

Occasional Address by Gabrielle Trainor

UWS Graduation ceremony, School of Humanities and Communications Arts

Parramatta Campus, University of Western Sydney

April 16, 2013

I thank the Chancellor, the Vice Chancellor and the members of the University for inviting me here to participate in this great day for all of you and for your families. It is a privilege.

I am fortunate to be here today wearing a few different hats – first, as a student. After graduating from my first degree in 1978, (I was an infant), I am presently enrolled in a MA in Cultural and Creative Practice here at UWS and I am enjoying it immensely. Secondly, I am a recent appointment to the Board of Trustees here at UWS. Thirdly, I am a member of the board of the Whitlam Institute within UWS – our office is just over there at the Female Orphans School. And another hat –more of a cap, I suppose, is as a director of the GWS Giants Aussie Rules Football Club, whose development team is the UWS Giants. But more of that later.

An occasional speaker is obliged to say a few things. But the speech must be short. And that's very hard for a former lawyer, but I will try to be restrained.

First, I want not only to congratulate you graduates, but also your families and friends who have walked with you on your journey to this moment today. They've encouraged you, made you cups of coffee, occasionally let you sleep in, kept you company on those long nights before the big essays are due, crossed their fingers as you set off to do an exam. For most people, a degree or diploma involves their whole family. For many of you who are graduating today, this will be the first such ceremony for your family. So you should all celebrate. It is a significant achievement. You should store the memory of this day for a long time to come.

My generation, the beneficiaries of free tertiary education from Gough Whitlam, were mostly the first of our families to graduate. In March 1972, Gough said: “The use we make of our lives and the contribution we make to the life of our nation is governed increasingly by education.” It was true then, and it’s true now. Education, including higher education, belongs to all of us who have the application and the ability. And it’s incumbent on the community, on government and on universities themselves to make sure we continue to have the opportunity for university education, that it remains accessible to us.

Last week, I was in Canberra for the announcement of the Charlie Perkins scholars for this year. Charlie Perkins was an indigenous activist who fought for justice and the first aboriginal man to graduate from Sydney University, back in 1965. He later became the first aboriginal to become permanent head of a federal Government Department. You may know of his two wildly talented daughters – Rachel, who is a film maker, who recently made *The Sapphires* and Hetti, who is an accomplished art curator. A trust has been set up in his name to provide scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge Universities in England. Two and a half years ago, there were no indigenous students studying full time at these two most famous universities. Within a couple of months, there will be fifteen.

One of this year’s winners is a guy called Rex Betar, a Bundjalung man from Tweed Heads in NSW. He holds three degrees already and has just been accepted to go to the University of Oxford. As far as we are aware, he will be the first Indigenous Australian to undertake an MBA at a leading overseas Business School.

Rex told a great story of one of his primary school teachers. He turned up for the first day in the grade two classroom and he was told to choose a table to sit at. The tables were labelled Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard or Yale. He chose Oxford, not knowing, at the tender age of eight, where or even what Oxford was. But he later asked his teacher and she told him Oxford was one of the world’s great universities and that he could go there one day. And that was when he decided he would. I should add, and he won’t mind my doing so, that at the time, Rex was in a wheelchair, suffering from cerebral palsy. He’s now out of the wheelchair and going to do an MBA at Oxford.

This not only says a lot about Rex, how he set his sights high and was determined to achieve his goal. I think it also says a lot about his teacher. When I was at school in grade 2, at a convent school in Melbourne in 1962, I'm betting the tables in our classroom were named daffodil, pansy, daisy and rose, or perhaps after the saints. Now that might have inspired us to be florists and horticulturalists, maybe even saints (though that's a stretch,) but I applaud, now from a considerable distance, Rex's year two teacher, somewhere up in the Tweed Valley, who inspired her class of eight year olds to believe they could achieve to be the best in the world.

Only three in every one hundred Year 8 Indigenous students will be eligible to go to university by the time they finish Year 12. This is something we're trying to improve.

You, today, have achieved a wonderful goal. After all that hard work, you now have your degree in your hand. If you take yourself back to your second grade classroom, how many of those who sat in the classroom with you have made it to a graduation ceremony like this? The prize you have received, the prize of education, comes with a responsibility. That is to use it and build on it, to regard learning as something you do all your life, and also to remember those who have no degrees. The wonderful former High Court Judge, Michael Kirby, said at an event like this a few years back: A degree is not just a ticket to a good income. With privileges in life, comes duties. Always remember the disadvantaged. Practice equal opportunity. Rid yourselves of unfounded prejudice. Be the vanguard of a better, juster, more compassionate society.

You have graduated in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts. I think the operative word is humanity. Please remember our shared humanity and the value of relationships as you now launch into an unsuspecting world.

I threatened earlier to mention my involvement with the GWS Giants. I will come to that via a slightly circuitous route.

Just over there, is the Female Orphans School, built in 1813. As you may know, the Female Orphans School holds a unique place in the history of education on the mainland of Australia. It was the first school established using public funds, and was a residential school to provide care for the neglected girls of the colony.

A young girl called Elizabeth McGuire, the daughter of two convicts transported from Ireland, lived there for ten years before marrying Horatio Wills and giving birth to a son, Tom, in 1835.

Now Tom Wills is the man credited with developing the game we now know as Australian Rules Football. He was an outstanding sportsman who was educated at the Rugby School in England and came back to Australia to be one of the best cricketers in the colony. In 1861, his father and 18 others were killed by aborigines in Queensland in retaliation for the murder of some of the local indigenous people. As my friend Greg de Moor, who has written about Tom Wills says the massacre of his father profoundly affected Tom.

“Nevertheless,” Greg says, “five years after the attack, Wills carried out perhaps the most astonishing act in Australian sporting history, captaining a team of Aboriginal cricketers from western Victoria, and led them on to the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Boxing Day 1866 to the applause of 10,000 spectators.

A year later, this team, left Australia to play against teams in England – more than ten years before the first white cricket team did so.

What sort of man sees his father killed by aborigines, then a short time later, joins a team of aboriginal cricketers to be their comrade on the sporting field? I think it’s an extraordinary story.

Tom Wills, whose mother lived for ten years in this place we are today, went on to write the rules of Australian Football and lo and behold, we now have an Australian Football team representing the west of Sydney, a team with a link to this University. And it has a link to this university because both share a strong commitment to building and supporting our community, to emphasising the value of education, to leading a rounded, contributing life, and to enjoying what you do.

Go forth and do likewise, graduands, and my warmest congratulations to you all on this great day. Thankyou.