

Graduation Speech – Damien Judd
Whyalla – Friday 10 May 2024

Thank you for the introduction and the opportunity to speak today and I also acknowledge the Barngala people whose land we are celebrating on today and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Normally when I stand to talk to groups of people they are school aged and the people in the audience are the parents of the school aged students. Today is clearly a tad different. And normally I am not wearing this outfit either when talking to the students. But there are schools that do have their staff wear the formal gowns like this when they have assemblies and events. It would seem quite odd to some of us in Whyalla to see myself or my deputy principal stand at an assembly wearing a mortar board and gown. But there are good reasons why these schools choose to have their senior staff wear their gowns and mortar boards. Aside from acknowledging the fact that principal (and the other senior staff) have worked hard to get where they are and have completed further tertiary study (and in the case of Catholic School principals, they must have completed or at least started their Masters Degree in Leadership in order to be appointed), but aside from that reason another reason they wear this garb is about aspiration.

Aspiration is an important, subtle yet powerful quality. Something as simple as showing, by some pieces of clothing, that the person speaking has done this and that in order to achieve highly in their chosen field can impact so many even without words being spoken.

At some point, whether very recently or several years ago, all of you sitting here today aspired to do something extra in your life or to work in a specialised field and that aspiration led to studying at University and ultimately at the University of South Australia Whyalla Campus. For some of you this aspiration started at school and for some it has come a little while after you left secondary school. And for some of you this aspiration has come multiple times and this qualification you are receiving today, may not be your first.

Aspiration can also be hidden amongst dreams or family tradition or what your mates are doing – either way it is all still aspiration that has led you here today.

And that aspiration will continue to drive you. To have taken this step to complete a qualification from the University of South Australia (even if not your first) shows you are keen to learn, keen to improve yourself and keen to try something different. All of those attributes will continue to drive you for the rest of your lives. All coming from a simple burst of aspiration to want to do or be something.

As part of my job as a Principal I chat with incoming students at an enrolment interview. Depending on their age, I ask them if they have had any thoughts about what they would like to do when they finish school. For some students they take that question as what they would like to do at 3.30pm on that day i.e. when they finish school. But for those that know it is a question about their future, I get quite an array of responses. Many haven't really thought about it – many are still 11-12 years old at this point, but for those that do have an answer for me, they are often very quick and firm in their responses. Some tell me they want to be a nurse or a teacher or an electrician or drive trucks. For many this answer may change ten times before they finish school but already they have aspiration. That aspiration will drive them.

Where you are different to many when it comes to aspiration and dreams is that you did something about it. As you well know, it isn't a walk in the park when it comes to tertiary education let alone getting to the final point of finishing the qualification. For those who studied straight of our school there would be the temptation of stopping with the essays and assignments and grades – but you applied, fronted up again and started a whole new version of school all over again. Some of you came back to study after a break – whether it was a break from school or break from other study – either way it was still a significant decision to decide to study again.

I started my Masters degree at a time when my wife and I were having our first children. It seemed odd at the time to choose to do a Masters degree then – which back then – meant face to face sessions on weekends several times a year in Adelaide all whilst working full time. The internet was literally in its early years and online classes were still a pipe dream. So it was a big commitment but I had aspirations to lead a school and knew the steps that needed to be taken. As it turned out, who knew that 2am was a great time to write 1500 word essays whilst a one year old lay asleep on the floor after a 1.30am feed.

Those challenges of doing that at 2am pale into significance when compared to what challenges some of you have faced to get on this stage today. For some of you study or reading books or writing essays or doing practicums are the most terrifying things you could think of. Some of you did this whilst still supporting your family or working part time or even travelling to access some of the resources needed for your course. All of this shows the power of aspiration. The power to move to another town to complete a prac or working til 11pm three nights a week to pay for this or put food on the family table. Today, therefore is also a celebration of the that – not just the mental nous to complete a tertiary qualification but the sacrifices made to be here at all. If you are someone looking at me now thinking you didn't do squat to get this degree and let ChatGPT do it all for you, then perhaps just keep that information to yourself and smile politely!!

So to the graduates, this parchment is a step. You know full well your aspirations didn't just involve getting a degree and then do nothing with it. You now move, as most you already have, into using that degree or qualification. Whether it be for work or further study and research, you now have the taste for improving yourself and extending yourself even further and the opportunities to meet even more of your aspirational goals. More doors now open for you because of today.

Congratulations on this special day and I wish you well in your ongoing careers.