

Commencement Address
The University of Texas at El Paso

The Honorable Shana Dale
Deputy Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration

May 12, 2007

Thank you, Dr. Natalicio. I am honored to be here with you and grateful for the opportunity to share this special moment.

Of course, this is not the most comfortable place for an introvert to be, at a podium in front of 10,000 people. But, I got a call from a woman I deeply respect, a woman who is a phenomenal leader with impeccable integrity, and I am fortunate to count this woman as a dear friend, Diana Natalicio.

I was asked to talk a little bit about my personal experience and although I don't typically like to talk about myself, I will provide some insights.

My parents' generation was the first to move away from the Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina. This was a big step as my ancestors settled in these mountains in the early 1700s from Ireland and Scotland. Historically, the Appalachian Mountain region has been among the most economically challenged in the U.S.

My generation, my sister and cousins, were the first to go to 4-year colleges and I am one of the few to go beyond an undergraduate education. With this background, some people along the way thought the odds were stacked against me, but more about that in a moment.

I am proud to be affiliated with the schools I attended, The University of Tulsa and California Western School of Law, but I live in Washington, DC, a place that is consumed, especially early in one's career, by graduation from Ivy League schools. Again, some people along the way thought the odds were stacked against me and did not expect much from me.

So, you may never encounter this and I hope you do not. But, if you do, my words to you are: Don't ever let someone else's low expectations of you define

who you are, or limit your potential. If I had, I would never have become the Deputy Administrator of NASA.

What ultimately mattered to the people I worked for and who promoted me were a gritty perseverance and determination to get the job done, a strong work ethic, and personal integrity that is the basis of my code of conduct that guides my life. If you are determined, have a strong work ethic, believe in yourself and live your life according to your own personal code of conduct, your achievements will have no boundaries.

These qualities are evident in someone you know and admire – Astronaut Danny Olivas. Danny will explore for NASA and the Nation as a Mission Specialist on the next Space Shuttle mission which is scheduled for launch in just under 4 weeks. It is a thoroughly rigorous process to make it into the Astronaut Corps, but Danny persevered. He submitted his first application to be an astronaut in 1988. He kept trying and was selected for the Astronaut Corps in 1998.

The message here is that persistence pays off. If you have an ultimate goal, a vision, a dream – don't give up. And know that there may be many paths to get to your dream. In 1989, as I was graduating from law school, I applied to NASA to become an attorney with the agency. That did not work out. So I went to work for Congress and ultimately worked my way over to the Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives. And sixteen years after that original application was sent to NASA, I finally joined the agency, albeit in a different capacity.

You may be asking at this point – why the fascination with America's space program? Since its inception, NASA has accomplished great scientific and technological feats in air and space that many said were impossible. NASA's very reason for being is to search for answers that power our future. We are at the forefront of innovation that creates new jobs, new markets, and new technologies.

Space exploration will enable new technologies such as hydrogen fuel cells that may help meet our energy needs on Earth. NASA's charge is to tackle hard, complex problems and in doing so, we make possible technologies that are important for life here on Earth. Space Exploration has led to over a thousand new technologies that improve and save lives every day. Advanced breast cancer imaging, heart defibrillators, and aircraft de-icing are just a few that benefited from NASA's work.

NASA has shown the world that humans can achieve previously inconceivable feats. I believe this spirit of persevering and succeeding in the face of hard challenges resides in you too. It is time for you to embark on your own journey of exploration and discover what life has to offer you and what you have to offer yourself, your community, and your Nation.

To you, the future leaders of the 21st Century, congratulations on a job well done and best wishes for your future!