

Commemoration Address 12.10.18

Firstly, what an honour it is to be invited to speak to you today.

I remember back to my days of attending Commemoration Day Celebrations. Often the speaker would be a former student who had achieved significant academic success at school.

I need to disclose at the outset, that I am not one of those students.

I am hopeful that by telling my story today I can speak to the ideals of attitude, self-belief and determination over A's and OPs.

Academic achievement at school does not define you, nor does it determine your destiny. It is just a step along a journey, your journey.

To demonstrate this let me share my story:

I knew that I had not done particularly well at school, so the other day I went in search of my senior certificate (yes I still have it):

English – Sound Achievement (c)

Mathematics 1 – Limited Achievement (d)

Chemistry- Limited Achievement (d)

Biological Science – Sound Achievement (c)

Speech and Drama – High Achievement (b)

Physics (which I only did for one Semester) – Low Achievement (d)

This was me trying, I was not just being slack, I was putting in effort!

Not sure what I was thinking by my subject choices! Clearly I was not going to be a scientist.

I received a TE score of 725, which I have been told is probably equivalent to an OP of 18-20.

On finishing school I was encouraged by my parents to get a job and to start earning some money. They were successful small business owners who did not particularly value tertiary education. Nursing was appealing in this regard because back in those days you 'learned on the job' and got paid for it. It was like an apprenticeship.

So I headed off to start my nursing training at the Ipswich Hospital.

It was such a culture shock, as I really did not know what nurses did. I had not undertaken any work experience. I had a very weak stomach and would dry reach when a patient was vomiting, and was worse with other body secretions! I saw my first dead person, in my first placement while I was still 17. I managed to get over these 'shocks' and learned to somehow control my weak stomach and went on to really enjoy nursing.

I have some incredibly fond memories of those days and lots of very funny stories, many which are not appropriate to share in this forum today. One though which stands out is when I gave my first injection to a real person, instead of an orange (yes we used to practice on oranges). As you can image, I was very nervous – with all the confidence I could muster I went in to the patient and did all my mandatory

checks, as I inserted the needle, the elderly lady starting singing 'amazing grace' – while I knew she had a history of confusion, I certainly was not expecting that.

On completing my nursing training I went to work at the Wesley Hospital for 10 years. When hospital based nursing training was stopped and became a degree based program, hospital based nurses had the chance to do a bridging degree. While working full time, I did two subjects a semester and completed my degree.

I had enjoyed study so again while working full time as a nurse educator. I completed a graduate diploma in Further Education and Training. Again I was working full time and studying part time.

I was doing well in my nursing career and by this time had moved to St Andrews War Memorial Hospital as a Nursing Unit Manager. I had been asked to act up in a higher position as the Assistant Director of Nursing (ADON) for the medical and surgical division (covering 10 wards). At that time I thought I wanted to continue up in the nursing hierarchy and had commenced studying a Master of Business Administration but just as I started, a life-changing event occurred.

While acting ADON over the Christmas period in 2001, I got a call that a patient had been overdosed on a drug called Methotrexate. The drug should have been administered every third day but it had been mistakenly been given over three consecutive days. She was an elderly lady who was immunosuppressed and we knew that she was going to die but that it would take days. It was a difficult time. I was dealing with the family, nurses, doctors and hospital administrators.

I vividly remember being interviewed by the hospital lawyers over the patient's death. It was at this time that I had a light bulb moment. I remembered the law subject I had done in my nursing degree and suddenly thought I wanted to be on the other side of the table, not the nursing administrator trying to explain a tragic mistake.

My friends and family thought I was a bit mad. I remember my father saying, "you nearly failed English at school how do you think you are going to be able to do law?". I though just knew from everything I had learnt about myself up to that time that I could do it. I think my Somerville days had something to do with that – it had been instilled in us that we could achieve what we wanted if we put our minds to it.

So still working full time as a Nursing Unit Manager, I enrolled in two subjects of my law degree. I achieved distinctions. I then took up a casual nursing position. I became a full time university student for the first time in my life at the age of 30. Something I truly relished but it meant that I had to sell my house and move in with a friend to be able to 'survive'. I literally had no money and remember having to scrape together loose change to be able to go out on a Friday night. A common experience amongst many uni students today but the difference being my age.

I quickly found a passion for the law.

So - going back to the part of my story where the patient died, I ended up being a witness in the coronial inquest (a formal court hearing where the Coroner, a Magistrate [senior lawyer] is examining the circumstances of death and considering recommendation to prevent similar deaths occurring in the future). I kept in touch with the law firm who represented the hospital at the inquest and became their first mature age graduate.

After a number of years of working for the firm I became an in house lawyer with the Department of Emergency Services mainly working with the Queensland Ambulance Service. During this time, I met an inspiring female barrister who encouraged me to fulfil my potential. She said to me, 'if I can do it, so can you'. She went on to be an incredible mentor and friend and now is the managing Magistrate at Southport.

Becoming a barrister is not an easy decision, particularly for a woman. At the time I joined the Brisbane private Bar in 2011, only around 13% of barristers were women, it is now approximately 25%. We are all self-employed and in effect run our own business. Our clients are solicitors and if we do not have solicitors briefing us we cannot succeed.

Thankfully I have been able to build a very loyal client base and successful practice. I principally defend hospitals, doctors and nurses; and appear in coronial inquests. I have had the opportunity to act in some very high profile matters, you may have heard of some of them:

- The inquest into the deaths of the three young men who were electrocuted while installing insulation as part of the Commonwealth government home insulation scheme set up by Kevin Rudd;
- The inquest into Australia's worst house fire where 11 members of the one family were killed;
- The inquest into the death of the first child to die in Australia from swallowing a lithium battery;

In November this year I am Counsel Assisting the Northern Coroner in the triple parachuting deaths, which occurred at Mission Beach last year.

It certainly has been quite a journey!

On reflecting on my journey, I will leave it to you as to whether anything resonates. However, I would like to provide some thoughts for you to ponder:

- Run your own race, life is not a sprint but a marathon – you may not be ready for university, you may not know what you want to do and that is okay
- Seek out mentors who can advise and support you on your journey [it is that person you can ring at any time in a panic who can calm you down and point you in the right direction], I have many and now am a mentor to others
- Find something that you are passionate about. There is nothing worse than going to work everyday just to pay the bills. We all have choices, be brave and take risks. Aim to find that thing that fulfils you. You may not find it on the first, second or third attempt, but in my view it is important you find it.
- Be grateful and be thankful for all the good things in your life. Be self-compassionate (we all have incessant mental chatter going on in our heads, mostly chastising and getting angry at ourselves – when you learn to speak to yourself as you would a best friend, life becomes so much easier).
- Treasure your friendships. To be honest the gift of Somerville to me was not what happened within the classroom but the relationships I formed and continue to form. The old girls network cannot be under estimated. Men have

being using their networks for years. It is amazing when you meet an old girl there is an instant connection and a special camaraderie. I encourage you to embrace this network of amazing women!

So in closing, I hope that I have been able to leave you even with just one thought you can take with you into your future. Remember your end of school results do not define you, you do through your attitude, your self-belief and your determination. I wish you all the best in your future journey, whatever it may be.

Melinda Zerner
Old Girl
1982-1986