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The Way I See It
Lessons on life and business learned at Harvard

Editor's note: When Rice alumna Sofia Adrogué '88 was elected class speaker for commencement at Harvard Business School's Owner/President Management Program this year and became an alumna of Harvard Business School, she was the first woman speaker in the past 22 years -- and possibly in the history of the program. (Earlier records of the class speakers are not available.) The column below is based on her April 17 speech.

Twenty years ago, I dreamed of attending Harvard Law School. Financial constraints dictated otherwise. But on the eve of my 40th birthday, I returned to Boston, which was my first port of landing when I arrived in the U.S. more than 30 years ago. For the past three years I have been enrolled in the Owner/President Management Program at Harvard Business School; I completed the program last month, and my dream has finally come true.

Below are some of the global lessons about life and business that my classmates and I encountered during our studies at Harvard. Our professors provided some of the most memorable quotations worthy of articulation.

* Birth is birth, death is death, and health issues are health issues transcending all time zones, ethnicities and languages. There are no international barriers to human emotions. People bond together, as our class did, by sharing their experiences and jointly celebrating or mourning, depending on the occasion.

* Families and friends are our "base camp." Their importance is best described in the book "Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership" by Joseph Jaworski when he referenced M. Scott Peck: "If you want to make a peak climb, you've got to have a good base camp, a place where there is shelter and where provisions are kept, where one may receive nurture and rest before one ventures forth again to seek another summit. Successful mountain climbers know that they must spend at least as much time, if not more, in tending to their base camp as they actually do in climbing mountains, for their survival is dependent upon their seeing to it that their base camp is sturdily constructed and well-stocked."
* Entrepreneurship and innovation require synergy - "the relentless pursuit of opportunity without regard to currently controlled resources."

* "To sustain superior performance, one must excel at the practice of strategy, execution, culture and structure; these must be supplemented by talent, leadership, innovation and/or mergers and partnerships."

* "Negotiation is not simply what is happening around the table. The negotiation table is thousands of kilometers long. It's important to always stay at the negotiation table."

* "Brand is not a goal -- it is a reward." To create a global brand, you must create something of lasting value.

* "To be a better leader and have a richer life, you need to act with authenticity by clarifying what is important, act with integrity by respecting the whole person, act with creativity by experimenting with how things get done" and always lead with a heart -- a moral compass.

* I encourage people "to shun the incremental and go for the leap." We should live with passion, with persistence, with perseverance, a little perspiration and panache. "Happiness is not an accident. Nor is it something you wish for. Happiness is something you design."

--Sofia Adrogué is a partner at Looper Reed & McGraw P.C. in Houston. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and legal studies from Rice and a law degree from the University of Houston, both with honors and on academic scholarships.