

SCU Graduation Occasional Address

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10.00 am, Saturday 25 March, 2017
Whitebrook Theatre, Lismore Campus

Thank you Chancellor Nick Burton Taylor AM, Vice Chancellor Professor Adam Shoemaker, Members of the University Council, Academic and General Staff, Special Guests, Families and Friends....and the reason we are all here, you the new Graduates.

In speaking to you on this wonderful day, I firstly want to acknowledge and pay my respects to those who nurtured minds, passed on wisdom and lived in harmony with the land for tens of thousands of years, the Widjabul Wijabul peoples of the Bundjalung Nation. I honour their Elders past and present and those emerging as Elders of the future. I also acknowledge Aboriginal people present today.

This is the third time I have been honoured with presenting the occasional address to an SCU graduation and as I prepared for today, I recalled the first in September 2009 when the University held a city street graduation parade and a ceremony in Riverside Park. It was a very warm day as the graduands, academics, the University leadership and I, as then Mayor, walked briskly behind the City Pipe Band to the park. But it soon became obvious that the warm weather and the seemingly more relaxed nature of the ceremony had its consequences when many of the graduates took advantage of the lack of walls and just drifted away after they had received their testamurs- or during my address. If you ever see the group photo of that day, after rearranging seating and a bit of skilful photoshopping, it looks quite an intimate gathering.

I was invited back when subsequent graduations were wisely held indoors, but I'm also mindful that occasional addresses can be boring and some of you might be eyeing the closest exit so I've instructed the ushers to lock all doors to ensure you don't escape today.

I have a confession to make, although I have two university degrees, I did not attend those graduations- although I did when I graduated as a primary school teacher and later as a teacher of deaf children. I have however attended 30 or more graduations here at SCU so I have heard many occasional addresses and I know that in the address as well as some personal reflections, there should be a few pearls of wisdom or dare I say it, advice.

I'm also aware that many of you will not remember what I say and tomorrow when you no longer have the booklet in your hands, you won't even remember who it is who spoke to you. In fact right now, you may be thinking about how you'll celebrate after the ceremony or a myriad of other things. So families and friends, perhaps I should be addressing you instead.

While we are on confessions, I'll tell you now, I was an average student. I scraped through my Matriculation or HSC before teachers' college and while I didn't qualify for university straight from school, after I had completed 4 years of teacher training, the 5 year old LaTrobe university was building up its numbers through flexible entry and I was given a place in a Bachelor of Arts degree because I'd passed Year 12 French. How lucky was I!

University study changed my life! Like many of you, I was the first in my family to go to university. It was hard work as I attended lectures and tutorials three evenings a week for 7 years completing my two degrees. Frequently I was at uni from 5pm until 10pm and found it extremely challenging on top of my full time role teaching speech to profoundly deaf children and later as a part time lecturer in Special Education at Victoria and later Melbourne University.

Arts degrees have been ridiculed in recent decades as being good training for waiting on tables but I will always be a supporter of a general arts degree in teaching critical thinking and challenging assumptions and belief systems through various fields of study- I majored in Linguistics as part of a Philosophy stream with a sub-major in English Literature and a minor strand of History.

I hope your university studies in Arts and Social Science, Education, Health and Human Sciences or from SCU College have changed your life too and that you never take for granted the opportunities you've been given and will be given in the future.

There's the first bit of advice- just in case you didn't recognise it. **Never Stop Learning.** Some of you will have already embarked on further studies- a full degree, another degree, Honours, Masters or a Doctorate- but learning does not just happen in a university. Every day with an inquiring mind and an openness to new experiences and ideas, we learn.

At the age of 66, I am learning a new skill- I'm making my stage debut in Hedda Gabler on Friday. It's scary but very exciting- and I have found out that I can learn (and retain) 15 pages of dialogue! So keep learning- as the banners in town say, your degree is not the end, it's the start.

Thirteen years ago, I decided to stand for election to Lismore City Council. I attended Council meetings, read a lot, went to training sessions and was elected. Actually it wasn't quite as easy as that. And here's my second piece of advice. Work out what you believe in and **Be Brave** in working to achieve it.

I knew I wanted to be involved in decision making for this community. I was not well known and didn't have a huge budget. What I did have was energy, determination and daylight saving. So I doorknocked each afternoon after teaching and each weekend and encountered dogs and steep hills in 35 degree temperatures.

I could have given up- the third house I doorknocked made me question my goal. When the man screwed up my leaflet, threw it in my face and slammed the door, I walked away in tears. I could have given up but I asked myself, Do you want this? and Are you brave enough? The answer was yes, so I composed myself and went on. I doorknocked 3500 houses that election and another 4500 the next and that terrible experience was never repeated.

Being an elected Councillor and Mayor was the best experience of my life- apart from my family of course. If any of you have the opportunity to stand for public office, go for it. It's not easy and you will disappoint or even anger some people. My opposition to CSG mining brought rebukes from the State Government, a couple of neighbouring Mayors, mining representatives and some in this university. My participation in and support for GBLTI events brought strong rebukes from some church leadership here too. That's what happens when you take a stand for what you believe as you try to make a difference in your community.

And that's my third piece of advice- **Make a Difference.**

However you do it, do something worthwhile- by joining an environment group, coaching a sporting team, becoming an advocate for refugees, becoming a wildlife carer, mentoring kids in strife, volunteering at a food bank.....whatever interests you, commit to something that is enriches life. Not just because it helps others but because it will enrich your life too.

If you haven't heard of it, Act Belong Commit is a wonderful program that originated in Western Australia and encourages individuals to get active, creative and social to protect and promote mental well-being. In brief it involves doing something regularly that's good for your body or mind, joining a group related to that activity and taking up a challenge also related to it.

So that brings me to my fourth and last piece of advice- **Get Active.** I'm not the first to tell you to look after your body as well as you mind and for most of my life, I wasn't good at taking that advice.

Eight years ago and just four days after being elected Mayor, that changed. I was diagnosed with breast cancer and after surgery and seven years treatment, I'm pleased to say I'm now clear. In the process, I became a Cancer Council Ambassador and in 2015 I participated in Dance for Cancer. I had to learn to tap dance but was very unfit so I joined the gym and lost weight - but afterwards and when the gym membership ran out, I was far 'too busy'. Then retirement came and I committed to get fit again.

I joined the GetHealthy NSW Health phone coaching program, began eating healthily, took up daily walking and Saturday morning Parkrun. To my surprise I can now run 5kms in 33 minutes, have lost 14kgs and feel better than I've felt in years. In doing so, I know I'm looking after my body and mind.

So to summarise my four bits of advice-

1. Never stop learning
2. Be brave
3. Make a difference
4. Get active

I suggested at the start that perhaps I should aim my address towards family and friends. Whether your student has studied on campus here in Lismore or on-line from their home near or far, whether they studied full or part time or it has taken many years to reach this point, you, as family and friends have shared this journey to various degrees (pun intended). You too have sacrificed family time while your student coped with challenging schedules, deadlines and concepts or juggling work and family commitments. It may have been up to you to support and even feed and water your student- and so you deserve special recognition and thanks. Part of his/her success is your success too.

I too owe a considerable amount of my success to my family and today I publicly acknowledge my husband Ron whose new position here at SCU in 1991 brought us to Lismore, my children Georgina and Tim, and my 91 year old mum Phyllis. Thank you!

So ...Congratulations graduates, have a wonderful day and a wonderful life - and thank you SCU, for employing Ron 26 years ago. I will always be a proud and loud champion for Lismore and its university. We are a richer and more interesting regional city because we have SCU here.

I do not feel worthy to stand beside other recipients of this award but from the bottom of my humble heart, I thank Southern Cross University for it....and I thank you all for listening.