

Fitz: Above all, stand tall: a commencement address from a saguaro

11 HOURS AGO • BY DAVID FITZSIMMONS

Good evening, class of 2014. Not many saguaros are invited to give commencement addresses, but I'm just a 1-ton cactus with five arms who can't say "No."

First, let's take a moment to thank those who helped us get to this point in our lives. In my case, it was the sweet little old creosote bush in the third row who gave me shelter and shade when I was a seedling. She cared for me through flash floods and drought. Wave your branches, mom. Like your parents, she's thrilled I didn't end up a javelina living in a Dumpster. Instead, look at all of us — standing as tall as saguaros tonight.

To you I say, "Be like the saguaro."

Be tough. It's not a jungle out there, but it is a harsh desert.

Be strong. Some days the Gila woodpecker will hammer you and you just have to learn to live with it. (Never let a pygmy owl nest in your middle eye socket.)

Grow a spine. In my case I have 4,567,893 spines.

Don't chase cheap highs like a jackrabbit chasing the adrenalin rush of dodging traffic on a dark desert highway. Your mother didn't raise you to become buzzard pickings.

Life consists of dry seasons and monsoons. Some years it won't rain for months. Take my word for it — eventually, it will always rain. And when it rains, soak up every single precious drop that comes your way. Be as thrifty as a pack rat, but take only what you need and give back to the universe what you can.

Every spring I flower. My flowers turn to small red fruits that I give freely to the Tohono O'odham. They crush the fruits and make the mash into wine. In a sacred ritual designed to beckon the rain clouds of summer, they drink my wine. And the rains come, sustaining us all for another season of life. Who knows how many lives we touch and sustain with our simple gifts?

Take time out from the grind of mindless photosynthesis to enjoy every sunset. Always offer shade to those taking too much heat. Don't spend your lives like quail, scurrying to an early grave. Don't pick on pygmy owls. Don't trust anyone under 100. Avoid debt and rattlesnakes. Always check your boots for scorpions. Be kind to kangaroo rats.

Class of 2014, you worked hard to get here. Howl like coyotes tonight. But in the morning, be as smart as ravens.

Your life will speed past you faster than a roadrunner. I can't believe I'm already 237 years

old.

As your life races by, remember the "Queen of the Desert." Like her, some of you appear unimpressive and barely alive. The night-blooming cereus is one ugly gray stick. But once a season this plant enchants us all with the most beautiful flower west of the San Pedro.

There are two lessons here. Never judge a book by its cover and never hesitate to fearlessly reveal your inner beauty to the world. Find your inner bloom and open it up to the universe.

Of course, you may attract moths and fruit bats, but that's the chance you've got to take.

Take every chance that comes your way. One cloudy day in August, a mesquite tree I had grown up next to was minding his own business when all of a sudden "wham!" a bolt of lightning hits him! One minute he was a perfectly happy tree; the next minute he's a smoldering pile of mesquite chips. You never know when the grim rattler will strike. When it's your time, the mourning doves will mourn and then life will go on. Cicadas will drone and spider webs will get spun.

And that's why it's important to wrench meaning from this existence while you still can hear the cactus wrens and smell the rain.

Get over yourselves. With your cap tassels, you look like quail.

Some saguaros live splendid lives. They're in every tourist's snapshot. Others live out their lives next to a Dumpster. Sometimes you're the quail chick, and sometimes you're the Harris hawk. Life is not easy, nor is it fair. You can give up, or you can bloom in spite of it all. You were born to bloom. Choose to bloom.

You can't bloom if you go through life with your arms folded tightly across your chest. No saguaro goes through life with his arms folded. Open your arms. Welcome the hot breath of summer. Embrace the dust devils of spring. Welcome the freezing nights of autumn. Embrace the terrible thunderstorms of August. Every day, face the sun and hold your arms up high in praise for the gift of life.

Plant your roots in good soil facing south. And above all, stand tall.

Good luck class of 2014.