



Commitment to Volunteerism

Andrew K. Benton, President, Pepperdine University

Addressing a student convocation not long ago, I shared with them that they had no idea where life would take them, only that it would be far better than they could imagine. That has certainly been true of my life, and countless others.

While growing up in the Midwest, Los Angeles always held a certain mystique for me, but I admit I never set out to live and work in the L.A. area. I would have been content living in the Great Plains practicing law, and with my wife, raising a small family. Life has a way of unfolding in directions that you don't always anticipate though, and I am grateful to be here, in the best place in the world, with the best job in the world.

I have Mr. George Pepperdine to thank. An enterprising Los Angeles businessman, Mr. Pepperdine was like other visionary Angelenos whose footsteps he followed such as Harrison Gray Otis and Edward L. Doheny and Frank Rogers Seaver. Mr. Pepperdine's dream was to found an independent college in Los Angeles in 1937. He envisioned a place with the "highest academic standards, guided by the spiritual and ethical ideals of Christian faith." After 33 years in the city the school relocated to a very unique campus in the foothills of Malibu in Los Angeles County. Pepperdine University opened classes in Malibu in 1972.

Any discussion about solutions to problems Los Angeles faces must include a discussion about the education of our youngest citizens. Every day, approximately 700,000 students attend classes in the L.A. Unified School District and those students represent the future of Los Angeles. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa knows this well. His vision for Los Angeles Unified, "The Schoolhouse: A Framework to Give Every Child in LAUSD an Excellent Education," is aimed at improving every school in the Los Angeles school district. At a time when the quality of American education is being called into question, few issues are more important than improving our schools.

While our undergraduate Seaver College is based in Malibu, the university has always had a strong presence in the city and always will. Pepperdine's several Los Angeles-area campuses, educating more than half of our total 8,000 enrollment, offers graduate programs through the Graziadio School of Business and Management and the Graduate School of Education and Psychology. Both schools continue to impact Los Angeles in positive ways – preparing new generations of ethical business leaders, teaching students to become teachers, and teachers to become better teachers, administrators, and school superintendents.

At Pepperdine and other select institutions of higher learning, we often cater to some of the best prepared college students in the country. In a typical year, thousands of students with extraordinary records apply to Pepperdine, along with neighboring USC, UCLA, and Loyola-Marymount. Many other fine students begin in the state's community college system, later transferring to four-year colleges where they succeed often beyond their own expectations. That selective universities, public and private, produce successful entrepreneurs and business leaders, leading researchers and scientists, and esteemed lawyers and judges, shouldn't come as a surprise. The exciting prospect is when a university gambles on the unknown and admits someone who does not fit the mold; someone who finds in the educational experience his or her own voice and does something truly amazing by beating the odds.

How does a place such as Los Angeles make good on an ambition to ensure that every child receives an excellent education? How does such a place help not thousands, not even tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands "find their voice"? How does such a place mitigate issues of child abandonment, malnutrition, joblessness, ethnic and racial tension, drug abuse, and other forms of abuse too horrific to mention? How can we help these students beat the odds?

Such a place may do all this and more only by truly becoming more than just a great city, but, even more, a great community. My thesis, I suppose, is that we will accomplish immeasurably more if we will focus on our common goals and challenges than our sometimes strident differences.

With nearly four million people, Los Angeles is the second most populated city in the United States and covers close to 500 square miles. That might make the phrase “community building” seem out of place. And yet, community building is a viable solution to combating many of the city’s most pressing problems. The more diverse Los Angeles becomes in terms of religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, the more important it is that Angelenos find common ground and work together as a community to achieve common goals – education, family stability, quality health care, public safety, and employment opportunities.

Recalling an earlier time in the 1940s when Los Angeles showed signs of becoming an economic and creative powerhouse, two characteristics were ever present – initiative and volunteerism.

Initiative led to the development of great industries, world-leading technologies, and the rise of Los Angeles as not just one of the nation’s leading cities, but as one of the world’s leading cities. We did that together.

The idea of volunteerism flourished as citizens freely sought ways to give of their time and their fortunes for the greater good -- creating world-class hospitals and schools, and pursuing initiatives to help the physically and mentally challenged; the underprivileged; the needy. We did that together.

One solution for the city today is to encourage a grand renewal of the dual application of the same initiative and volunteerism that has characterized our nation from the beginning. At numerous faith-based schools around the country, education is focused on educating the mind, and

the heart. Such is the case at Pepperdine where there is an emphasis on altruism, an effort that results in two-thirds of the student body engaging with some regularity in volunteer efforts each year. The outreach ranges from helping the homeless deal with legal issues and serving meals at the Union Rescue Mission to volunteering in hospitals and aiding our beleaguered environment.

Alone, few of us feel capable of making a measurable contribution. But, working together in community, under the umbrella of a church organization, a service club, community center, or a university, we can make a difference; we can have a lasting impact. We build what Robert Putnam described as “social capital.” The city of Los Angeles needs to find new ways to involve as many voices as possible, uniting initiative and encouraging volunteerism. Sometimes, great things begin with just one voice.

I once toured a famous church with a small group. We stood in silence, admiring the beautiful artwork and absorbing the peace of that particular sacred space. At first barely audible, one of our fellow travelers started singing Amazing Grace. Alone, his voice was beautiful as the notes of the hymn filled the church. Soon, other voices joined in, creating two- and four-part harmony. That too, was beautiful. An ancient hymn was being sung by what had become an impromptu choir of voices with a result far beyond what any single voice could accomplish. Chills ran up my spine. As beautiful as the solo voice had been, hearing the sound of so many voices singing multiple part harmony, is a memory I will never forget.

When I see more than 1,500 of our students line up on Step Forward Day at Pepperdine, an annual day of giving something back to the communities in which we live and work, I am reminded of the power of community. Harness a greater percentage of the city’s four million residents to tutor children, feed the homeless, and care for the sick and elderly, and there is truly no limit to what can be accomplished.

We are my solution to our city.