

Occasional Address – Southern Cross University Coffs Harbour Graduation Ceremony Elizabeth Ruthnam

Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> April 2014.

Thank you and good afternoon to our

- Chancellor - the Hon John Dowd
- Deputy Chancellor – Trevor Wilson
- Vice-Chancellor – Professor Peter Lee
- Council Members & Distinguished Guests
- Families and friends and of course and especially
- Graduates

May I begin by respectfully acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Gumbaynggirr Nation, their elders past and present.

Thank you for the invitation to deliver this address – it is both a humbling and momentous experience for me.

To our graduates here today, Congratulations on a job well done. You have achieved something that can never be taken from you.

A university degree is a valuable asset. It says you can commit, you can work hard and you are motivated.

It confers on you a status in society which is recognised and respected.

To any of you who have achieved this as parents, most especially single parents, I salute you. Your children should be proud.

To your friends and families, undoubted contributors to your success we join with them to recognise your efforts and have pride in you and our University.

Your teachers are proud too and rightly so. They have brought out the best in you and facilitated your learning.

The Latin root of the word educate is educare. The letter e means 'out' and ducare means 'to lead, to bring forward'.

They have led you forward as you will now undoubtedly lead others forward in your professional lives. This will be your purpose.

Being asked to give this address has caused me to reflect on my long working life to see if there is anything I have learned that may help you on your way.

One or two things have come to mind. What I will share with you are some reflections of the things I wish I had known from the beginning. Take from it what you will.

I am sure you will all approach your professional lives with ideas of changing your worlds, making them better. Be that change, participate, meet its challenges. Make sure that change is improvement.

I have found that change, if it involves people and organisations is very challenging. You will make mistakes. Be gracious. Learn and move on. Keep enhancing your skills.

Can I tell you a story I read many years ago that was published in the local paper?

'A lady in a faded gingham dress and her husband dressed in a threadbare suit stepped off the train in Boston and walked to Harvard University. They arrived to see the President of the university without an appointment.

The secretary could tell that such country hicks had no business with the president of Harvard and informed them that he was busy all day. 'We'll wait' the lady replied.

For hours the secretary ignored them but eventually asked the President to see them for a few minutes so they would leave. He sighed in exasperation and nodded.

The stern faced president came out to see them. The lady told him 'our son attended Harvard for one year and he loved it but about a year ago he was killed and my husband and I would like to erect a memorial to him somewhere on the campus.'

The president wasn't moved, he was shocked. 'Madam' he said gruffly 'we can't put up a statue for every person who attended Harvard and died. If we did this place would look like a cemetery.'

'Oh no' the lady replied quickly 'we don't want to erect a statue; we thought we would like to give a building to Harvard'.

The president rolled his eyes, glanced at the gingham dress and the homespun suit then exclaimed 'a building! Do you have any earthly idea how much a building costs? We have one over seven and a half million dollars'.

For a moment the lady was silent. She turned to her husband and said quietly 'Is that all it costs to start a university? Why don't we just start one of our own?'

The president's face wilted in confusion and bewilderment.

Mr and Mrs Stanford walked away, travelling to Palo Alto, California, where they established the University that bears their name, a memorial to their son.'

The story may or may not be completely true but the message is clear. Never dismiss or underestimate any person.

Emily Bronte said 'prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilised by education'.

I believed it was incumbent upon me to learn from my education and broaden my horizons and my comfort zone. I also had to learn to manage other people's various prejudices.

It is quite difficult to treat everyone equally all of the time isn't it? I have found this in my life.

I have also found that it is very pleasant to be treated with respect.

If your fundamental interaction with others is always with respect, then no matter how challenging a situation is if respect is our default position we can't go far wrong.

How often have I been in a shop dressed casually in have failed to attract the attention of the shop assistant because you are insignificant to them?

How often have we not been acknowledged ?

Have you ever felt slighted as a person of colour, a gay person, a person with a disability, a person who does not speak English well?

Have you ever been disparaged at work?

Obviously this kind of treatment doesn't make us feel good.

I ask myself how does my behaviour impact on others?

Do we ever dismiss people too lightly?

I ask myself how I am perceived by others? Do I really know? How would I like to be perceived? How do I identify?

The great Scottish poet Robert Burns authored a poem named 'To a Louse'.

It is written in the vernacular of the day but a modern translation would be 'and would some Powers be gifted to us to see ourselves as others see us...'

Where does that leave me? We make mistakes, errors of judgement, underestimations of people.

Should we each reflect on ourselves? Could we accept all comers?

The simple fact is that peoples' life would be enriched if we would not inflict these hurts on others.

More than this our lives are enriched if we view life from a wider comfort zone.

I believe truly great people, truly great people all have this attribute in common – to treat every other person as their equal.

Another thing I have learned along the way is that truly great people are humble people. They don't tell you how great they are. They are not boastful. They can in fact be easily overlooked.

We can talk and read as the sophisticated beings we may believe we are about and theological and philosophical constructs of equality, moral philosophy and

natural justice, but at the end of the day it all begins with treating everyone we come across fairly and respectfully.

Then we are inclined to treat groups fairly and respectfully, organisations fairly and respectfully, governments fairly and respectfully, peoples fairly and respectfully, countries fairly and respectfully.

We should learn from others throughout our lives. We all have mentors and leaders we admire. This will be your path as professionals.

Some of you will become leaders and mentors in your professional careers. We may all look at great leaders for inspiration – Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, John F Kennedy. But perhaps we should look closer to home?

Who do we admire among our day-to-day associates at university, at work, in our families, in our communities? Why do we admire the people we admire? I have analysed this in my life.

When you deconstruct the attributes and actions of another person you can learn for yourself what values and attributes you actually admire in these people.

This knowledge then becomes a worthwhile factor in our decision about how we may conduct ourselves.

Live your professional lives, from the beginning with open minds, ready to discover each individual who comes your way as a person with pride, a person with their own story, a person who can enrich your life with their knowledge and experience no matter how small.

The first gift my husband ever bought me was a book of poems by Robert Burns (yes, author of 'To a Louse'). There was an anonymous little inscription in the flyleaf. It read 'A man cannot be judged by the colour of his skin, or by his speech or by his clothes and jewels but only by his heart'.

As I said take what you will from my experiences. Happy Graduation Day.

Thank you.