



“YOU HAVE ARRIVED”

-AJ Rodriguez

Spring Recognition Ceremony

On May 21, over one thousand individuals came out in support of workforce development in San Antonio by attending QUEST’s Spring Recognition Ceremony honoring over 150 program graduates.

The event took place at Our Lady of the Lake University’s Thiry Auditorium. Mr. A.J. Rodriguez of Zachry Industrial, Inc. delivered an inspirational keynote speech to a room filled with graduates, their families and friends, QUEST participants, community leaders, and people from all walks of life.

A.J. Rodriguez’s Keynote Speech

First and foremost, good evening and congratulations on your successful graduation! I won’t keep you long, you’ve heard enough speeches in your “QUEST” to get to this moment –



A.J. Rodriguez –Keynote Speaker

I’m here to share just a few brief thoughts; and following this very special ceremony – we all have a Spurs game to see! Who’s lit a candle at San Fernando for the Spurs?

I’d like to take a brief moment to thank Sr. Pearl Caesar for her

kind invitation to do this and I want to acknowledge the Project QUEST Board and Staff.

“You have arrived.” After putting my family through a rough ride through most of my schooling and having a very rocky start in the beginning of college, it was a relief to hear these words after I got my first job as an intern working at the Greater SA Chamber – “YOU HAVE ARRIVED,” my Father said.

I didn’t quite know what he meant when he said it, but he knew exactly what he meant. Tonight, I know exactly what I mean for all of you, as I in turn, share these words with you - **You have all arrived.** Today, all of your hard work has paid off. All of the sacrifices each of you have made -the difficulties and obstacles that you have overcome. The things that may have gotten in the way, out of the way, things in your control, out of your control, you have done it. The wishes and hopes of your family, your friends and your supporters are all about today’s triumph. **You have arrived.**

What does that mean? It means you have given yourself the gift of opportunity. No one can do that for us, except for us, individually. This is an opportunity to do big things, an opportunity to do small things, an opportunity to do important things. We can help ourselves through opportunity and we can help those that love us. Most importantly, it gives you the opportunity to put yourself in a position to help others. And if you have the opportunity to help others, then, in my humble opinion, you have purpose – **and purpose gives meaning to having a life.**

So today’s graduation is important because it means you have a piece of paper that qualifies you to do

things that not everyone can do and as a result you can provide value. And people will pay for value. I believe you have done something far more important and special today – you have given yourself the opportunity to have true purpose and give yourself a meaningful life.

Don't get me wrong, having value and being paid for that value is great and important. That's the economic argument – and believe me, I would hear an earful from my wife if I wasn't being paid for my purpose in life! But pieces of paper, qualifications, and experience are no substitute for having true purpose.

When you have purpose – you get to work and say, “Thank God it's Monday.” Some folks might think you're weird, so don't say that out loud and Fridays still feel really good! But we have all been there when the only day, the only hour that feels good is that final countdown for when we get off our work. Those days are over. The feeling of success that you feel today is the feeling we all should embrace every day.

As I said, *you have arrived*. **This is not the end of the “QUEST,” this is only the beginning. Life is not about the destination, it's about the journey. Most of you have heard this, but Project QUEST has taken that mantra to new levels.** I am confident all of your lives will be better as a result of going through and completing QUEST. I am also aware that you have developed and gained so much from your education and training that goes beyond the technical aspects of your expertise.

Also remember that what you have earned today can never be taken away from you. Be confident about what you have achieved. Tomorrow, years from today, and even as you end your career, you will face challenges. Remember the confidence that got you where you are today. You are all different people today than you were when you started on this QUEST. Now that *you have arrived*, you need to keep moving forward. Stay confident and don't look back. **The most important things I learned from my education: 1) learning how to learn and 2) communication skills – how to pass on what I have learned.**

I want to encourage all of you to pass on what you have learned and encourage you to stay ambitious in your pursuits. As you may have heard, “keep the fire in the belly.”

In closing (I told you this would be brief), Congratulations again on your successful completion / graduation, and welcome to your new life!

One last thing – GO SPURS GO!!

Andy Hernandez- Graduate Speaker

Let me begin with “Congratulations” because today we are all successful. What an honor it is for me to be a representative for such a diverse and distinguished group. This is a wonderful ending to a journey we all began such a short-time ago.



Andy Hernandez -Graduate Speaker

All of us here today have a story, a personal story that is meaningful to ourselves and those close to us. The type of story that inspires some, brings hope to others, and propels us all forward through adversity-helping us finish what we started.

Any one particular story can be viewed as a testament, a testament to our beliefs, our life's structure, and our individual fortitude. As an example, I will give a small insight to what led me here with all of you today. First of all, I'm no spring chicken. I'm 40 years old and have some gray sprouting out of my head -which carries a stress all of its own. But some of you might be familiar with what I'm going to say next. I had been down this path before. I was a high school grad, first in my family to attend college, was on my way to try and be a philosophy major. However, many of us find out that life is seldom or maybe never a straight path. By this time in my life, my parents had already

divorced, my siblings had married and moved on, and then a bomb was dropped on me. My mother informed me that she had cancer. I was stunned, not because I knew what that statement meant, but because I didn't know. At the time **I didn't know that this meant my mother's treatments were going to be so aggressive that she would lose her job because of it, I didn't know that I would have to get two full time jobs to compensate,** I didn't know that I would have to drop out of school because I would be just too exhausted all the time... I just didn't know. But I adapted, and I moved on.

Eventually, I fell in love, got married and had my first child. But she was born somewhat ill, and was in the NICU for 9 days after her delivery. There was never a more grueling, prayer filled time in my life that one. I had met some very inspirational nurses during those 9 days. I decided that I was going back to school, become a nurse, and do what they did. **It had been 18 years since I last walked a college hallway,** and had set foot back into those doors. My world had definitely changed. In retrospect, part of me says, "Andy, what were you thinking? Have you seen how much you've aged because of that decision?"-some of you might be able to relate with my thinking. But I digress, the point is that life has a tendency of side tracking our ambitions; it throws potholes in the middle of our personal streets, that force us to take the road less traveled by.

Could I tell you more about my personal struggles, my highs and lows, my self-doubt throughout this whole process, the strain it put on my marriage. Of course I could tell you more; this is why we're here, because collectively everyone in this room had to sacrifice. Today is about our validation. Even though I am unfamiliar with many of the faces I see here, I still feel connected to you. We are all bound together, not only by our life's circumstance, but by our sense of purpose. Our reasons are vast to say the least, it's the pride you want to give your parents, that living example you want to set for your significant other, the role model you can be for everyone around you, the need for a better life sustained financially, or maybe you're a little more like me, and your eighth grade teacher told that "You'd never amount to anything good..." It's a remarkable feeling, to know that you're

doing something with your life, to know that you may be having a profound impact on those that you love the most. Like many of you, that feeling, that need, that want, led me here to Project QUEST.



A.J. Rodriguez, Andy Hernandez, Sister Pearl Ceasar, Executive Director and QUEST Board of Directors: Mike Phillips, Father Walter D'heedene, Father Frank Macias, Don Beeler, and Sister Gabriella Lohan, Chair.

When you're a part of this program they call you a "QUESTer", to me that title is literally representative of our quest, our journey to become something more than what we were yesterday. **If friends, family, and desire are the foundation in which we reside, than surely Project QUEST is the glue that helps hold our shelter together.** They are the parent who won't let you forget your chores. We all commit to the "Message to Me" document. If you can't remember exactly what the message entailed, then let me remind you now, *"It will take great courage and commitment to go back to school. I need to do it for good reasons: and no matter what else happens in my life, I owe it to myself to complete my education. Once I have my certificate or degree, I will always have it. The knowledge and skills I gain will be mine forever to use any way I choose. Nothing and no one can stand in the way unless I allow it. I won't. I can't. I'm too important. I must and I will finish."*...

Well, that you have, and for those of you out there who are still on your journey, you will.

I am proud to be a "QUESTer", being here with all of you, surrounded by my peers, the feeling is undeniable, because today we are successful.

