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Dedication Trumps Money

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'Dedication trumps money'



Jason Lett

David Lett proved that professional success can be accomplished with little more than vision, dedication and a willing hand.

His story of persistence, tenacity and a belief in his dreams was shared with the more than 600 members of the class of 2009 on a sun-drenched day in the Oak Grove. His son, Jason Lett, told graduates the key to his father's success was blending the three elements of being human: the heart, the head and the hand.

David Lett, founder of The Eyrie Vineyards and the father of Oregon's world-renowned wine industry, was awarded an honorary degree posthumously by Linfield College for his vision and commitment that helped establish Oregon as a premier wine producer. Lett died last fall on the eve of his 39th grape harvest.

"It would have given Dad great pleasure to stand here today and address you all," said Jason, who accepted the degree on behalf of his family. "No doubt the things he would have had to say would have delighted those of you starting the next leg of your life's journey and left those who helped get you this far feeling a little uneasy."

Jason recommended graduates remember three things: make space for the cosmic brick, that moment of life-changing revelation; the value of education is not the knowledge, it's the tools; and dedication trumps money. Expected to become a doctor, David completed his bachelor's degree, applied to 12 medical schools and was rejected by them all. While in California in 1962 for an interview at a dental school, he took a side trip to one of the few artisan wineries in the Napa Valley where, over the course of one day, he found his calling.

He turned "winewards," Jason said, and completed a degree in viticulture at the University of California at Davis. There he had his first taste of pinot noir from the Burgundy region of France and was captivated. He spent several months in northern Europe researching specific climate requirements of pinot noir and became convinced that Oregon's Willamette Valley offered the best climate. In 1966, he and his wife, Diana, established The Eyrie Vineyards, becoming the first to plant pinot noir in the Willamette Valley. They produced their first vintage in 1970. During tastings in France in 1979 and 1980, a 1975-vintage Eyrie pinot noir put the wine world on notice that Oregon vineyards could produce world-class wines.

Jason said one of the most valuable parts of David's college experience were the contacts he made and introductions to growers in Europe who put what he had learned into a new context.

"The only conclusion I can reach from examining my father's education is that you should not be afraid to throw out almost everything you've been taught," Jason

said. "I know that's a daunting thought. But your education has given you tools to think through and to build your own approach to things."

Jason encouraged graduates to balance caring for the environment, love and time for family and friends, and professional success.

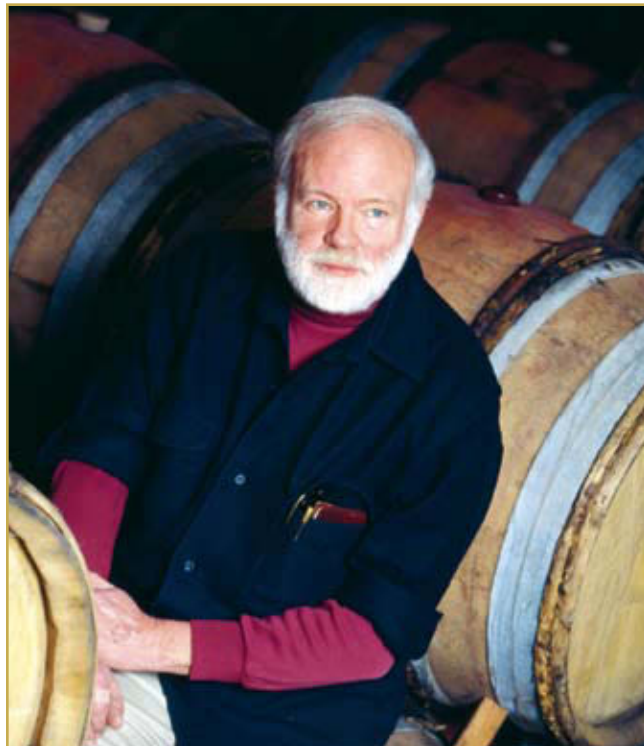
"We're all seeking our own balance of these three things, but we live in tippy times," he said. "How, in trying times, do we muster the resources to follow our dreams?"

Jason told of his father coming to Oregon with very little and working first in a berry nursery and later finding a job selling college textbooks that freed his summers to work in the vineyard. His limited resources became an asset as he learned the wine industry from grape to bottle. When he couldn't get a loan to build and equip a winery, he rented an old ag processing plant and cobbled together equipment to produce his first vintage.

"Dad was dedicated to the hands-on details of his art," Jason said. "He realized early that in the search for quality, personal dedication trumps financial might. His hands-on ethos was a great example to us wine-growers who follow him and it was one of his greatest legacies to us."

— Mardi Mileham

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David Lett

Doreen Wynja photography