

BRISBANE GIRLS GRAMMAR SPEECH DAY ADDRESS: 2007

Ms Jameson, Chair of the Board of Trustees and other Trustees, the Principal Ms Bell and members of staff, families and friends of students, students and most importantly Seniors 007. May I also acknowledge the traditional owners who have lived, learnt and celebrated on the land on which we meet.

I was walking down Adelaide Street just outside here last week, lost in thoughts about what I might say to you today, when I saw a girl in front of me with “Seniors 007” emblazoned on her back. How well I remember my last day at Girls’ Grammar. A day of liberation, joy and adventure but what I can’t remember is who spoke to us at Speech Night, as it was then, or what they said. No doubt at the age of 16, as I was, I would have regarded any advice given as likely to be seriously old fashioned, completely out of touch and unlikely to be of any use to me. We were after all the baby-boomer generation who could hardly imagine why any one would want to be alive after the age of 30. Well we lived beyond 30 (most of us) and discovered why you would want to live beyond 30 and indeed why that was even more fun than being under 30.

We were impatient, arrogant, and we thought we knew everything. So I was a little daunted when I realised that this was the audience many years later that I would be speaking to today.

What does your future hold? And is there anything that someone like me can say to young women as diverse as you are that might give you a heads up for your futures.

After all I confidently anticipate that in this audience there may well be a future Chief Justice of Australia, a future Prime Minister or Premier, CEOs of major business organisations, a Nobel Peace Prize Winner, a Nobel Laureate in science or medicine, a Booker or Archibald Prize winner, perhaps the Secretary-General of the United Nations. So here for what it's worth is the best advice I can give to you.

With all due respect to Heath Ledger and Julia Stiles¹, these are

The 10 things I've learnt about life.

1. Always take up opportunities offered to you.

Being a judge is not easy. There are a lot of responsibilities to the community as well as to the individuals who appear before you. So in 2005 when I was toiling away, I hardly expected someone from the Human Rights Institute of the International Bar Association in London to contact me and ask if I would be part of a small group of international lawyers who would go to the Middle East in the next month to talk to a group of Iraqi judges about international human rights law norms and their practical application by judges in Iraq. Of course I was uncertain. It would be dangerous, I would have to prepare a number of lectures, I would have to become familiar with the history of the legal and judicial systems in Iraq, and I would have to present the material in a way that was accessible to a very sophisticated non-English speaking, Arabic and Muslim group made up almost entirely of men. And all of this as a volunteer. But I didn't hesitate because my rule is say "yes" to new opportunities if I think I can do it even if it will be hard and it will take me out of my comfort zone. It's a good rule: it was fascinating and I learned such a lot about the aspirations of the people of Iraq and the judges who work in such difficult conditions.

¹ Stars of the film *Ten Things I Hate About You*, itself based on Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*.

This brings me to my second rule:

2. The harder I worked, the luckier I got.

When I was studying law, people often said to me how lucky I was that I did so well academically. I smiled to myself and thought of the many, many hours of painstaking note taking, reading, summarising and synthesising that I undertook. It was certainly true as Sam Goldwyn is reputed to have said, that the harder I worked the luckier I seemed to get.

3. Success in life is not just about using your strengths; it's about using your weaknesses as well.

We all have strengths that help us get through life; but we also have weaknesses. Sometimes it's your weaknesses or what other people perceive as your weaknesses that actually help you to find your way in life. When I was at school I was often in trouble: I talked too much, I voiced my opinions, I failed to wear matching ribbons in my pigtails and I even skipped gym forever after I decided it was not for me. Ironically all of those qualities that got me into trouble at school have helped me in life. Lest I get too big for my boots, however, I was reminded fairly recently of those years when a Minister of the Crown began to introduce me at a public function to one of my old Grammar teachers. I demurred saying that I knew her as she had taught me. "I remember you", she said. I smiled nervously. "And a very naughty girl you were too" she said shaking her finger at me and putting me very firmly in my place. But having plenty to say and expressing opinions have been integral to my professional career. Perhaps not going to the gym and having messy hair have been less helpful. So use your weaknesses as well as your strengths. And don't be too hard on yourself. We all have weaknesses.

4. Always remember who you are.

You are not the sum total of other people's opinion of you. From time to time you will be disliked and criticised. The only way to get through all that is to be centred and have a sense of humour about yourself. No matter how important or famous you may become, you are just yourself. You only have to look at the personal disintegration of celebrities like Britney Spears to see how important it is to have a strong sense of self which is not based on others' perceptions of you. Be honest and true to yourself and you should be able to get through almost anything.

5. Take care for others particularly those who don't have your advantages.

This goes from the smallest to the highest. Many of you will have experience of helping out younger students in your house or in the school. That mentoring role is important and is one you should maintain. Others will mentor you in your career: don't be afraid to ask, people are usually very generous, and in return you can mentor those behind you and then take pride in their achievements. But you should also strive to make the world a better place for those who don't have your advantages. Make a special point of using your skills and abilities to help others – from volunteering at a community centre to going to war zones with Medecin sans Frontières. You should make the effort to find these opportunities.

While Britney and Fergie are wasting their privileged lives, others like Beyonce Knowles, formerly of Destiny's Child, have heavily involved themselves in philanthropic work. She co-founded the Survivor Foundation to help the victims of the social dislocation that followed the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. It doesn't hurt to have ideals and to be kind to yourself and others.

6. You only get one life. Don't be afraid to have big ambitions (but maybe keep them to yourself).

You have the capacity to leave the world a better place than you found it. Don't have small ambitions for yourself. If you have dreams, follow them. If they don't work out, you can always do something else. I always wanted to be an actor so I saved up, went to drama school in England, and started a small professional theatre company with a group of like-minded people. As it turned out, I found it a bit boring and not nearly challenging enough to devote my life to – but if I hadn't tried, I would have regretted it. I was then able to wholeheartedly embrace a different life as a lawyer, a career I enjoyed much more, and where I could make a real difference to people's lives.

7. Never forget who loves you.

You are surrounded by those people today. Don't forget that they will provide you with love and support when things go pear shaped, which they will from time to time.

You are not on your own. Make sure those who love you are not on their own.

8. Get out of toxic relationships.

A great relationship is a wonderful thing in life but a poor, destructive relationship is not better than none at all. Make sure you look after yourself.

9. Have fun.

You may not need much encouragement particularly over the coming weeks but life is meant to be enjoyable.

10. There is no rule number 10: always keep a few surprises up your sleeve. Or perhaps it's more correct to say I'm still learning so there is no number 10 **yet**.

My warm congratulations for your many achievements in 2007: students, teachers and parents; and my best wishes to you all for a fabulous 2008.