What’s Past Is Prologue by Sage Stossel

As at so many colleges, Harvard’s graduation is attended by much pomp and circumstance ... and more than a little uncertainty.

“you are plunging into the great unknown,” the graduation speakers intone.

But if the newly minted graduates would only take a considered look at the reunion classes descending on campus reunion week, they might observe their own futures passing before their eyes ...

From the glamorous optimism of the recent graduates ...

("I'll practice law for a while, but ultimately I plan to hold political office."))

To the humbling pragmatism of the middle years ...

("No, Becky! — Not on your sister's head!")

To the somewhat less glamorous optimism of the later years ...

("I think the kids can support us in assisted living.")

But whatever they do, and wherever their lives take them, it may be heartening for jittery new grads to know ...

... that there is at least one experience that they will all share...

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That’s when I really began to excel academically and to articulate to the outside what it was to be poor, and the merits of the people who were poor.”

In high school, he joined the debate team and the school newspaper; he was elected student president and was the only person of color in the college-preparatory classes. Always close to his parents, especially his mother, whom he admires for raising him alone, he took to heart his dad’s refrain: “It is our duty to help our community.” He remembers boarding buses with his family to attend rallies organized by César Chavez. “I wore my UFW [United Farm Workers of America] Eagle pin every day in school; I was very blunt about my political views,” he says, with a laugh. “Everybody knew who I was and what I stood for.”

The potential power of radio as an instrument of social change first dawned on him when his brother, Candido, became the DJ of a Spanish-language music program in Sonoma County in 1964: “I saw every farmworker, of every age, listening to this program.” (Candido is now president of the Institute for Mexicans Abroad, appointed by former Mexican president Vicente Fox; Morales’s two sisters work as a teacher and as a speech therapist in California.)

At Harvard, Morales went to the larger demonstrations and advocated for increasing the number of Latinos on campus, but “was mostly studying.” He did help develop the first Spanish-language programs on WHRB, playing Mexican folk music as well as Latino rock and jazz, and recruiting Puerto Ricans from outside the Harvard community to play salsa, recite poetry, and report on the independence movement. “He talked me into becoming a member of WHRB. I became a studio engineer for his program, in addition to having my own show,” says Juan Arambula, who also grew up in a California farmworker family. “He’s very good at that: he has the quality of making it difficult for people to say no to him.”

By the time he got to law school, Morales had decided to become a public servant—maybe an elected official or a union organizer, and “I wanted to use radio to empower farm workers to help themselves,” he says. During the summers he went home, worked in the fields, and lived in the farm labor camp with his parents. After graduation, he lectured for La Raza Studies at California State University in Fresno and posted flyers about starting a bilingual radio station.

“Everyone who called became a board member,” he says, laughing. “There was no money; we began from scratch, organizing music concerts and holding menudo—tripe—breakfasts. The whole idea was to go back to our Chicano roots and build on that. We would net about $400, and a radio station cost about $200,000 to set up. We were quite romantic about the whole idea.” It was Arambula who suggested appealing to foundations for grants: Morales convinced him to write the first proposal. In 1980—one of July—RB went on the air, playing mostly folk music for listeners in the San Joaquin Valley.

Funding was a consistent problem until, in 1997, Morales installed 17 satellite downlinks, opening up major sources of revenue beyond the valley. These days Morales, who is known for his persuasive fundraising techniques (the station enjoys a 60 percent success rate on its grant proposals), still spends about half his time traveling to promote the station, often getting backaches driving the three hours between Fresno and San Francisco (he also has a house in Oakland) in his Prius. But the trips give him time to think. “I’m the ideas man,” he says. “I come up with the big concepts.” His cur-