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# Mr. Vargas Goes to Washington

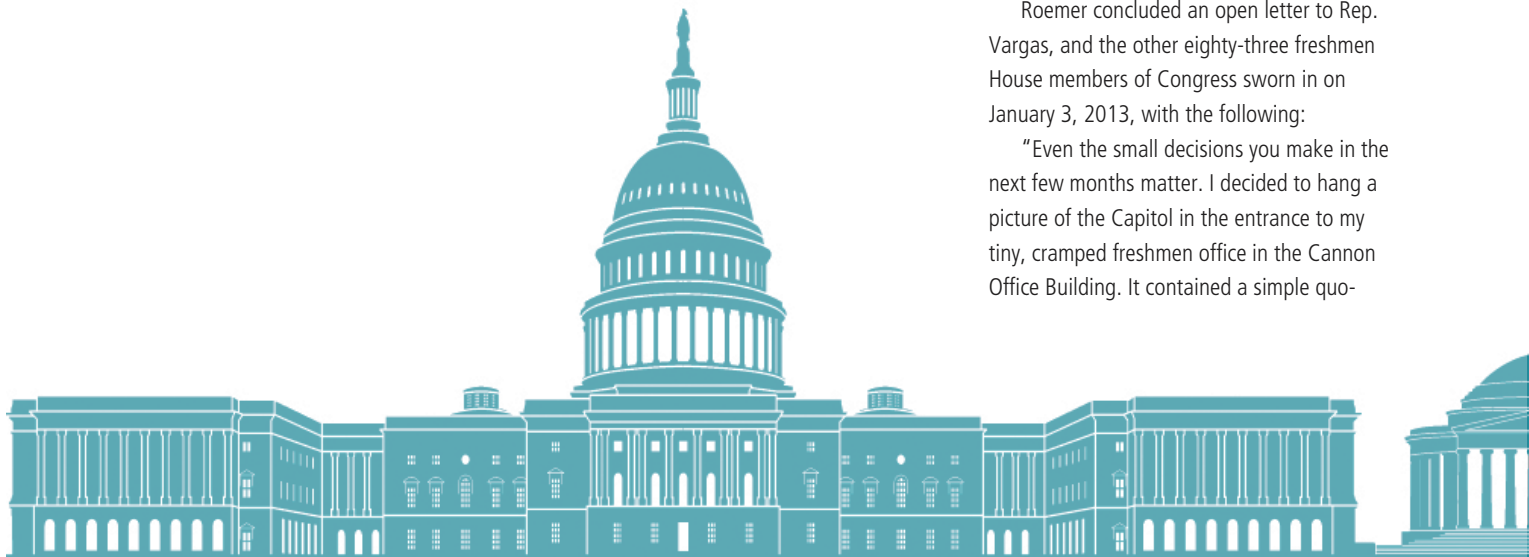
By Henry DeVries

Juan Vargas, the son of immigrant farmworkers and a former Harvard classmate of Barack Obama, received plenty of advice after he was elected to Congress last fall.

“There is an old saying about what it’s like to be a new member of Congress,” noted Tim Roemer, a former six-term Democratic congressman from Indiana and a 1979 graduate of UC San Diego. “There’s so much to learn and so many people giving you advice, it’s similar to inserting a garden hose in your mouth and turning on the spigot.”

Roemer concluded an open letter to Rep. Vargas, and the other eighty-three freshmen House members of Congress sworn in on January 3, 2013, with the following:

“Even the small decisions you make in the next few months matter. I decided to hang a picture of the Capitol in the entrance to my tiny, cramped freshmen office in the Cannon Office Building. It contained a simple quo-





tation from Alexander Hamilton. ‘Here, sir,’ he said, discussing the legislative branch of government, ‘the people govern.’ Especially in your first term, the people are watching and expecting great things.”

As a Democrat and first Latino representing the 51st Congressional district, which spans from the southern portions of San Diego County and extends into Imperial Valley, Vargas’ efforts are focused on good paying jobs for trained workers and supporting green power sources to boost economic growth. Assuring educational opportunities for all is very high on the Vargas list of priorities, and he did not wait long to speak out on the issue.

In March Vargas strongly urged President Obama’s new secretary of defense, Chuck Hagel, to immediately reinstate the tuition assistance program that the army, marines, and air force had all suspended. He joined other members of Congress in writing a letter to Secretary Hagel highlighting the importance and value of continuing education.

“The tuition assistance program is imperative because it enables our service members to attain a diploma, gain college credit, and earn a college degree,” stated Rep. Vargas. “It is essential that we provide our servicemen and servicewomen with the resources to pursue an education and better themselves both personally and professionally. The people that get continuing education get a leg up on everyone else, and that is why it is so important for veterans to get this opportunity.”

It comes as no surprise that an American success story like Vargas believes in the power of education. Born in 1961 in National City, California, he grew up on a chicken ranch as the third son of ten children raised by legal immigrants, brought to America in the 1940s as part of the Bracero program that brought Mexican farmers to work in the fields in the U.S.

“My parents came to this country very poor and did not have an opportunity to get a formal education, but they really drilled into us that we had to stay and excel in school, because that is the way to make your life better and help other people,” said Vargas.

Driven by a desire to help others, he earned a scholarship to attend the University of San Diego. After graduation in 1983, he began studying to become a Jesuit priest and worked with orphans and refugees in El Salvador and other places. The Jesuits sent him to Fordham University for a master’s degree.

At Fordham his career path changed when he met and fell in love with his future wife, Adrienne, a fellow student who worked with him at a soup kitchen in the Bronx. After deciding to give up his studies to become a priest, Vargas then moved on to Harvard, where he earned a law degree in 1991. In pickup basketball games on campus he guarded a talented left-handed player who just happened to be the future president of the United States.

“I met a young man named Juan Garcia at Harvard and he introduced me to his

roommate, Barack Obama,” recalled Vargas. “I had never heard the name before, and I thought his name was Baruch, a name I was familiar with when I was studying to be a priest that means ‘Chosen of God.’ He told me, ‘No, it’s Barack,’ and he explained that his father was from Africa and he was born in Hawaii.”

Garcia, a naval aviator, would go on to become a U.S. Congressman from Texas and Obama’s assistant secretary of the navy. Also choosing a career in public service, Vargas was elected to the San Diego City Council in 1993 and served for eight years. He later served in the California State Assembly and Senate, where he was a strong proponent of educational opportunities.

“Continuing education is important these days because technology and everything is changing, and if you don’t keep up to date, you are in trouble,” says Vargas.

Vargas says the best piece of career advice he has to offer is to never give up on a worthwhile goal. He takes pride in the fact that it took him four tries to get elected to Congress. “Many people said, ‘Well, it’s too bad you are never going to make it to Congress. I said, ‘No, I still am; it is just going to take me a little longer.’ I never give up.” ■

*Henry DeVries is a 1979 graduate of UC San Diego and the assistant dean for external affairs for UC San Diego Extension.*

## “Here, sir, the people govern.”

—Alexander Hamilton

