

Rick and Susan Sontag, Pomona College Commencement 2017

Thank you for that introduction. Susan apologizes. She was physically unable to travel here.

But I am going to stand in for the both of us.

First of all, let me say thank you to the Board of Trustees, the faculty of Pomona College and all of the Pomona staff for these awards. We're really honored and humbled. And while Susan and I may have our names on these diplomas, we would like to accept them on behalf of our whole family. After all the Sontags have had a very long relationship with both Pomona College and the city of Claremont. For example, my Uncle Fred was a professor at Pomona for 57 years. So it is only right that our entire family be honored.

I do have a few words to say to this graduating class. And since I've been told to keep my remarks short, I will.

Sometimes, the most important decisions in your life are totally unplanned and unpredictable. They come from a set of facts and circumstances beyond your control that require you to make an important life choice. That's the way it was for Susan and me. Take, for example, the decision we made about 20 years ago.

About 20 years ago, Susan and I had a very happy, productive life. Good marriage, good family. I was an entrepreneur with a fairly successful business. Life was good.

Then, on one night in 1994, all of that changed. That evening Susan suffered a stroke. The stroke was later found to be caused by a terminal form of brain cancer. She was given three years to live. That totally rocked our life and our world. And it clearly was not in our life plan.

But guess what? By some miracle, Susan survived that disease. She's alive today, albeit with considerable disabilities. And we, like many people who confront this kind of serious disease, wanted to do something to find a cure for brain cancer and help people affected by it.

As we thought about it, we came to realize that we were in a very unique position to do something that most people are not able to do. After all, I had many years of management experience at a senior level. We had a successful company with substantial financial resources. And we had the most unique commodity of all. We had personally been through the experience of battling a normally fatal disease – and survived it! We both, therefore, had a perspective about a disease that very few people in the world get. We were clearly in a position to do something much more substantial than most anyone who has been through this experience. All that was required was for us to put these facts together and make a decision to make a life change.

And that's what we did. We sold our business. We took part of the proceeds from that business sale and started a foundation. I left the business and became the President of that foundation as my full-time job - which I'm still doing today. And we directed the foundation to begin by sponsoring medical research related to brain cancer. From there we grew and started a new non-profit organization which is dedicated to supporting patients in their fight against the disease.

Today, as a result of that one decision, our foundation has become one of the most well-known and broadest organizations of its kind in the brain cancer field. It's nothing short of a miracle that we have been able to have a positive effect on the lives of thousands of people affected by that horrible disease. The decision to do this was the most significant decision of our lives. And it was totally unplanned and unforeseen.

There is a lesson in this for all of you. Like most graduating college students you likely have a firm plan for what you are going to do after you leave Pomona. But I suspect one day life will present many of you with an unforeseen challenge. Something is going to happen that is totally unexpected and not in your life plan. And you may be facing a decision not totally unlike the one that Susan and I faced. An opportunity to make a major course change. A potentially risky course change that carries with it the chance to do something highly significant. When that happens, Susan and I have one wish for you. That you will step back, contemplate taking that course your heart is telling you to take. And do it. So that when you are facing the end of your career and life, as Susan and I are now, you'll feel as satisfied as we do that your life has made a real difference in this world.

Thank you.

THE BIO BELOW REPOSTED FROM THE COMMENCEMENT BULLETIN :

Rick and Susan Sontag have a long history of supporting their alma maters and The Claremont Colleges as a whole. They have spent a lifetime building successful businesses and actively supporting education and medical research. Their giving to The Claremont Colleges includes naming gifts to Sontag Center for Collaborative Creativity, LEED-awarded residence halls on both the Pomona and Harvey Mudd campuses, as well as significant gifts to expand undergraduate research. Rick is also an emeritus trustee at Harvey Mudd College.

After Susan's survival from brain cancer Rick and Susan redirected their resources to helping others affected by that disease. Through The Sontag Foundation, The Brain Tumor Network and other activities they are now sponsoring medical advances and helping brain cancer patients find their way to more effective treatment.

Rick earned his B.S. in physics from Harvey Mudd College, an M.S. in physics from the University of Nevada at Reno and an MBA from Harvard Business School. Susan received her B.A. in government from Pomona College.