

**Biographical Reflections:  
A Presentation to the Palo Alto Rotary Club  
April 12, 2004**



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Remarks of Martha J. Kanter, Chancellor  
Foothill-De Anza Community College District  
To  
The Palo Alto Rotary Club  
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I was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the eldest of five children. We lived in a tiny apartment. My father had grown up in nearby Dorchester during the depression, the only one in his family to graduate from the Boston Latin School and get a scholarship to Harvard. Early in my life, my father told me that I was the oldest daughter of my mother who was the oldest daughter of her mother who was the oldest daughter of her family of nine children, all of whom immigrated to the United States in the late 1800s. He further told me that because I was the oldest daughter, I would bear a special responsibility to my family—that of stewarding my brothers and, years later, my sister, not only as a role model, but also as their teacher when our parents weren't available. My father became a doctor, and we rarely saw him while we were growing up because of his demanding schedule. When we entered elementary and high school, my mother returned to college to finish her degree and teach English as a second language. She was also the only one in her family ever to graduate from college.

When I look back, I realize I have always been a teacher at heart. For high school, I was one of 200 girls who went to the Winsor School in Boston. Getting accepted to this school was one of the proudest moments for my parents. My proudest moments in high school included

getting published in *The Lamp*, our literary magazine; getting a near-perfect score in Math on the SAT; playing center on the hockey team, and playing goalie on the lacrosse team. From an early age I never minded those hard balls coming at me because I always had a repertoire of very effective offensive and defensive strategies. In public higher education today, those strategies have served me well.

As an undergraduate at Brandeis University, I studied with two professors who changed my life: Dr. Abraham Maslow who introduced me to humanistic psychology and an unwavering belief in the human potential of individuals and society; and Dr. Rosabeth Moss Kanter who helped me understand that every person had the potential to have a significant impact on society by building meaningful relationships with others. I completed my master's degree in education at Harvard and came to California in the '70s after teaching at Lexington High School, the Public Schools of the Tarrytowns, and later at The Searing School in New York City.

In those days, we taught many different subjects. Mine were the subjects of English, Social Studies and Special Education, though in those days special education was called Alternative High School.

My first job in California was to create the first program for students with learning disabilities at San Jose City College. I taught special education, reading and psychology, and from there, became a dean, a vice president and moved to Sacramento to work as the vice

chancellor for policy and research for the California Community College system. Along the way, I earned a doctorate in education from the University of San Francisco. In 1993 I became president of De Anza College and, last July, was appointed Chancellor of the Foothill-De Anza Community College District.

Community service has always been an important part of my life. I was a member of the Cupertino Rotary Club for ten years before joining this club last summer. For the past three years, I have co-chaired Joint Venture: Silicon Valley. At the state level, I chair the Technology and Telecommunications Committee for the community college system. And nationally, I serve on the board of MentorNet, the e-mentoring program to attract and retain women in higher education preparing to enter the fields of science, engineering and technology.

I am very proud of having worked with Palo Alto Rotarians Bob Smithwick, Betsy Bechtel and the Foothill-De Anza Board of Trustees in the late 1990s to convince voters to support Measure E, the local bond campaign that is now enabling Foothill-De Anza to renovate classrooms that are more than 40 years old and build new science, arts and student centers on each campus. In this way, we will preserve the vision and legacy of Dr. Smithwick and Dr. Calvin Flint, the founding chancellor of our district, for generations to come.

I am probably most proud of the fact that our colleges continue to be ranked at the top of community colleges in this country in two areas

of academic excellence: university transfer and career preparation. Many do not know that community colleges educate half of all students in higher education in our nation and that over 80% of minority students in California enter higher education through the doors of a community college.

Foothill-De Anza plays an enormous role in educating the current and future workforce of Silicon Valley. In fact, our colleges are often referred to as the "economic engine" of the Valley.

Our students become the nurses that take care of us at Stanford or El Camino Hospital, the dental hygienists who are Foothill graduates, the automotive technicians from De Anza who fix the our cars, the energy management technicians who run the complex heating and ventilating systems in our companies, and the bioinformatics technicians who serve our bioscience community, to name just a few of the outstanding vocational programs we offer.

Similarly, our colleges play a lead role statewide in transferring students to California's public and private universities among others. In fact, significant numbers of all UC and state university graduates come from our two colleges each year.

Foothill-De Anza also plays some very special roles in the community. Over 15% of our students receive some form of financial aid, many of these students living below the poverty line. We serve over 3000 students with disabilities, including the blind, deaf, learning

disabled and those with physical and developmental disabilities. We serve over 1000 students who are moving from welfare to work, many of whom are single parents who need child care in order to attend college. And, like my own parents, a large number of our students are the first in their family to attend college.

Last Monday on April 5, we opened our doors to more than 45,000 students taking classes in our spring quarter. In public education, our greatest challenge is to move forward in the face of uncertainty. Despite the projections of our best economists, scientists, legislators and business leaders, California has never seen a fiscal crisis of this magnitude. In the past few years, Silicon Valley lost 190,000 of the 400,000 jobs we had in the year 2000. Unemployment surrounds us. Expenses for everyone continue to rise. The cost of higher education at all levels has escalated at the very time when student demand is at an all-time high. Since the first community college opened its doors in 1910, higher education has been a right of every California resident 18 years or older who could benefit from instruction.

That is no longer the case. We are now living in a time in which the ability of our students to exercise that right has been dramatically reduced as you have read in the paper.

Given all of this, I have four goals to achieve:

First, to ensure that Foothill-De Anza provides educational opportunity for all of the students who enter our doors.

Second, to ensure that Foothill-De Anza strives to be the best community college district in the country in preparing successful students for university transfer, careers and lifelong learning;

Third, to work at the state level to advocate for a sustainable funding base for current and future generations to attend California higher education. Many do not realize that Foothill-De Anza is one of the lowest funded districts in our state;  
and

Fourth, to triple the assets of our foundation in order to promote and sustain educational excellence and innovation.

At Foothill-De Anza we have educated over a million students since we opened our doors in 1957. I look forward to making sure that our doors stay open to the next million students in the decades ahead.

Thank you for the opportunity to tell you about myself and to be part of the Palo Alto Rotary Club.