

**“SJSU and the City of San José:  
Our Shared Past and Shared Future”**

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**San José Rotary  
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Thank you, Gay, for that kind introduction, and thank you all for such a warm Rotarian welcome.

I don't regard this visit as a presentation, but rather as a chat with neighbors.

Parking was not a problem for me today. I walked here, from my office in Tower Hall, on campus. It took five minutes.

I'm hoping that we can engage in a true neighbor-to-neighbor conversation, and I am eager to hear your thoughts and answer any questions.

First, though, I'd like to tell you a bit about myself, and about why I decided to come to San José.

I'm a valley girl. Not the Silicon Valley, but the San Fernando Valley, down in Los Angeles.

(And here is where I am supposed to pause for any boos.)

Okay, I'll say it. Go Giants....

Go, *San José*, Giants.

I was educated at UCLA, but I spent the bulk of my 30-plus year academic career “back East,” as we native Californians tend to describe anyplace east of the Sierras.

But when opportunity arose unexpectedly to come to San José State, I leaped. It looked like the right move and the right time. Those don’t come along that often!

In fact, I leaped so fast, and so high, that I might have qualified for a roster spot on the Spartans’ nationally renowned track and field team.

First, I considered a move to California as a homecoming of sorts, as did my family.

More than that, though, I was attracted to both the legacy and the promise of San José State.

It was California’s first—and remains the Silicon Valley’s only—public university.

Its student body reflects the rich diversity and vibrancy of California writ large; its faculty is first class, energetic and engaged—with their students, with ideas, with public service.

It boasts a “who’s who” list of distinguished alumni—from Ray Dolby, to Harry Edwards, to Jessica McClintock, to Amy Tan, to Peter Ueberroth, and on and on—that I’d put up against that of any other university in the country.

And it sits in the center of the nation's 10<sup>th</sup> largest city. In that sense, San José State University truly is an urban university.

And I'd like to linger on that geographical feature a bit, because to me it represents both a great opportunity, and a true public trust obligation, for San José State University.

You see, one of the most exciting discoveries I've made in my time here is the extraordinary level of cooperation that exists between the campus, the city, and the great neighborhoods, the communities, of San José.

This is the wonderful foundation on which we can—and we must—build as we work together to imagine an even more exciting future.

And before I forget, can I please get a show of hands from anyone in this audience who is connected to San Jose State in any way...as an alumnus...or employee...or student...or parent, grandparent, son or daughter of students or alumni?

Impressive.

The cooperation between the campus and the community shows itself in all sorts of ways.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Library. (And I note that today we are remembering the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., after whom our public/public library—the only

such shared venture between a university and its city—is named).

The Hammer Theater. And the collective efforts of San José State students, professors, city officials, and community activists to bring improvements to our city, neighborhood by neighborhood.

These collaborations range from deciding where best to place a new BART Station...to sprucing up parks...to voter registration drives...to addressing issues related to climate change, affordable housing, and transportation...and on and on.

Much of this work is done under the umbrella of collaborative institutions and research centers at SJSU such as Moss Landing Marine Labs, the Mineta Transportation Institution, CommUniverCity, among others.

The later, CommUniverCity, is a collaborative partnership between...you guessed it...the communities of San José, the public university that calls San José home, and the city of San José.

For more than 12 years, people who represent these entities have come together to push San José toward becoming an even stronger, more resilient, and more inclusive place for all who live here, work here, and raise families here.

Now, those who assume leadership of any existing institution sometimes take a skeptical view of special projects that have

been put in place by their predecessors...often in the name of out with the old, and in with the new, and all that.

I spent much of my first year here simply listening—listening to people on campus and listening to people in the community.

And the more I heard about CommUniverCity—and, more importantly, the spirit of civic cooperation that animates the program—the more convinced I became that this was a case where my job was to take something that was working and do what I could to make it even better.

Others may have laid the framework, but it falls to me and my fellow campus leaders to make sure we build on the existing platform...to foster even more impactful and enduring collaborations between the city, its communities, and its public university.

Let me tell you, as someone who has spent her life in academia, this degree of collaboration is not common. This does not happen in every American city and town. We are engaged in something quite special on the American higher education scene.

Other universities recognize this. They see that CommUniverCity is something special. People from UC Riverside have come up over the Tehachapi Pass to check it out. People from UC Merced have come over the Altamont Pass to check it out. People from Seattle University have come down the coast to check it out.

They see...and they want to replicate...what we have proven over time—that CommUniverCity benefits all the people who make up our city, our communities, and our university.

Students benefit. For them, the program offers an opportunity to engage in what we call service learning. They get their hands on meaningful projects. They make contacts in what students...probably back to the time of Socrates...have always called “the real world.” The same holds true for professors engaged in these projects.

Communities benefit. Delmas Park. Spartan-Keyes. Northside. In neighborhoods like these, San José State students go door-to-door, canvassing residents about what they think is working in their community, and what they believe needs to change. They track the common needs and concerns. They make note of the opportunities.

Under the guidance of their professors, with the counsel of community activists, and with the support of city hall, they then set out to translate research into action—organizing engineering projects for high school students; setting up financial literacy workshops; pulling together a transit village advocacy group.

As a side note: Many of our community residents are immigrants. Many speak languages other than English. So we send students who can translate and converse in Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, and so forth.

And the benefits for the city also are clear—not only because of the immediate impact these collaborative projects make, not

only because of the force multipliers our students provide, but also because of something bigger, something more enduring.

As they venture off campus and into communities, our students start to grow their own roots in San José. An interest is seeded...students decide to stick around after graduation...they begin to want to make San José *their* home...they become determined to do *their* part to make San José a more inclusive, more dynamic city.

One of those former students is here with us today. Her name is Yan-Yin Choy.

Yan-Yin, would you please stand?

Yan-Yin's family moved to the Bay Area when she was seven years old, drawn by the promise of the dot com boom. She originally picked San José State because of its affordability and its proximity to home...but she quickly fell in love with the campus and its community.

Yan-Yin's involvement with CommUniverCity began during her freshman year, when she coordinated San José State student volunteers to implement environmental lesson plans and service projects with students she tutored at nearby elementary schools.

As an Environmental Studies major, Yan-Yin already felt a passionate commitment to civic engagement...but that commitment grew even stronger through the work she did with CommUniverCity.

As she has explained, “I don’t want to just bring people together. I want to generate solutions.”

Her work with CommUniverCity inspired her to pursue community leadership at San José State. She coordinated leadership programs with the César Chávez Community Action Center...benefit productions and conferences with the San José State Women’s Resource Center...and civic engagement campaigns as Associated Students Director of Student Rights & Responsibilities.

Among her many achievements after graduation from San José State, Yan-Yin learned how to code. She joined Code for San José—a volunteer initiative—to help advocate for open data and more transparent civic government.

Yan-Yin interns and freelances, but she has chosen to give back, in a big way, to the people of her city. She is a Code for San José captain and the team lead for its Renter’s Rights Guide online resource, which provides vital information for many San José community members.

For Yan-Yin, San José is home. And she wants everyone who calls San José home to feel a sense of pride and participation in its civic life. As she says, quote, “I want San José to be a place where everybody can thrive.”

I endorse...and I applaud...Yan-Yin’s goal. But as she, and I, and everyone in this room knows, we face significant challenges in the effort to make sure everybody in San José can thrive.

There is the challenge of affordable housing.

There is the challenge of new infrastructure for public transit...and the traffic density that has turned rush hour into a full-day phenomenon.

There is the challenge of persistent homelessness...in a region that's home to some of the wealthiest companies on earth.

There is the challenge of several hundred vacancies, right now, in San José's city government.

There is the challenge of growing the innovation pipeline and insuring that it is diverse, prepared, and representative of all sectors of our community

...And back on campus, we are working on ideas to meet that need with future San José State graduates. Stay tuned.

It is with a frank acknowledgement of these challenges that I hope we can begin our neighbor-to-neighbor conversation today.

I know that this is the right group of Rotarians to help resolve challenges of this magnitude. I know the Rotary PlayGarden on Coleman has given children with special needs real opportunities to play and learn alongside their siblings and friends.

That's a meaningful difference you have made in our communities and on behalf of our city.

You convene here each week because you care about San Jose. And now I want to hear what *you* have to say. I am always ready to listen to my neighbors. As President of San José State University, I pledge to make community building a priority—not just a passing cause.

And I hope all of you in the community, whatever your roles, turn to San Jose State's talented faculty, staff, and students for support, engagement, research, and analysis as we work together to solve the problems with which we are confronted.

But as a closing thought, let me say that I am a Renaissance English literature scholar by training, and one of the great poets I studied was the 17<sup>th</sup> Century poet and clergyman John Donne. Centuries ago he had something quite powerful, and enduring, to say about the moral imperative to build communities and to be a good neighbor to our neighbors...

...That relationships between and amongst members of communities and institutions that make up communities much go both ways....seamlessly.

“No man is an island, entire of itself”...Donne famously wrote...“every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

And as the third woman to lead San José State in its 161-year history, let me simply add:

What he said. Donne's words ring as true today in this cradle of innovation as they did over four hundred years ago

Here's to the future we will build together.

Thank you. And Go Spartans!