

FALL 2004 CONVOCATION ADDRESS
Mohammad Mohanna
"Crossing Boundaries Imagined and Real"
Wednesday, September 29, 2004
11:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon

Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts
Jackson Hall

Judy Sakaki, vice chancellor for student affairs at UC Davis

And now it is my pleasure to introduce this morning's featured speaker, Mohammad Mohanna. Mohammad exemplifies the notion that America is the land of opportunity. A native of Iran, Mohammad immigrated to Boston as a teenager. He came to Sacramento in 1974 and has been a force in the commercial real estate industry and community ever since.

Mohammad co-founded the Downtown Sacramento Partnership and is responsible for much of the revitalization in our state capital. Mohammad always looks out for the disadvantaged. He is a strong supporter of many charitable organizations, including Loaves and Fishes and its subsidiary groups, the Women's Empowerment program, and Clean and Sober, which he founded. He was also instrumental in establishing the Iranian Alumni Association's Iranian Scholarship Endowment at UC Davis.

In April, Mohammad, Chancellor Vanderhoef and others traveled to Iran to explore potential scholarly exchanges and to promote understanding between our nations. Last year we were privileged to have Mohammad join the UC Davis Foundation Board of Trustees.

Mohammad personifies hard work, generosity and, most importantly, compassion. He is an asset to UC Davis and we are very fortunate to have him in our community. Please join me in welcoming Mohammad Mohanna.

Mohanna:

Thank you very much. I'm very honored to be here. Of course, I'm honored to be anywhere. As an immigrant, I was 18 years old when I came to Oxford. My father had hoped that his son would be Oxford educated. I failed Oxford. That discipline was not for me. Those were difficult times as a teenager looking for other options in life. I went to Italy for a year, had a wonderful time, good food, wonderful girls. I asked myself, do I want to go home a failure or do I want to succeed in life? That was the challenge for me; that is the challenge for many of you.

One nation came to mind, America. The land that has given the poorest of the poor the opportunity to become the best that they can be. I came to America. Lived in Roxbury, a very poor neighborhood of Boston. I lived in an alcoholic house. I was a janitor; I was a maintenance

man. I finished college. I bought my first real estate when I was 22 years old, and the success began. The opportunities are here for all of us. I am simply another story of “Only in America.”

We have heard many of those stories. But let me tell you from my heart, and I put aside my written statement, five years ago I was privileged to associate myself with UC Davis when I did a fund-raising in one of my buildings in downtown Sacramento. We raised money for a scholarship for Iranian students.

At that opportunity, I worked with a lot of wonderful people at UC Davis, among them our Chancellor Larry Vanderhoef, whom I am so pleased and so proud to be working with. He had the vision, he had the courage, he had those American values that I always read about, and those values that your great-great-grandparents instilled in us.

He always wanted to do something with Iran. He wanted to expand education beyond borders. Our friendship began. He wanted to build a dialogue with the University of Tehran, one of the oldest universities in the Middle East. I took a message from Larry five years ago to Iran inviting the chancellor of University of Tehran to come to UC Davis and visit. As we were working with those issues of visas and problems, one more disaster happened — September 11th. No more visas issued for Iranians.

Our job was very difficult; it became almost impossible. But Larry did not give up. He had the perseverance to accomplish what America always wanted to do. He wanted to build a dialogue with others. In these challenging times we were able to secure visas for us, six of us including myself, to go to Iran and show them what America is all about and build academic alliances.

University of Tehran received us warmly. We went there a few months ago. We visited four universities in Iran. We met with the scholars, students, and the most important thing, we built a relationship with our former students — those who graduated from this fine institution 20 or 30 years ago. They all came to see the chancellor. They had a wonderful gala. They brought their wives and children. They brought their teenage sons and daughters who wanted to have the hope of building relationship with America.

It was at that gathering that one of the former students, who is now minister of agriculture, said to me, “Mohammad, I owe what I am to my education at UC Davis. UC Davis made me what I am.” And I heard that comment from many other dignitaries and scholars and businessmen who were your former students.

Another dignitary told us, and he quoted from Imam Ali [the son-in-law of the prophet Mohammad]: he said, “Teach me a word, and I will be your servant forever.” It was these comments that made me feel tall, made me feel proud that I am an American. I traveled there as an American, I represented American values to Iranians, and I was proud to stand before them and ask them this question, “Show me one among you that has risen from a janitor to a Board of Trustees of a fine institution.” They were quiet. They were good listeners. They wanted to hear the message of democracy. They wanted to hear the opportunity of equality. They were good listeners.

Iran has many challenges. When I left Iran the population was 30 million. Today there are 70 million Iranians. More than 50 percent of them below 20 years old. A young nation — a nation of young people, bright, but with challenges. Ladies and gentlemen, I am really proud to say as an American I carried your message, the message of democracy, equality, human rights and dignity to Iran. They were very pleased to hear one of their sons is bringing that message. They are thirsty for knowledge; they are eager to have a dialogue; they are tired of competition.

In this country I have been taught how to compete, and I am a fierce competitor. It is my hope that we learn to cooperate, to have compassion. When competition yields to compassion and cooperation, we may achieve some greatness. Ladies and gentlemen, I am really proud to be an American. I want to present those American values overseas, and I'm asking all of the foreign students here today: you are an ambassador of the United States to your nations. Take the message of democracy, tolerance and human rights to your countries and let us build a better nation.

Thank you very much.