

Occasional Address – UC Graduation – 9 October 2019

I would like to offer my deepest respect to the Ngunnawal people, the traditional owners of this land and in particular the Elders, past present and emerging. May your wisdom, foresight and footprints on this land guide us to a better future.

I wish to acknowledge the Deputy Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Members of Council, Deans of Faculties, all staff of the university, proud parents and family, deserving graduates, thank you for this extraordinary honour to address you with a few humble thoughts.

My journey has not been different to yours as I reflected on some past experiences to share today. In a sense I could not help to feel a huge sense of de ja vu. Throughout this process; however, I have found some guiding stars which I am humbled to share, and I trust that you may find of some of value.

I will reflect in particular on the power within.

As many who have been here before me, I too have little memory of my first and second graduation ceremony and it is only after the third that I could recollect some poignant statements. I would venture a guess that it has something to do with the excitement of the day or the looming after party. Please slip me the address of the party after the proceedings. Love a good celebration.

Born in South Africa, I stem from a working class family. Neither of my parents were educated past year 10. Affected by drought and poverty, my mum and dad met in a mining town. My dad spent all his life working in the mines and eventually retired after several spates of ill health and accidents.

Despite not having the opportunity to complete a formal education at a fine establishment such as the University of Canberra, my parents instilled their incredibly rich wisdom and life experience into us as we were growing up. When I was younger I quite often did not understand the meaning or application of the things they taught me; these lessons are now some of the guiding forces in my life.

Please journey with me as I share some of those with you.

1. Dad had a saying - a life in service provides life – as a young child my brother and I were often ushered out of our bedroom, in a small three bedroom house, to make space for a family of sometimes up to five people.

Initially, I didn't understand why this continually happened and my enquiries were often met with; Mr and Mrs Smith was only visiting us for a short while. This sometimes lasted from a couple of days to a couple of weeks and often after they left, I would meet them or their children again at church, in town or when I saw the children at school.

In later years my parents explained; don't ever wait to show love, kindness or support; it is an investment in faith, whether it is theirs or yours.

What I learnt from my parents were that my social status, religion, race and gender doesn't matter – that we are living in a world equal to all and that I should always check my heart and engagement and whether I am in a position to support, fully acknowledging that tomorrow I

might be the one in need and hoping and praying that there would be a helping hand, a supporting word, or an understanding heart.

2. My parents instilled a strong value of respect in us – respect for your elders, respect for women, respect for a different point of view, respect for the little things in life – this taught me that it is deeply important to consider my actions on others and that showing respect is a moral investment that always yields fruit.

I see the result of this truth daily in my current role as CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society in something as simple as our Night Patrol Volunteers greeting people on the street as equals and providing them with sandwiches, hot drinks and material items; no questions asked.

3. My parents taught us to be considerate and that no man is an island. A deep rooted investment from dad: “you never know what happened in the 10 minutes before you meet somebody”. I learnt that first-hand on a day that I interviewed a young woman for her first job as executive officer, who had learnt hours before that her father whom she loved deeply, had passed away; but she still had the courage to continue with the interview because that is what her father would have wanted. I specifically recall the great sadness she had that could have easily been interpreted as anxiety about the interview. Today that young woman is a successful Managing Director of a Credit Card Company.

I learnt; not only is it okay to, it is important to ask the people around you the simple question “how are you?”

4. Norms and values define who we are. What are the standards that I live by? Mom always said; consider what you wear (moms standard saying was that we might not have much to wear but we are always clean). I once challenged her and refused to change into clean clothing before leaving to visit friends – mom in a very casual way reflected: “mate I brought you into this world, I can also take you out of it”!

Think about what your values are and what your standards might be. Whether that means standing up for what is right in the face of injustice or simply leaving your room tidy each morning; you can be the judge.

5. As mentioned before, mom and dad were extremely active in the Church and welfare activities – and strong supporters of: “charity begins at home”. Especially dad’s approach killed us at times.

He started charity by not always being on time but by arriving at least 30 minutes before the time – we didn’t have Facebook/ YouTube and Atari tennis games had no Bluetooth or battery functionality. If you didn’t take a book, you were stuck and admittedly this was one of the root causes of back seat fights with my brother.

We always arrived at events and functions first and did not leave until everything used was cleaned and stowed.

Quite often I saw dad having a conversation with someone before or after the service and in later years I learnt that by greeting people he was checking in on their wellbeing and when he detected any concern, matter or situation he engaged and supported them with advice/encouragement/compassion and kindness.

This was the very testimony on dad's funeral when in excess of 250 people of the hundreds that attended got up and sang two songs in his honour; each of them having been someone touched in a special way and acknowledging an unselfish life of meaning.

My father, who didn't get to go to university, who did not even have the opportunity to finish high school taught us we are part of a community. Being connected to your friends, family and wider community, seldom with instant gratification but with huge impact – dad called it sowing seeds of kindness.

6. I found that I can continue with many reflections of my mum and dad whom I love so much; but let me summarise the ones I have shared today:
 - a. a life in service of love, kindness and support of others provides life and a legacy of ourselves;
 - b. respect of others, our environment, our vision and mission will always yield positive outcomes;
 - c. enquiring about the welfare of others establishes a good culture and it builds great attitude;
 - d. always ask yourself: "what do I stand for"; and finally,
 - e. remember that in all that you are, that you achieve, that you initiate, and that you encounter, you are part of a community.

Why did I choose to share this with you today? Because these values instilled by so many, starting with parents, teachers, friends, family and the amazing people present here today established a spirit within and an amazing power screaming to be released. As stated in the classics: "You have the power"; but as always, with great power comes great responsibility.

These life's lessons guided me in my decisions to complete my studies (being empowered) even though I often felt like walking away (accountability and responsibility), being unsure of the future or what it holds (having faith), practicing law and realising it was not really what I expected it to be and making a decision to move into the financial sector (having the courage to change) and finally ending up in the community services sector (being there for others and especially the community). Only later in life I realised I had to follow those pathways to prepare me to look after the most vulnerable in our community; the over 1,600 Canberrans experiencing homelessness each night and a further 26,000 who are living below the poverty line".

A man deeply respected in the world; Nelson Mandela once stated:

"In Africa there is concept known as "Ubuntu" – the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others; that if we are to accomplish anything in this world it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievement of others."

In setting off on your act 2, it is important to hold on to these beliefs. The beliefs and attitudes, created by those on whose shoulders we stand today, are anchors. Not because they did it before us or told us to do so, but because these beliefs and attitudes have fundamental value and you can use that as benchmarks when you embrace change and future opportunities.

I do acknowledge that there is a strong sense that everything happens for a reason no matter what. I don't know if that is actually true but I do know one thing: everything happens, and my recommendation is to get cracking and use the power within to make it happen. My personal belief is that I would rather be sorry for the things I did, that didn't have the desired result, than not having done something at all.

I learnt the hard way that sometimes no matter how well you do, and what effort you put in, you may not succeed – that is life – that teaches resilience. I submitted 321 applications for a position on my arrival in Australia, which included not being successful in my McDonalds or Woolworths shelf packer applications – it took 7 months, through which I learnt valuable lessons about the way resumes should be drafted, and about networks, etc. One thing is certain; however - I refused to give up and I discovered that hitting rock-bottom is a solid foundation!

Going by Dunbar's number, over our life time we will impact 150 people and we will have contact with 80,000 people. For me the aim is to touch as many people as I can, and to change the face of poverty and the dire effects of isolation.

What is your aim? What is your plan? How will you use your spirit to invest in your community and in the future of your children? We rely on your intellect, your journey and your talents to help us change the world and make it a better place and succeed where we may have failed.

Finally, as you journey on this ancient land, travel gently with respect, compassion and care. Hold the goodness of your learnings and beliefs from family, friends, coaches and colleagues always in your heart and may the power that you have received to establish change, inspire you to leave this land in a better place.

I wish you every success and congratulate you.

Barnie van Wyk