

Justice Applegarth - Brisbane State High School Graduation Ceremony

Mr Principal, our local member of Parliament, Ms Trad, Councillor Abrahams, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen and especially the graduating class of 2012.

In 1975 I spent a lot of time thinking about my hair. Of course, I thought about the Cold War, the possibility of nuclear annihilation, whether the reformist federal government would stay in office, how fast Jeff Thomson could bowl, Macbeth, the causes of the first world war, calculus and the general gas law. But most of all, I spent Grade 12 thinking about my hair.

My greatest fear was that a teacher would tell me to get it cut. At home, things were not much better. My mother told me how ridiculous I looked, and how, if I didn't get my hair cut, I would live to regret it, and one day realize how ridiculous I looked.

Well that day is today. A picture is worth a thousand words. As you can see, I look ridiculous, and my mother was right.

The point of this story is: always remember the remote possibility that your parent (and by that I mean your parent, your guardian and other people who really care for you) may be right in their advice. Feel free to reject their advice, and follow the hairstyle of your choice, but always consider the possibility that they may be right.

Follow your dreams

On occasions like this it is customary to tell graduating classes to follow your dreams. Steve Jobs did this at Stanford University. J K Rowling did so at Harvard. I cannot improve on their advice. You should listen to it. And I cannot improve on the advice, falsely attributed to Kurt Vonnegut, but in fact written by a journalist about an imaginary graduation class speech:

“Wear sunscreen: If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it. The long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proved by scientists, whereas the rest of my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience.”

The fact you didn't make the State High team doesn't mean you can't play

The fact that you didn't make the State High netball team does not mean that you can't play netball. The fact you didn't make the first XV doesn't mean you can't play football. You can swim, and may become an even better swimmer than you are now, even though you didn't swim for State High. The same goes for the orchestra, the physics team and every other thing you didn't try to do at State High, or tried to do and didn't make the team.

By the way, one of the people in the back row of that photo of the 1975 team and the captain in 1977 is Wally Lewis, and when he was winning awards as the best footballer of his era in the 1980's, he paid tribute to Mr Jim Lucey, his State High Coach for having made him the footballer he was. I hope that, in time, you'll appreciate more than you perhaps realize today what a debt you owe your State High teachers.

Surprise yourself this summer

You may have an idea of what you are going to do in the next few weeks, the next few months and next year, depending on whether you get that job or make the grade for further study. But spend a minute now, and a few minutes later today thinking about doing something different this Summer. You may have put the tennis racket or a musical instrument away years ago. You may have given up a language, or made a subject selection and never studied something that may interest you.

There may be a song or story in your heart waiting to be written this Summer.

Anyway, set yourself the challenge of thinking about something new to do, and try to do it before February. You may surprise yourself, and others, at how good you are.

Equality

At State High, I became friends with a remarkable group of individuals, whose friendship I have carried into later life. We came from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds, and benefited from the opportunity to be taught by devoted and inspiring teachers.

The federal government had abolished university fees to encourage access to universities by gifted students from the working class. The rhetoric of the time was one of equality of opportunity, and at State High these opportunities were on offer.

One of my friends, Victor Boyko, caught the Greyhound bus from Browns Plains to school each day. His working class parents were refugees from the Soviet Union, who had experienced the tyranny of both Communism and Nazism. Victor was the captain of the school team on the “It’s Academic” TV show. He was a brilliant student and later served his country here and in refugee camps overseas in senior positions in the Department of Immigration. He died tragically young, but he saw much of the world, including travelling with his brother through the former Soviet Union from which his parents and grandparents had fled to find a better life in Australia. State High provided the opportunity for that better life, and Victor took full advantage of that opportunity. His story is a distinctly State High story.

In such an environment, people were not judged by the wealth, class, religion or ethnicity of their parents. We were inspired to strive to reach our potential not from the promise of personal reward in later life, but because this was the ethos of the school.

Later when studying law, I came across a similar sentiment in the writings of the great legal scholar Ronald Dworkin, who identified two principles that citizens should share. The first is that **every human life is intrinsically and equally valuable**. Secondly, he argues that **each person has a personal responsibility for realizing his or her own potential**. Dworkin says that an individual must take his or own life seriously, and accept that “it is a matter of importance that **their life be a successful performance rather than a wasted opportunity**.”

Find work that you love

Steve Jobs told the graduating class at Stanford:

“Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to **do what you believe is great work**. And the only way to do great work is to **love what you do**. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it.”

This is a work by Cynthia Breusch, a brilliant artist, who I knew at State High, and who kindly sent to me this image to display to you today. Her work is what she loves to do.

One of my classmates, Julie Tolmie, was awarded a Doctorate in Mathematical Sciences, and is a visualization expert. She works on the visualisation of relationships across a broad range of disciplines. It might be the complex relationships between participants in the Biofuels Industry in Europe. Here are some examples of her work. They are quite beautiful. They are the product of someone who loves their work.

You can do two or more things at once

You will have more than one career. Some of my fellow judges were school teachers or actors before they became lawyers. They pursued their dreams, and that is what counts.

Even if you do not find satisfying work, do things that you love outside work. And remember you can do two or more things at once. You just have to manage your time. It is possible to be a professional footballer and study at University at the same time. That great coach and great man, Wayne Bennet, once told me that, so it must be true.

And remember, the fact that you didn't make the State High team, or get a prize at the awards day does not stand in the path of your success. At my 20 year school reunion, there were people who were multi-millionaires living in mansions by the harbour in Sydney who never made a team or topped their class. But they had the advantage of a State High education, and were brave enough to pursue opportunities.

Find a good mentor

I owe a lot to my parents, and to State High and to my teachers. I also owe a lot to people who mentored me. Like most people of my generation, including most judges, none of my family had been to university. My father left State High at the age of 15 to start work. He was a brilliant sportsman, who was in the First XV, the First XI and was the GPS Sprint Champion. I was never going to come close to matching his feats. He didn't complete senior because he came from a working class family. My mother topped the State in the final year of primary school, then Grade 8, in what was called the Scholarship Exam. But she did not

go to State High because most women of her generation were expected to become secretaries, and that is what she became. She is much brighter than I am. My parents' generation did not aspire to a tertiary education. Most left school at 15 or even younger.

I had never met a lawyer when I started studying law. But I had some great mentors, who helped me.

So try to find good mentors. Do not be afraid to e-mail, or better still, actually write and sign a letter to someone who you admire. Be brave enough to speak to them if you see them in the street: tell them that you admire their work, and say that you would love a few minutes of their valuable time. If you flatter them enough and sound enthusiastic enough, they may just give it. If they don't, you've only wasted the cost of a stamp.

One reason potential mentors will give you their time and free advice is that they see in you, something they once were.

Think of where you have come from in the last 5 years

In the audience today are Grade 7 students. Like you, full of promise, and possibly full of apprehension about the next stage of their lives. Look in their eyes and think about what you were like 5 years ago. Picture yourself then. Think of how you have developed as a person, courtesy of this public school, its values, your teachers and your peers.

Some of your best work will be done in the next five years

Think of the trajectory of your last five years, and try to continue it for the next five.

Of course, you can vegetate for the next few weeks. You deserve it. You may even have a gap year, but make sure it does not turn into a gap decade.

At my advanced age, I still have heroes. Many of them are serving judges, and I won't embarrass them or myself by naming them.

Let me mention one of my heroes, who recently retired as Chief Justice of NSW. His name is James Spigelman. He is Chair of the ABC. You might think that to reach those heights he must have gone to a private school, but he went to an elite public school in Sydney just like State High. He didn't speak English when he came to this country. His family were refugees. He went on to work for a Prime Minister, write a book about the nuclear power industry, be a top barrister and become a Chief Justice. He achieved great success, and it is wonderful to live in a country where leaders can come from such a background.

As a 19 year old University student, Spigelman led freedom rides through country NSW confronting racism and the exclusion of Aborigines from public facilities, like swimming pools and cinemas. The basic objective of the student group was to expose discrimination against Aborigines through publicity, and it was very successful.

On an occasion like this when he was speaking to his old school, Mr Spigelman said:

“it may well be that the most important thing I have ever done, was what I did then at nineteen.”

I feel the same about my life. As proud as I am of my professional achievements, the things that I am most proud of were done as a member of the civil liberties council when I was 19. I had no money. I had no letters after my name, but I was brave enough, with others like me, to confront abuses of power and defend human dignity. I think I was brave at the time because of the values I believed in.

The values I believed in then, and now, about liberty, equality and fraternity were taught to me by teachers at this school, and they were also a lived experience. I saw in my friends, like Victor, what equality of opportunity could deliver.

And so it may be that the best things that you will ever do will be done in the next 5 years. Don't waste those years. Be brave. Follow your dreams. And with the values that you have acquired at this school, and the opportunities it has given you, may your life be a successful performance.

16 November 2012