

## University of Canberra – Occasional Address – Graduation Ceremony

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Dean and distinguished guests, friends and family and graduates.

Thank you for the opportunity to share in this occasion, and congratulations.

I wish to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respect to their Elders, past and present.

I acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders present here today. This land always was and always will be aboriginal land.

I hope you are sitting here today with an immense sense of pride and accomplishment, as befits reaching a milestone such as this, as well as becoming a key turning point in your next adventure to come.

I have always viewed life as an adventure. Perhaps this is due in part to being a naturally curious and restless soul, but moreso the fact that I have never wanted life to “happen to me”, rather I wanted to be the captain of my own destiny and to make my own way, on my own terms.

For me, this meant embarking on a career in a male dominated sector, and to be challenged consistently on my ability and my suitability to exist in a world where being a female meant I had less value than my male peers.

We talk about Value or our own Values a lot.

It is perhaps an overused and misunderstood word, which may not be given the level of importance it deserves. You see without knowing your own value, and without recognising your own set of values, you will not be able to go out into the World and truly thrive.

My own value was challenged early on in high school, when I put my hand up to go to the steelworks plant to do my work experience in the hopes it would lead to an apprenticeship like my male peers. This request was met with equal parts surprise and disdain, and I was told unequivocally that if an apprenticeship is what I wanted, I should go and be a hairdresser.

Hair dressing was not my interest however, and despite being firm in my opinion on this, it fell in deaf ears. My Mum managed to organise a week at the University Of Wollongong in the Mechanical Engineering department which meant a week of me dozing off in front of lecturers as I didn't understand a single thing they were saying!

When I completed high school, I pursued my dream of becoming a carpenter, which involved applying and being rejected for upwards of 150 jobs. It may come as a surprise for this generation, but when I left school there was no Seek.com nor online applications. You endured the brutal reality of face-to-face rejections after dropping off a printed resume to a business or ringing a phone number in a newspaper advertisement.

I eventually wore down a builder and convinced him to give me a go, on the proviso I worked for free for 3 months, and after that he would consider signing me up. Now whilst that would be unheard of now – thank you to modern slavery laws – it was my only way in at the time. Did it lessen my values and self-worth ? Of course.

But did I know that I could convince him in 3 months that I could do the job? Absolutely.

Did he eventually sign me up after 3 months of making my life horrendously hard and me still showing up every day? Sure did.

Fast forward a few years and I was still copping a ton of grief from men in the industry, who simply didn't want me there. From verbal abuse to intimidation, to vandalism and theft of my precious tools, through to unsavoury comments and unwanted physical approaches, I started to develop the skin of a rhino, the mind of a marathon runner and the mouth of a sailor.

The thing that irked the detractors the most, was that I was actually GOOD at what I did and had a natural aptitude for organising the team and getting things done on time.

So, here's my first piece of advice to you all – the pathway forward is never straight and free of obstacles. You need to be prepared to prove people wrong and prove you belong. I'm not saying its right, but I am saying that for many of you, that will be a reality.

So a few years later I was a project manager for a façade company with happy clients, happy installers, but a very low salary. My colleagues doing the same role for the same amount of time were on triple my salary with a company car. When I tried to raise this inequality, I was given the standard responses.

“You haven't done your time”.

“You're still developing”.

“Keep working hard and you will get there”.

It was total rubbish. I was working hard, had done my time and was still being taken for granted. The very blunt advice from my mentor and friend at the time was direct – “Quit”.

I was a bit shocked. I can't quit! What about rent. I won't get another job. What if they are angry?

Her next statement rings true today.

“If they can't see your value and worth, then leave and find someone who does. Because if you don't value yourself, why would anyone else?”.

It is the greatest advice I have ever had, and I say it is my second piece of advice to you all now. Because it is true. Women and culturally diverse people are conditioned to not see their own value and worth and to just put up with it. But we have the CHOICE not to. And believe me there is always someone out there who will see your worth.

That moment gave me the courage to leave a thankless company and become the operations manager of a large structural steel subcontractor.

It also gave me the sense of adventure a few years later to pack up my bags and head overseas where I ended up being a site engineer on a nuclear decommissioning project in Lithuania and learning how to speak and swear profusely in Russian. And this is the beauty of working on construction – your job can literally take you anywhere you want to go.

Third piece of advice – embrace every opportunity that comes your way, and don't be afraid of doing something completely left field. Sometimes the best adventures seem like the scariest decisions at the time!

After working overseas for 3 years and backpacking for through 45 countries for 12 months, I landed in Canberra.

All of the experience and adventures and challenges I overcame, have led me to where I am now - General Manager of a large Tier 2 National construction company who has an enviable track record of winning national industry awards and founder of not-for-profit organisation – Build Like A Girl.

Each of these moments I have told you about today, were a turning point in my career and ultimately changed me from being a shy, self-conscious, self-doubting young girl, to a woman who does not accept the societal excuses on the way women and other diverse groups are treated in construction any longer.

I refuse to accept that this is as good as it gets.

And I refuse to allow any female or other diverse people wanting to work in construction to go through what I had to over the past 28 years.

And yes, some of those things that happened to me are still happening now.

Whilst the industry has come leaps and bounds and young people don't have to work for free for 3 months, there is still a stigma hanging over all of us and a reason why we cannot attract more females and diverse people to this industry.

We need to look at how we plan and manage our people and projects, we need to be realistic in our approach to work hours and allowing people time with their families and other obligations, just like every other industry.

We need to break down the negativity around taking time off to look after children or to go to school functions and events and we need to encourage and support men and women to re-enter the workforce after parental leave expires.

Lastly, we need to push hard for more women in leadership roles.

I stand here now, with no further pieces of advice, but instead a challenge to all of you.

Because you are the next generation in construction who can be the change.

You can refuse to accept the status quo. You can demand more and better. You can be the generation who didn't stand by and say nothing in the face of poor work practices, discrimination, and inequity. You hold the keys to a new and better industry, one that is empathetic, innovative and sustainable.

And if you are sitting here thinking that you can't do any of those things, then I hope you will remember these words (borrowed from a very famous and important female leader)

You are powerful. And your voice matters.

You are going to walk into many rooms in your life and career, where you may be the only one who looks like you – but you are not alone. So,

Dream with ambition.

Lead with conviction.

And see yourselves in a way that others may not, simply because they've never seen it before,

But know that we will applaud you every step of the way.