

## **ADDRESS TO CLAYFIELD COLLEGE SPEECH NIGHT**

**28 October 1998**

***JUSTICE MARGARET WILSON***

**Mr Rae, Mr Kettmiss, PMSA Councillors, Mr Secomb and Dr Pitman, Mrs Hauff, Mr Bernard, Members of the Staff, Students, Parents and Friends of Clayfield College –**

**I am delighted to be with you this evening.**

Clayfield College will always be a special place for me. I started here in year 2, when my sister was in year 11. I remember Speech Days being held here in this building, when it was the old Savoy Theatre. In those days the function was held on the last afternoon of the school year.

I do appreciate the warmth of the welcome the school always gives me.

**Speech Night is the occasion to celebrate the achievements of Clayfield Collegians over the last year.**

Not everyone excels academically or on the sports field, but everyone has strengths as well as weaknesses, and we are all indebted to Mrs Hauff and her staff at Clayfield College for truly giving every pupil the opportunity to let her or his light shine.

Every student deserves to be congratulated for what she or he has achieved over the last year.

### **What is education all about?**

As students we all came to Clayfield College to be educated – not just to acquire information, but to acquire learning skills that we could use for the rest of our lives. As the American educationalist Professor Jacob Neusner has said, “Learning takes place through discovery, not when you’re told something but when you figure it out for yourself.”<sup>1</sup>

In return for the guidance, stimulation and constructive criticism of their teachers, students must allow their teachers to teach, they must work consistently, and they must actively participate in the discovery process rather than sitting back and waiting to be told things.

### **As women you can achieve.**

Those of you who have just completed Year 12 are probably feeling mixed emotions tonight – a certain sadness at leaving the familiar warmth and security of the school community, an eager anticipation of the freedoms and opportunities which you see in the adult world, and perhaps a little nervousness about whether you are making the right choices about your future directions and whether you will achieve your goals.

Today, young women have a far greater array of choices open to them than ever before. Thanks to education, family planning, technological and commercial changes, many young women can choose whether to be full-time wives and mothers, or to combine full-time or part-time careers outside the home with family commitments. For some, there is no choice – financial pressures dictate that they undertake paid employment.

It is important that we all respect the choices made by others, and that those who choose careers outside the home do not disparage the fulltime homemakers. There will always be women, even those with high qualifications, who choose to devote themselves fulltime to their families. That they can make such a conscious choice should be seen as a plus and not a minus.

In this country there is now very little difference in the educational opportunities for young men and women. At universities and other tertiary institutions women are excelling in all faculties. However, after graduation, many young women still find that the paths to success in their chosen fields are strewn with more obstacles than their male colleagues have to overcome. This is often partly a function of trying to juggle the competing demands of childrearing and career in a society where women still have the primary responsibilities for childcare, and partly a function of lingering attitudes held by some men and some other women.

Those of you who want to pursue careers should not be deterred by this. You can and will succeed with a combination of ability, tenacity of purpose, discernment, and the support and encouragement of loved ones.

Women have striven for equality of opportunity. You should aim to succeed on your merits, and hope to be judged on your merits, although in fields of endeavour until now largely the preserve of men there is still a tendency to make women conscious of their identity as women. Charlotte Bronte felt this almost 150 years ago when she said –

“I wish critics would judge me as an author, and not as a woman.”<sup>2</sup>

Women shouldn't, and don't, want preferment simply because we are women. That can only cause criticism and resentment, and make it harder for other women. You'll need to be alert to these undercurrents, and to devise your own strategies for dealing with them.

You should never underestimate your own potential. Recently I read an article entitled *Do women judges really make a difference? The American experience.*<sup>3</sup> The author canvassed a wide variety of opinions and commented that while there have been many positive changes over the last 30 years, society still has a long way to go. She concluded by drawing inspiration from the story of *The Little Engine That Could*,<sup>4</sup> the little blue engine that pulled the train over the mountain after several larger, more powerful engines had refused to help. Last year a cartoon appeared in *The New Yorker* showing a teacher reading the book to her class. “Ánd let's remember, children,” she told them, “that *The Little Engine That Could* was a locomotive of the female gender.” If you go back to the book, you'll find that the cartoonist was correct: it was a female locomotive!

## **Change and adaptability**

I imagine that the vast majority of those finishing school this year will go on to some form of tertiary or vocational training.

Technology is evolving so fast that it would be unrealistic to think that 10 years after you complete your courses the jobs you trained for will necessarily still be there.

It is likely that the restructuring, re-engineering and downsizing that we have seen in recent years will become permanent features of the employment landscape. They will affect professional people and other members of the white collar workforce as well as the blue collar workforce.

Throughout your working lives you will always need to be flexible and ready to adapt to change; you will have to upgrade your skills frequently if you are not to slip behind. You will constantly need to invoke the learning skills which your teachers at Clayfield College have imparted.

## **Principles of community life**

As members of the Clayfield College community you have been part of a network of values and relationships that has supported and nourished your lives. The tolerance, moderation and balancing of individual rights and freedoms with personal responsibility and mutual obligations which you have learnt in the Clayfield College

community will stand by you as you go forth into the wider community, where you can expect to become part of wider networks of relationships.

I trust you will find happiness and fulfilment in whatever you choose to do.

Thank you for asking me to be with you this evening.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Neusner, "Professor Jacob Neusner Defines the Social Contract between Teacher and Student," in *Lend Me Your Ears – Great Speeches in History*, ed. William Safire (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992) pp 942-946.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Bronte, *Letter to George Henry Lewes*, 19 January 1850.

<sup>3</sup> Shirley S. Abrahamson, "Do Women Judges Really make a Difference? The American Experience," in *Women in Law*, Ed. Shiman Shetreet (London: Kluwer Law International, 1998) pp 195-216.

<sup>4</sup> W. Piper, *The Little Engine That Could* (1930).