

Opinion: Generation Entitlement has more lessons to learn

By Ruben Navarrette Jr.

I submit that most of us have a commencement address tucked away, containing some choice words of wisdom that we'd love to share with high school or college graduates if we ever had the chance.

This year, David McCullough Jr. – an English teacher at Wellesley High School in Massachusetts and the son of the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough – was given that chance. And he didn't waste an ounce of it. In fact, he turned in an A-plus performance that has talk radio and the Internet buzzing.



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Commencement speakers usually tell graduates what they want to hear – how great they are, that the world is waiting for them with open arms, that they can accomplish anything in life they set their minds to. McCullough provided the Wellesley graduates a valuable service by telling them what they needed to hear – namely, “You’re not special.”

It's a simple message. But it's an essential one. That's because, as McCullough told the graduates, too many of them

have been “pampered, cosseted, doted upon, helmeted, bubble-wrapped” and otherwise protected from the cold, cruel world for too long.

The message must have been difficult to hear for those parents in the bleachers who did the pampering. They did their children no favors by teaching the little darlings that the world revolves around them.

These are the kids who, as infants 18 years ago, prompted us to drive carefully because the little yellow sign in the rear window of the family minivan warned us that there was a “Baby on Board.” These are the students whose self-esteem, we feared, would suffer if teachers graded their papers with a red marker. And these are the young athletes who were all assured a trophy just for showing up.

It doesn't matter if the world doesn't see them as special. What matters is that they see themselves this way. Move over, Generation X. This is “Generation E,” and the “E” stands for “entitlement.” And, for many, what they feel entitled to is our undivided attention and constant adoration.

Generation E might not be anything special. But McCullough's speech certainly was, and it was because of lines such as: “Dream big. Work hard. Think for yourself. Love everything you love, everyone you love, with all your might.” And this: “Climb the mountain not to plant your flag, but to embrace the challenge, enjoy the air and behold the view. Climb it so you can see the world, not so the world can see you.”

This is what I would have added to McCullough's speech: “Success is easy to handle. But if you're lucky, as you go through life, you're going to fail. Maybe a lot. After all, if you get everything you want, it's a good sign that you're not setting your goals high enough and you need new ones. You'll get knocked down. Maybe often. Everyone does. It's how you respond to the defeats and setbacks – whether you can

persevere and press on – that will shape your character and determine your destiny.”

This generation doesn't need any more coddling. What it needs is straight talk and a reality check. And, in at least one high school, students got both thanks to an English teacher who did his homework.

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