

Jimmy Barnes AO, Graduation Speech – Wednesday 28 September 2022

Good afternoon Chancellor, Distinguished Guests, University Staff and ... most of all ... the Graduands we're here to celebrate today.

You're probably thinking that it's a bit odd that I'm standing up here. I feel exactly the same way!

Usually if I'm on a stage in front of a microphone, the audience expects me to *scream* at them - but I'll spare you that. Instead, they've just given me an *honorary* degree, and some of you are graduating *with honours*, so I'd like to talk briefly about what "honour" actually means to me.

I was born in Cowcaddens, a working class suburb near the centre of Glasgow. Glasgow is a tough town. Billy Connolly once said "Where I come from, if you see a cat with a tail, it's a tourist". Not only was I born in a tough town but I came from a tough family. School seemed like a waste of time to them. The most they had to look forward to was a lifetime working in the ship yards. There was a lot of honour in hard work but at that time any jobs, even those in the shipyards were scarce. So my grandfather took up bare-knuckles fighting in the backstreets of Glasgow. Thirty or more brutal rounds, for not a lot of money. It was his way of earning respect. He'd come home battered and bruised with a pocket full of cash and buy breakfast for all the kids on the street before spending the rest of it at the pub. But for a moment he was a hero and that was HIS version of honour.

My Dad wasn't well educated, but he wanted to become a boxer too. In fact he eventually became the amateur featherweight champion of Scotland. He didn't want to turn professional because the sport was too corrupt – it was *dishonourable*. So when the time came for him to hang up his gloves and leave the noble art of boxing, he took a job as an enforcer for the local gangsters – they always say that there's *honour* among thieves but I'm not sure about that. So that was probably the future my dad saw for me. Using my fists to smash down the doors that always seemed to be slamming in our faces.

Luckily when I was five we left Glasgow and emigrated to Adelaide, and after living in various migrant hostels we finally settled in Elizabeth. Initially primary school was just a place to escape the violence at home. But I was like a sponge. I wanted to learn and grow to be a better person. But it didn't take long until I felt doomed to the same dead end as my parents and grandparents. Living day to day, hand to mouth. Struggling to make ends meet and then giving up and disappearing. I lost hope and interest in school. All I heard was "hurry up and finish and get a job". ANY job. Apparently that was as much honour as people like us deserved. So I quit school midway through year ten and pumped petrol for a while until I found an apprenticeship pouring molten metal and daydreaming about being somewhere else. I got in with the wrong crowd and started fighting, drinking, and taking drugs - trying not to feel the pain that burned inside of me.

I remember walking past a university not so far from here around that time, wondering what it was like to be a student there. But that was only for good people – honourable people. I was the other kind. The kind that couldn't get through the front gate. So eventually I jumped over the wall. Literally. My friends and I jumped the fence that surrounded that University to see a rock concert. And while my friends were prowling the grounds looking for trouble, I was looking through windows, secretly imagining what it would have been like to have the honour of studying there.

As it turned out I was one of the lucky ones. I wasn't destined to end up in gaol like a lot of my friends. I met a bunch of young guys who had plans. They wanted to BE something. They wanted to make music that touched people's souls. Soon their dream became my dream too.

Music transported us all to a better place. It might sound corny but music literally set us free. Later I met my wife Jane and life changed even more. She loved poetry and literature and couldn't believe that I had missed out on so much of it. She wanted to share it all with me. When I was in my early 20's she even gave me a copy of "Shakespeare for Children" by Charles and Mary Lamb! This was a whole new world, I loved it and every time Jane gave me a new book, I wrote a song or a story. Over the years I found that the more I read, the more I was inspired and the more the world started to make sense. Maybe things didn't HAVE to stay the same for me as they had for my dad and granddad? Maybe there were other lives that I could lead?

Eventually lots of professional honours came my way, gold record, plaques, statues, awards. I was grateful for all of them but they never really changed the way I felt about myself. Finally, about six years ago I realized I had to deal with my past if I wanted a better future. I couldn't do it alone. With the help of a great therapist and the understanding of a beautiful family I started to make sense of all I'd been through. So I started writing it down. It was painful but with every page I felt a bit lighter. Eventually I sat with a final manuscript for my first book Working Class Boy. For a moment I thought: "No, burn it! It's not that good!". Old habits die hard. But I had to let those habits go and release the book. And the act of letting go changed my life once and for all.

So ... yes ... it's a bit odd that I'm standing up here today, but not just for all the obvious reasons.

In Elizabeth – and Glasgow – the only degree we knew was the third degree. Our options for "honour" in life were limited and distorted so lots of us decided to run away. Some of you will know what I'm talking about there. Many of you won't. But I guess what I'm trying to say is that I now understand that, despite this magnificent occasion, an "honour" is not actually something that can be bestowed on you by somebody else. It is a feeling we all have to cultivate within ourselves. We have to create honour in our lives each day by what we do, what we create and how we treat others. Honour can't really be put in a frame or hung on a wall – it's something you have to grow inside yourself through bloody hard work. Caps and gowns are great but they're mere symbols of something much more grand.

So congratulations to each and every one of you. The honours you receive today recognize what you are capable of achieving when you refuse to accept anyone's limitations. May you continue to strive for that kind of honour in all that you do over the years ahead.

And finally thank you to the University of South Australia for granting me this honour. I accept it on behalf of the petrol pumpers, metal moulders and auto workers of Elizabeth who weren't lucky enough to escape. May their children and grandchildren have an opportunity to enter this great institution through the front gate, instead of having to jump over a wall.

Thank you.