

Good evening. It is an honour to be speaking with you here today. I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the Ngunnawal land on which we meet, and pay my respect to elders, past, present and emerging.

I also wish to acknowledge the Deputy Chancellor, Vice Chancellor & President, Members of Council, Deans of Faculties, all staff of the university, parents, family and friends and of course our incredible graduates. Without all of you none of us would be here today.

Graduates, CONGRATULATIONS! You did it! You managed to complete your degree and not only complete it, but complete it throughout a global pandemic! No doubt you'll certainly never forget your final year of this degree.

So as you know, I am Dani Harmer. I grew up here in Canberra and completed my degrees here at the University of Canberra before heading on a super fun journey for the first 12 or so years of my career. When I sat here (or I think we were at Parliament House at the time) for my graduation ceremony in 2005 I had absolutely no idea where my journey or career would take me. I had landed a graduate position at IBM in Sydney and thought perhaps I would just work my way through the ranks of a big organisation. I never in a million years thought I would end up working in New York City, for The New York Times, let alone in the Media industry, and now in the Real Estate industry back where I grew up. Who knows where the next 20 years of my career will go? All I know is that I will continue to seize the opportunities like I have done in the past. This is the inspiration for my speech today. People often ask me how I got to where I am today and I don't have too many answers other than the fact that I seized the opportunities when I had the chance. At the same time I am so grateful to have been presented with lots of opportunities having grown up in Canberra and graduating from one of the best universities in Australia.

What does seizing the opportunity mean? Well I've tried to distill it into a few key pieces of advice for you, enriched by a few personal stories. This is completely my view of course and if you take one little tip with you as you enter, or continue in, the workforce then it was worth me standing up here today.

Realize that you'll never be totally prepared - so say yes!

Many miss great opportunities, believing they're not totally prepared, and that it's not the right time. We might think we lack knowledge or experience to face new challenges or we're simply scared of failing.

*"Great people do things before they are ready"*¹. They do things before they know they can actually do them.

You were probably never one hundred percent ready for a final exam right? You probably always thought, I could have studied more, read one last page or taken one more practice test. But you all finished and clearly made it through. If you're here today it means you got through these challenges and that's all that matters!

When I arrived in New York City in my 20's after saving up for years and years, I finally landed an interview with a "publisher" (which I subsequently learned was The New York Times), I almost turned it down. I thought, how can I work for a publisher? I knew little about the media. My mum had always told me I should have been reading more news and now I realised why. I'd only worked for IBM and felt like I only knew about software development. How could this be applied to somewhere like The New York Times I thought? BUT I really really wanted a job so I could stay in the city so I couldn't turn it down. That very next day, I threw on a suit, arrived in the lobby and I'll never forget my incredibly nervous elevator ride up to the 21st floor of

¹ Amy Poehler

the New York Times office in Times Square. I interviewed for four hours and somehow convinced them that I was right for the job. Had I not taken that opportunity, had I not said yes, it would have no doubt taken me on a very different path and I would not have had the incredible experience I gained over the next three years of working there with the most incredible people at such a pivotal time in the digital era. Opportunities like that don't come around that often.

A few weeks ago I was asked to run a marathon to raise funds for the Indigenous Marathon Foundation. I thought about every excuse under the sun to say no. Firstly I've never run a marathon, I have three little kids, I work a busy job with little free time, but as I was making that decision, I was writing this very speech. When I read through the words of my last story, I thought to myself, I should take my advice, and say "yes". What an opportunity to be given. I would get to know 14 incredible First Nations men and women and be a part of their life changing journey. AND... I hope, I can say at the end of the year, that I actually ran a marathon!

Always enter a room with confidence.

There will be many times when you have to go to an event or attend a function where you either have to present, or just simply engage with a group of people you don't know. How many of you thrive in this instance? How many of you cringe at the very thought of it? It doesn't matter where you go, or how many people you are about to meet, always enter a room with confidence.

Confidence is a funny thing - I'm watching my two young girls aged 6 and 4 grow up and develop their own very different personalities. Both have confidence in their own ways. One will walk into any room, very easily sing people a song, smile and get along with almost anyone. The other will take her time getting to know people, will come across as shy but will very quickly take the lead in organising play activities and corralling the kids to play. Both having lots to offer but in very different ways.

Each and everyone one of us should feel confident to enter a room. We all have something unique to offer. When I look at my staff, there are some that are highly technical, some that can sell products, some that can organise an event in minute detail and some that have an innate ability to lead others. Without this diverse mix of strengths and capabilities across our team we would go nowhere. I can't imagine a team of people just like me. It would be mayhem.

Remember, you will always have a strength that no one else can offer.

Part of the challenge when starting out your career is finding those strengths and that comes with time. But know for sure, you will have many.

You will learn on the job

I spoke earlier about the many times you may have turned down an opportunity or didn't go for an opportunity in the first place because you didn't think you had the experience. That's nonsense - always put yourself forward!

I've hired staff who had no experience in a role before. I've hired them based on their attitude, their personal attributes and the unique skills they may have to offer. The only way many people can get into a new field as a graduate is by learning on the job.

Richard Branson said. "If someone offers you an amazing opportunity and you're not sure you can do it, say yes - then learn how to do it later". I agree 100%.

When you go for an interview (perhaps your first) and you don't have any major work experience to speak about. Speak about your strengths, your life experiences (sport, hobbies, interests, travel etc.). This information is just as valuable to an employer in assessing how you would fit and add to the culture of any team. Show your attitude towards learning new things and your desire to grow.

Be resilient

I've told some really positive stories here; where things have worked out. Trust me, there will be plenty of times when you'll have to take a punt, build up the courage and say yes, and it may not turn out the way you hoped. That's ok. It happens to all of us. And the more it happens the more you learn and become stronger in the journey ahead. Resilience is your ability to bounce back from things that don't go as planned.

When I first moved back to Canberra five years ago, I took a job that wasn't right for me. With 12 years living out of Canberra I had no idea what the job market was like here. I knew consulting was big in Canberra so thought it would be great to join a big consulting firm. I had an itch for getting back into the work I had enjoyed at IBM. Within weeks I knew the job wasn't right for me. I didn't get to build things, I didn't manage my own team, I had to sell, I didn't get to work with engineers or coders and I had to work really long hours. All of this while getting used to being a brand new mum. I knew I had made the wrong decision. I put so much pressure on myself and my family to try to make it work but it was upsetting, and I wasn't excited about heading to work each day.

I remember making a call to an ex-colleague who I had worked with in Sydney and asking what opportunities looked like at Allhomes. I loved the website, I loved the brand and I loved real estate - don't all Australians? I'll never forget the call when I realised they had the role for me. It paid less and it was a step-down in job title, I didn't get an assistant, but it didn't matter. It was doing what I loved to do. Had I not recognised I needed to make a change, had I not recognised that it was ok to admit this wasn't the right move for me, I would have missed the Allhomes opportunity. And now, five years into Allhomes and now a few years into my role as the General Manager, I am so glad I "failed" a little and learned what I truly enjoyed doing.

What does all of this mean when you put it together? Be open, say yes, back yourself with confidence, know your strengths, learn as you go, be ok with failure. AND never miss an opportunity!

As American author Orison Swett Marden said: *“Don’t wait for extraordinary opportunities. Seize common occasions and make them great.”*

Thank you so much for having me today. I wish all of you the best on the journey ahead. Congratulations!