

Noem to USD grads: Prepare for life's changes

By David Lias

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Rep. Kristi Noem had something in common with students of the University of South Dakota who were waiting to receive their degrees during Saturday's 36th winter commencement exercises in the DakotaDome.

"I have my fingers crossed because I've turned in my final paper and if it does well, I'm going to graduate with you in 2011 as well," she said. "We've probably gone through totally different experiences going through the classes and getting to the graduation point that I've reached but it certainly is very significant to me."

A native of Hamlin County in northeast South Dakota, Noem was elected to the United States House of Representatives on Nov. 2, 2010 after serving in the South Dakota House of Representatives. In the U.S. House, Noem serves on the Agriculture, Education and Workforce, and Natural Resources Committees.

As a member of the state house, Noem represented South Dakota's Sixth District and was assistant majority leader before taking a run at Congress.

When Noem was 22, she left college to help run her family's ranch after her father was killed in a farm accident. Though her college career was interrupted, she has, over the years, taken classes, including online courses and she has received intern credits for her work in Congress.

Noem said she is often asked

why she decided to go back to school years after her father's death.

"It all started with a conversation I had with my sister," she said. "We were talking about our lives, and how things had changed ... and she said 'one thing that's really surprised me is you've never completed school to get your degree. You don't quit at anything.'"

Noem said she kept telling herself that she would have more time to complete her schooling later in life, when things perhaps weren't so busy. "Hopefully, I will learn soon that, I, too, will have met my goal (of receiving a university degree) and I'll be right there with you," she said.

Noem told the graduates that she is aware that they, too, also faced challenges to achieve the goal of receiving a university degree that day.

"Boy, am I proud of you," she said. "There are so many hurdles that keep you from getting a good, quality education, and you guys stepped through it."

Noem said in preparation for her keynote speech that morning, she reviewed several commencement speeches on the internet made over the years by politicians, business leaders and other noteworthy personalities.

"I didn't want to make today's speech too sappy, or too optimistic," she said. "I think you are a unique generation. You don't know of a world without the internet. If you wanted to know something or question something your professor told you over the years, all you had to do is Google it. This makes you much more perceptive ... you

can tell a fake when you see it - you know when a deal is just too good to be true.

"So I wanted to leave you with something today that you could use going forward," Noem added. "If I stood up here today and told you the rest of your lives were going to be lollipops and bubblegum, you wouldn't believe me. You know that there are going to be challenges ahead."

She chose to share a portion of the message that comedian and late night talk show host Conan O'Brien left with the spring 2011 graduates of Dartmouth College.

"So, at the age of 47, after 25 years of obsessively pursuing my dream, that dream changed. For decades, in show business, the ultimate goal of every comedian was to host The Tonight Show. It was the Holy Grail, and like many people I thought that achieving that goal would define me as successful. But that is not true. No specific job or career goal defines me, and it should not define you," Noem said, quoting O'Brien. "... whether you fear it or not, disappointment will come. The beauty is that through disappointment you can gain clarity, and with clarity comes conviction and true originality.



Rep. Kristi Noem's childhood dream of ranching side-by-side with her father abruptly changed when he was killed in a farm accident. "We've all heard the cliché that the only thing that is constant is change. Well, it's a cliché because it really is true. I know all of you have future plans, naturally," she said during her keynote address to graduates of USD at Saturday's commencement exercises in the DakotaDome, "but don't be surprised if they change. There's no telling where our plans will take us, and where our future will take us."

(Photo by David Lias)

And there is no greater cliché in a commencement address than 'follow your dream.'

Noem said O'Brien's speech also contained this message: "I am here to tell you that whatever you think your dream is now, it will probably change. And that's okay. Your path at 22 will not necessarily be your path at 32 or 42. One's dream is constantly evolving, rising and falling, changing course. It is our failure to become our perceived ideal that ultimately defines us and makes us unique. It's not easy, but if you accept your misfortune and handle it right, you're perceived failure can become a catalyst for profound re-invention.

"Those are pretty wise words for a stand-up comedian," Noem said. "If you had asked me when I was age 16 what I would be doing with my life, I would have

told you, 'I'll be working with my dad.' From the time I was a little girl, I can remember going out to the pasture with him, checking cows, and telling him, 'When I grow up, this is exactly what I want to do.'

"I never dreamed, until the day he went into a grain bin on our farm and died, that my plans would change ... it was a tragic event in our lives; he was only 49 years old, and we had to make changes and adjustments.

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This class is being offered through a partnership of the Vermillion Area Chamber and Development Company, Masaba Mining Equipment and the Vermillion School District.

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