

Southern Cross University

Occasional Address

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I am honoured to address you the graduates and all of you attending this ceremony today, Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, distinguished guests, academic staff, staff, friends and family. I am very grateful to the Chancellor, The Honourable John Dowd AO QC, for inviting me. It is a tremendous pleasure to be here.

I acknowledge the original custodians of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to the elders, past and present.

It is with such fondness I recall standing amongst you as a student graduating from Southern Cross University, not all that long ago.

Today, through the lens of my own journey, I offer some brief observations, analysis and experience and in doing so I hope to contribute in some small way to provide some further context to your many compass points as you navigate your way through the next chapters of your life, whether that be through the backwaters and wetlands, over the glassy waters of the still lagoons, through the rapids of the wild rivers or over the high seas.

Southern Cross University is a beacon in this spectacular and vibrant landscape and community of the Northern Rivers. It is an institution that has embraced a social and environmental justice orientation of which it is known and proud. It is this very orientation within which you, as graduates get to relish. You

have been educated by the living environment and community of the Northern Rivers. You are privileged to have the educational experience that you will now carry and build upon for the rest of your lives, and this community and this place is privileged to have been a part of your personal and collective journey.

For some, you will continue to be part of the Northern Rivers community, for others you will go to different places, and for some you will come and go. Wherever you are, one of the responsibilities that you now carry as a graduate of SCU is to never forget this place.

This place is special, you have learnt on the soils of an ancient and unique landscape, modified somewhat, but intact. The volcanic soils are the lava that flowed some 26 million years ago, the vegetation that surrounds us has evolved since before that time, the waters that flow on the surface of this land and beneath have flowed since near the beginning. The animals that roam this place, often unseen in the night, contain the genetics of times long gone, they carry knowledge that we cannot yet fathom - they too make this place. While we are here we are all part of a dynamic and diverse ecosystem, and one that is precious.

This landscape right here is internationally significant. The forests of this region are a world heritage property they are recognised for their rarity and their diversity. We are all fortunate to be here and we are fortunate to have had an educational experience right here.

You have all worked really hard, that we know. You have all achieved something quite fantastic and something that will reward you and those around you, well into your future. No doubt most of you will have been supported by many around

you, and we all together thank them for their support; the commitment to education is a collective contribution to a better and more enriched society; that we also know.

Your education will carry on into your work as it has for me. On Monday I will be in the Federal Court of Australia for a three day challenge to a decision to approve a new open cut coal mine on the public forest estate out west from here, near Narrabri. My client, a group of farmers and ecologists who cannot sit by, and watch the scale of damage proposed to be done to my ultimate client, the environment - the voiceless.

However, for me the outcome, the measure, is no longer, did I get an HD or a D? The stakes are different; if my case is successful the last remaining high quality stand of a nationally listed critically endangered woodland will be protected from being clear felled for yet another open cut coal mine. If I am unsuccessful I cannot resubmit, or try again. However, I will be consoled by one thing, I will know that I used everything I received by way of my education here at SCU to work hard to achieve something I know and understand is very important, environmental justice.

Being a public interest environmental lawyer is fraught with challenge and conflict. This is simply because we live in a system that is very much geared towards using our natural resources as if they are an unlimited commodity at our disposal and absolute discretion for the benefit of some here and now, without proper regard for the survival of other species or future generations. In fact, in the occasional momentary lapse of passion that I experience from time to time, I often feel marginalised in voicing my arguments for reason in the pursuit of environmental justice, notwithstanding that they are based on evidence as objective as can be described. Unfortunately

law, even in a society as well off as ours, does not naturally protect the environment. However, informed and strategic application of the law in some circumstances *can* be used to protect the environment and further advance the laws to do so. This is something that my experience and education right here helped me see and refine, so I can now be out there doing just so.

As a graduate of SCU, like many others, I have found myself on the cutting edge of my field, while it involves a constant exercise of balance; there is no place I would rather be. As one graduate of Southern Cross University to another, I suspect I will see you at some time or another at the forefront, on the cutting edge of your field, I suspect you will all be the good folk out there engaged critically in the workings of things, not assuming because the system is the way it is that it is reasoned, just and equitable, I suspect you will be focussed on the strategic direction of your field, doing good each day and making the world a great and better place to be.

So, you will now get to turn your Ps, Cs, Ds and HDs (I won't mention the others) to a different application, one where you can make a further positive contribution to this place and places like it.

You have all worked hard, I expect for you, like me, the hard work does not end here, it just gets even more rewarding, but for now it is your celebration, it is your success, it is your achievement and it is your graduation.

Go well, with your eyes wide open, use your now well attuned and educated voice to always speak up for the voiceless and work towards those things that really matter.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today