

University of Canberra Graduation Ceremony 28 September 2017, Speech by Dr Helen Watchirs OAM, ACT President & Human Rights Commissioner, Parliament House.

Good morning everyone, I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people. I respect their continuing culture - the oldest in the world at over 65,000 years (at least 20,000 years locally at Birrigai in ACT) & the contribution they make to the life of this city Canberra & this ACT region. I pay my respects to elders, past, present & future. I also acknowledge other Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people who are attending today's ceremony, including Professor Tom Calma AO, who it is a privilege to know as the first Aboriginal Chancellor of an Australian university. I also pay my respects to Vice-Chancellor Professor Deep Saini, Members of Council, Deans of Faculties, new graduates, families & friends.

I would like to sincerely congratulate students on achieving your dreams of graduating in your chosen discipline – it's your time to shine as you have gotten here through hard work and merit, with the assistance of the academic community and support of your loved ones here today. I am very honoured to be asked to speak to you at this joyful occasion and share my story, and perhaps give you some guidance on navigating your own career path and transitioning into a profession. I believe that higher education should be accessible to people with intelligence and perseverance - this is where you learn to think, problem solve and embark on life-long learning. Dr Martin Luther King Jr said in 1963 *I Have a Dream* speech '*the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.*

Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education'.

My main three advices are to:

- find your passion & pursue it, as a vocation doesn't feel like work, and you won't be watching the clock daily. Choose people in teams who share your passion & commitment to work to achieve more together than you would alone;
- know that all paths you explore in your career (even part-time jobs when you were studying) are not a waste. Every door you've opened usually has a purpose, even if it's just to learn that this type of work is not as satisfying as you thought it would be, but it's a stepping stone to where you want to be & grow & find a great mentor;
- be true to yourself by developing a strong sense of yourself – to *know & be* the person you *are* & not be restricted by gender and other stereotypes, to help you to actually fulfil your potential.

Although my family had few books, the public library was only one block away from home and I was an avid reader. The novel I studied at a Parramatta High School that influenced me the most was '*To Kill a Mockingbird*' [Harper Lee, 1960] about a lawyer defending an innocent African American in Alabama. My favourite quote is from Atticus Finch: '*You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it*'. The lesson is to be humble and open, and not to assume or judge others too much.

I consider myself lucky to be the first member of my family of six children to receive a university education (three of my five older siblings subsequently studied at university). More unusual is that our parents did not go to high school during the Depression years, despite being very bright (in fact my mother was dux of her rural primary school). I am very grateful for my education as I think it is the *transformative* ladder of opportunity in life. In fact I spent more time at university getting four degrees than 13 years in school! I have worked for 35 years as a human rights lawyer, with my interest probably sparked from growing up in Sydney's western suburbs where our neighbours in Guildford were refugees from Vietnam and Lebanon, who moved from nearby Villawood (now a detention centre), and witnessing firsthand the inequality they faced.

Universities were free in the 1970s-80s and the availability of Austudy's predecessor (TEAS) meant that working class people like myself could access higher education. I moved out of home when I was 20 years old to campus to avoid the daily three-hour commute to the University of Sydney. I had many part-time jobs to support myself – shop assistant (milk bar & pharmacy), usher at ABC classical music concerts, factory hand at Fairfax newspapers, tea lady, clerical assistant, and as a paralegal.

I did dream of working for the United Nations as a student and am glad I was able to achieve that goal 20 years ago, but I did not expect to one day be President of a Human Rights Commission, albeit a small one in the ACT (the Australian Human Rights Commission in Sydney is twice the size). I think that my determination and resilience comes from growing up in a disadvantaged and culturally diverse area – it has helped me to relate compassionately to people from varying backgrounds and earn their trust. I feel passionate about equality, and treating everyone with dignity and respect no matter what their background is. Prejudice unfairly blocks other peoples' opportunities, and are usually irrelevant to most areas of public

life, such as workplaces and service provision.

I am proud of working in partnership with ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body to convince the ACT Government to amend the ACT *Human Rights Act 2004* (first in Australia) in 2016 to include specific recognition of distinct cultural rights, using wording from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These rights make it clear that we all have a responsibility to protect, nurture and respect Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander culture including language and knowledge, kinship ties, spiritual practices and beliefs, and to respect and consult traditional owners who have an ongoing connection to the land, water and resources. We have a project called 'Respecting Rights' to bring s27(2) to life by showing the rich and distinctive nature of cultural rights, and educating communities to know how to assert cultural rights, & teaching ACT Government funded services how to respect them. Important implementation work to avoid the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system includes justice reinvestment, piloting 'Gladue' reports about an individual's culture for sentencing reports, which could be extended to care and protection cases so that children are not removed from families except as a last resort.

I want to highlight the need for respectful & balanced debate about marriage equality, as people have questions they want to talk about before posting their survey. The LGBTIQ community sees their exclusion from marriage as discriminatory, by being denied the benefits that community recognition brings to the stability of their committed relationship & family. Legal recognition brings more respect & a sense of belonging – it is established law in 25 countries. There is no doubt that exclusion, bigotry & condemnation of people because of their sexuality is seriously damaging to people's health & well-being. I've seen this first hand with my family, friends, & mentors, for example Michael Kirby J working on HIV/AIDS human rights issues since 1989. There is fracturing occurring in our community with extremists on both ends of the campaign spectrum - all parties need to show more respect and goodwill for each other's well-informed, and not ignorant, opinions.

I've learnt not to be afraid of controversy, as it is inevitable in recommending change for the better, whether it's the humane treatment of people in detention at the Alexander Maconochie Centre prison or Bimberi Youth Detention Centre, or the need for law or policy reform in areas such homelessness, family violence, gender diversity and mental health. Being

criticised in media can be a badge of honour for a human rights lawyer, especially when it's *The Australian* newspaper!

My advice on living human rights everyday, so you can contribute to society & make a difference is:

- treat people with compassion & dignity - don't show pity for disadvantaged people;
- be curious & involved in the community – have the courage to voice your opinion publicly when you believe our society is unfair, as this is how the case for change is built from the ground up.

Good luck in following your dreams: feel pride in your achievements recognised today in this famous Great Hall of Parliament House, and remember that the world is your oyster!