

Occasional Address to University of Canberra
Faculty of Health Graduation Ceremony, March 2022
Speaker: **Rachael Clark**

I would like to begin by importantly acknowledging that we are meeting on the ancestral lands of the Ngunnawal people where I am grateful to live and work. I respect their continuing connection to this land which was never ceded. I pay my respects to elders, past, present & emerging. I also would like to acknowledge all Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people in attendance today.

I offer my warmest congratulations to all of the graduates:

I am honoured to be here today for your graduation from the University of Canberra. The same university from which I was a graduate only four short years ago. I still vividly remember all the hard work, the hours and hours of study, and appreciate the sacrifices that you may have had to make in order to earn your seat here today. The degree conferred on you is an achievement which can never be understated:

- From this point it will always follow you and be something which will be always well regarded by others.
- It is a representation of your courage, determination, and an example of you living your life deliberately.

I understand the excitement that many of you would have for your future plans, whilst others may still be searching for their niche and trying to make decisions so I thought I would share with some insight with you all of my journey leading to university and then beyond.

For context, I am a proud Wiradjuri woman, born and raised, on country, in regional NSW. I was disconnected from my culture mainly due to my parents divorcing at a very young age.

I grew up with my father's family and spent time with my mother's Aboriginal mob on some weekends and school holidays. For the most part I wasn't allowed to talk about being an Aboriginal person, and I wasn't allowed to mix with my people. I lay no blame because I understand it was a different world then and country Australia was small and fairly isolated. My world education came largely from outsiders' stories and the books in the library.

I came to university very late in life after a car accident left me with chronic injuries. By that time, I had a wealth of life experience, I had done many things and had surrounded myself with range of different people which was largely an extension of my usually large family – my father was the youngest child of seven, my mother the youngest daughter in a mob of 14 kids. I was used to diversity and appreciated a range of opinions. Domestic violence, racism and sexism were sadly common around me. Cultural learnings were not included in my education - I was only taught about Australia being 'discovered' by the English in 1788.

With that background skip, forward through 30 years where I not so quietly, but for the most part quite unconsciously, set upon a life of revolution and change. Whilst I have never had much of a public presence, in my private life I unknowingly became a beacon for advice and have a long history of helping others through difficult times. I must say that none of this was ever a deliberate path – it was just how my life evolved from living day to day.

Starting university later in life gave me a wealth of experience to draw upon during my studies. I still had plenty of enthusiasm but appreciated that most of my peers were around the same age as my children. I had been around very few academics in my life, so university felt a world apart from anything else I'd ever done. I am pleased to report that I was warmly welcomed at UC— by both the academics and the students alike.

Soon after I commenced my four-year law degree a convener told me that the attrition rate for law students more than half in the first year and then another 50% would move over to do something else or would drop out within the next two years but generally once two years were completed a law student would go on to attain their degree. I made a promise to myself at that point that no matter what I wanted to enjoy the journey. My studies were interrupted a number of times due to further illness and some other pivotal moments in my life so my time at university was extended well beyond what I had planned. So much so that toward the end of my degree I realised that I hadn't spent enough time focused on what I would really do after I finished and questioned whether I really want to finish at all because I loved the education and being challenged so much.

During my education I was surprised to learn that most students who study law will never practice before in a court or ever represent a client. I was also very surprised to learn that once I completed my degree, I would need to undertake even further study, increasing my already hefty HEC loan and then work for months under supervision before I would need to apply to the Supreme Court who would then make an assessment about my character— to determine if I was worthy and could be trusted to be an officer of the Court. It seemed like I still had a lot to do.

And so, in my Pentium year I rolled up my sleeves and got to it. I lived my life more deliberately than I ever had before. I should say that the University always encouraged me to do more but I was too focused on getting the degree and maintaining my life outside to take advantage of all the other opportunities that were available.

So, during my final year I made up for all of that - I undertook a short mentorship at the Supreme Court. Every person there was very friendly and encouraging. I have always admired the work of the court and feel very privileged to have been able to observe and participate in some of their work. I must also say that it was one of the most respectful and truly wonderful workplaces I have ever experienced.

I went straight onto enrol in the Career Trackers program and gained some work at the ACCC. Much to my delight I was assigned work in a team which was litigating against a large unnamed car company who much to my dismay settled on the Courthouse steps for a \$10,000,000 penalty for their unconscionable conduct. For those who know the law – this is one of the most difficult tests to prove in law.

During this time, I also went to Cambodia on a scholarship and studied human trafficking. I have to say that this trip gave me much more than I bargained for. I came back to Australia somewhat disillusioned for a while but realised that I wanted to work with people who were stuck in their lives, who had little help, were disadvantaged. I also wanted to connect with my culture and other first nations people.

I was fortunate enough to be offered a position at CCL as the first cadet in their newly formed Dhurrawang Aboriginal Human Rights Program under the wings of some very experienced lawyers who had a wealth of knowledge to share with me.

Because I was from the private sector had a lot to learn.

And learned I have.

I initially spent several years giving legal advice about tenancy and social security law. I also volunteer in the NTLAS program offering free legal advice to the broader Canberra community about civil matters like contracts and employment issues. During that experience I met many lawyers from the private sector and the government, who also volunteered their time to provide legal assistance to the community who were commonly unable to access Legal Aid assistance due to their income but could not afford to obtain comprehensive legal advice either.

I could have never known when I commenced my cadetship and went onto become a solicitor that there was an impending housing crisis like this country had never been seen before or that a pandemic would occur shifting many people over to need income support payments – people that had never been in the system before.

Safe to say there was never a better time to be competent in these areas of the law

At CCL I have been privileged to work alongside some brilliant legal minds whose main focus has been to assist vulnerable people, law reform and broadly share their knowledge. I am now charged with managing a program to further assist my peoples. I appreciate the opportunity and the responsibility of this position. One which I take very seriously.

I think in many ways I have been very fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time which has propelled my career. I feel grateful for it all, but to get these opportunities you must put yourself out there.

And then you have to do you best when you get there. So, I say to you today these words of advice, let's call it wisdom – some of which I believe is a result of the education I received at the University of Canberra:

- Be authentic. Trust yourself.
- Use your knowledge wisely
- Do what you feel is right and have the courage to back yourself.
- rest sometimes. Always make time for the things which are important to you outside your career.
- Continue to believe in yourself but listen to those around you – particularly those who have been on the path before you.
- Listen to the old people. No matter how smart or clever you are, they have lived longer than you, and know things that you don't.
- To the older peoples, I would say listen often to the younger people for they may have the enthusiasm you've lost and can possibly teach you new and better ways.
- I urge you to go forward today and soak up your success. Be proud of yourself but be humble. Give back.
- Be grateful - take the time to thank the people who have supported you. Whoever they are. Your teachers, you family your friends, your baristas who made you the

coffees which got you through the long nights study in an, the adversary at uni who you wanted to be quiet. All of it got you here today so be grateful for it is never easy to share a life with someone who studies.

- Help those along the way the same way that others helped you.
- Most importantly be human – don't expect more than you give, embrace your failures and learn from them. Be the good example to others of the world that you want to live in. I wish you all the very best in whatever lies ahead of all of you today. Congratulations.