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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Why I Said it Would be Worth It

By Alan Gard

Editor's note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be better actuarial leaders. Here is a winning early entrant from the Leadership Quote category.

I never said it would be easy, I only said it would be worth it.
—Mae West

I have heard that quote many times recently. As the board chairperson for a nursing college, I have had the privilege to award diplomas to the graduates at commencement. As the graduates cross the stage, a personal message they have written ahead of the ceremony is read. The graduates mostly use these statements to thank family and friends for their support and to recall humorous or hard times with fellow students. Frequently, the messages start with famous inspirational quotes. This Mae West quote turns up in those messages over and over and over.

In reflecting on that quote and why it is so popular, my first realization was this: Mae West was an actuary! Her comment is a classic risk/reward statement. The first two instances of “it” refer to the reward or outcome. The last “it” is the risk or the investment. On the surface, this quote could be paraphrased as “the reward will be worth the risk.” But that isn’t very quotable.

It makes sense for graduates to relate to this quote. They all have invested years of hard work and emotion into getting their degrees. At this college, many are first-generation college graduates or come from low-income backgrounds and have had to overcome a lot of adversity to finally reach their goal. With health care jobs in high demand, the graduates all have careers to look forward to and can now start realizing the return that will make their investment worth it. I can very much see Mae the Actuary talking to them about the worth of the expected net present value of their future earnings.

West was also a pretty intuitive psychologist. The more obvious inspiration from this quote is for those who are in the midst of striving for a tough goal. This quote could easily have been



West talking to an actuarial student nearly burned out on studying a week before an exam. She is urging that student on with a reminder that there will be a great sense of accomplishment at the end. In almost every case, big effort brings satisfying reward. I’ve not heard any actuaries say upon earning their Fellowship, “I wish I wouldn’t have worked so hard.” Similarly, I’ve not heard runners after completing a marathon regretting how hard they trained.

Those latter observations led me to the conclusion this quote is really a call to arms to always be taking on hard challenges. While external worth may be bestowed upon completion of a hard task—degrees, Fellowship certificates, medals—it is the value we generate for ourselves through our hard work and perseverance that creates real worth. I’ve realized this isn’t a risk/reward statement. It’s a cause/effect proclamation. When I think of this quote now, I rephrase it a bit: “I never said it would be easy, that’s why I said it would be worth it.” ■



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