

Visit from the stars makes Pacific graduates' day

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STOCKTON - Saturday morning wasn't the first time Nick Rosenquist donned a cap and gown at the Alex G. Spanos Center on the University of the Pacific campus. The Stockton resident was there when he graduated from St. Mary's High School in 2001 and again a few years later after leaving San Joaquin Delta College.

Something was different about his graduation from Pacific on Saturday, however.

"Not to say those weren't alright," said Rosenquist, 22. "But to have Dirty Harry giving your commencement speech ..."

Hollywood legend Clint Eastwood did address nearly 1,000 graduates at Pacific's 2006 graduation ceremonies, although the actual commencement was delivered by a star of a different kind: NASA astronaut and 1984 Pacific grad Jose Hernandez. The pair joined local jazz icon Dave Brubeck to form perhaps the most paparazzi-worthy commencement in the school's 155-year history.

Eastwood and Hernandez both received honorary degrees in fine arts and science, respectively. Brubeck, who graduated from Pacific in 1942 and is the namesake of the university's musical institute, received the first President's Medal of Achievement to be awarded in more than a decade.

"Everything good that has happened to me started right here," Brubeck, 85, told the audience.

Students from nine of the university's individual colleges began filing into the Spanos Center's floor level just after 8:30 a.m., many wearing black caps and gowns adorned with colorful scarves, leis, beads and other decorations. Some wore suits and dresses under their gowns; others preferred shorts and flip-flops.

The auditorium's U-shaped seating erupted in a chorus of shouts and waving arms as friends, parents and relatives tried to draw their graduate's attention.

Hernandez told the graduates about his journey from working in the fields as a child in French Camp to becoming an astronaut in NASA's space program. He recalled climbing into the family car after a hot day of field work and learning a life-changing lesson from his parents.



University of the Pacific Class of 2006 graduates walk into the commencement ceremony Saturday at the Alex G. Spanos Center in Stockton

Credit: DOUGLAS RIDER/The Record



Dave Brubeck received the first President's Medal of Achievement to be awarded in more than a decade at Saturday's commencement ceremony at University of the Pacific

Credit: DOUGLAS RIDER/The Record

"They said, 'This will be your future if you don't study and finish school,'" said Hernandez, 43.

Other speakers also offered advice for the graduates as they enter the work force. Franklin Gevurtz, a law professor at Pacific's McGeorge School of Law, said there are only four words students need to find success after school.

"Go forth. Do good," Gevurtz said. "All the rest is commentary."

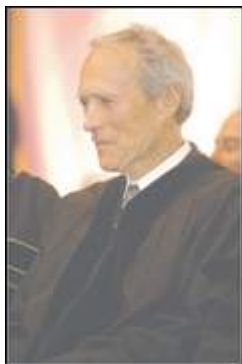
Eastwood's presence gave the ceremony a decidedly Hollywood flair. The actor and Academy Award-winning director is the honorary chairman of the university's Brubeck Institute.

Aaron George, one of two graduates presenting the senior class gift, joked that the students had "been through the good, the bad and the ugly" while in school. His colleague, Suzanne Shenk, challenged next year's graduates to "raise a million dollars, baby!"

Student commencement speaker Maria Lourdes Fernandez-Libre appeared to ask Eastwood for an autograph after delivering her speech. Fernandez-Libre also managed to squeeze a bar from the theme song to the television show "Friends" into the address - complete with the telltale rapid-fire clapping.

Eastwood told the students he nearly enrolled at Pacific after returning to his native Bay Area from the military in the 1950s. With a nod to the school's Class of '56 - nearly 50 of whom attended the ceremony - the actor joked that he'd finally completed that journey.

"I'm very happy to be here with the Class of '06," Eastwood said. "Even though I should be there with the Class of '56."



Clint Eastwood is one of the honorary degree recipients at University of the Pacific's commencement ceremony Saturday in Stockton

Credit: DOUGLAS RIDER/The Record

Eastwood also spoke about his relationship with Brubeck, whose jazz quartet played to audiences worldwide in the 1950s and 1960s. The actor recalled sneaking into San Francisco's Blackhawk club before he had reached drinking age to watch the Dave Brubeck Quartet perform.

One of the first albums Eastwood ever bought also had a connection to both Brubeck and the university, he said.

"It was the Dave Brubeck Quartet's 'Jazz at the College of the Pacific,'" Eastwood said. "It was COP in those days."

The official number of students graduating from the school's Stockton campus is 1,095, said Pacific spokeswoman Lauren Hersh. Students from McGeorge in Sacramento and the Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry in San Francisco are graduating in separate ceremonies.

Graduates waiting to walk into the Spanos Center early Saturday said they were eager to receive their diplomas, many repeating such terms as "excited," "nervous" and "sad." Marcel Gibson, a 22-year-old religion major, was a bit less nostalgic.

"It feels like we're being released from prison," Gibson said with a grin.

Sarah Wren, a 22-year-old political science and philosophy major, had mixed feelings as she prepared to walk with her classmates. The Stockton resident looks forward to attending law school and starting a new career but was also a little sad to realize her experiences at Pacific would only be relived in remembrances.

"Ten years from now, they're going to be just that - memories," Wren said.

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