you this piece of advice: Promise yourself to always be willing to learn, to seek new knowledge, and to embrace change. Do not be afraid to ask questions and seek answers. Of everyone and everything. Because that is how you learn, how you grow as a person, and how you make things better.

I can remember as a young girl in middle school, I challenged and questioned things that did not seem right to me. Like why couldn't I speak CHamoru in school? Why were

we given demerits when we spoke the language that our parents spoke – the language that we used at home? If none of us had questioned that move, our indigenous language might be dead today. But because people did not accept the ban on speaking CHamoru, and instead questioned it, that action eventually raised awareness about the importance of preserving and perpetuating our language and our culture. Now, we embrace the speaking and learning of CHamoru. Now, we have a CHamoru Language Commission, a CHamoru immersion school, and a CHamoru immersion program in one of our public schools. All because people questioned the ban on speaking CHamoru. They asked, “Why?”

When I was a teenager, I questioned my parents about why I had to stay home and clean the house while my brothers got to go outside and hang with their friends. Why I was not allowed to smoke at home when my brothers could? Why I couldn't go down to the river and swim while my brothers could?

I did not accept the answer that it was because I was a girl. Although I didn't realize it back then, I was already learning to be a trailblazer, because I did not want to accept what I thought was unfair and discriminatory. So I questioned it. When I went off to college, I joined women's consciousness groups. I became politically active. I advocated for the rights of women and fought for access to healthcare for all.

This questioning, this thinking and this curiosity influence our behaviors, our attitudes, and our mindsets. Those of you being awarded science-oriented degrees today know the importance of questioning things in order to ensure that you get the most accurate data and results.

Questions lead to answers, or to the discovery of facts and sound reasoning that can lead to a change for the better. When I took over at the Bank of Guam after cancer stole my brother Tony from us, I was new to the banking industry. So I asked questions of my senior managers. I knew they were more knowledgeable about the industry, and I took in their wise counsel. But when they told me something had been tried and had not worked, I questioned why. Then, from my fresh perspective, I would offer that maybe if we tried it a different way, we might get more positive results. Often, my suggestions worked. But the changes would not have happened if I had not been asking questions.

Questions rock complacency. They often spur creativity, or that “Aha!” moment. Believe me, as maga'håga, I ask a LOT of questions of people. When we ask questions, we learn more. We become surer of ourselves. We become more confident in our decisions, our ideas, and our actions. We become more courageous and we hold ourselves up stronger, reinforcing our ability to conquer our fear of failure and achieve success in our lives. So promise to ask questions. And also promise to listen when someone asks a question of you – in your professional life and especially at home, with your children.

Promises take many forms, and the promise of education for you is that you are now equipped with the knowledge and skills you have acquired from the University of Guam to go out and make a difference.

We have already seen some of that promise, and the difference it has made, in your work as graduate and undergraduate students. Thanks to Environmental Science graduate students, we now have the first long-term study of the Northern Guam Lens Aquifer, which answers questions about the freshwater storage capacity of our island's aquifer and its vulnerability to weather patterns. This is crucial information for all of us, including the managers at the Guam Waterworks Authority, as the aquifer supplies over 90 percent of our potable water.

The 21 Masters of Public Administration graduates created a sexual misconduct awareness toolkit that provides important information for use in classrooms, churches, and youth camps throughout the region. Guam has the unfortunate distinction of having one of the highest sexual assault rates per capita in the United States. So this toolkit will be extremely helpful for generating much-needed conversations about sexual misconduct here on our island and around Micronesia. Awareness will go a long way toward stopping this crime. The graduates have even translated this toolkit into multiple Micronesian languages.

The 25 students graduating from the School of Education engaged in action research to improve the classroom learning experience and address the importance of parental engagement in student achievement. They have also examined various aspects of our CHamoru language instruction in public school classrooms.

Another group of students produced an innovative project examining Yapese culture and dance; and another took an emotional and revealing look into the psychological impacts on families coping with cancer.

All of these projects and many, many others at the graduate and undergraduate levels conducted by the 388 people graduating today have already had direct and positive impacts in our community. Graduates, si Yu'os Ma'ase for this outstanding work and for everything you have already done to improve life for our island communities. And congratulations to the University for having produced the single LARGEST graduating class in UOG's history!

Many of you will soon be hired as professionals in our private companies or at our government offices. When you become employed, I ask for your promise to help where you see the need for help. To speak up where you see the need for change or improvement. To respectfully question why something has been done a certain way for years, when from your fresh perspective, you may see a different and better way to accomplish it. To offer solutions to our island's problems where you see that something – a new policy, a new program, or a new idea – will work. To keep thinking creatively, scientifically, logically, and compassionately to develop new ways to make our island home the very best place to live.

Right now doors are opening on our island for new opportunities. UOG professors have developed a pathogen-free shrimp, which will help jump-start our aquaculture industry here on Guam. Some of you could be the entrepreneurs that help this industry to take off and grow our economy in ways we have not yet imagined. Others could help develop biodegradable paper products using our own natural materials, to help us reverse the damage being done to our environment by Styrofoam and other plastic garbage. You are only limited by your imagination right now – and for each and every one of you, your imagination is what holds so much promise for your future, and for our future as an island as well.

People are not born leaders. They become leaders by seeing a need for change or improvement, and then by doing something about it. The promise of leadership is now in your hands. Earning your degree is the first step toward becoming a sustainable, productive member of our community. It is the first step toward being able to make a positive difference on our island, in our region of Micronesia, and maybe even throughout the world.

As I travel down this historic road as our first Maga'håga, my promise to you is to try to create a Guam that is fair, safe, compassionate and prosperous for everyone. My hope for you is that you take your promise as a University of Guam graduate with the power to make a difference, take the opportunities that we are working to provide, and do something great with them.

I was not “born” a leader. I became a leader because people saw promise in me. And today, I see promise in all of you.

Un dankolo na Si Yu'os Ma'ase. God bless you, God bless your families and friends, and God bless our island of Guam on this promising day.

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