

The Occasional Address

Delivered by Professor Sev Ozdowski AM OAM FRSN
At The University of New England Graduation (Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Education
Awards and Faculty of Medicine and Health Awards) Ceremony
Armidale 2nd May 2019

WELCOME

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished academic and professional staff.

Graduands and your families and friends

Thank you Mr Colin O'Hoi, the Anaiwan Aboriginal Elder in Residence, for your welcome to country. I also would like to acknowledge the Anaiwan people, the traditional owners of this land where we meet today and pay respect to their elders past and present.

My particular welcome goes to Aboriginal graduands amongst us and to their families.

INTRODUCTION

I am honoured that Vice Chancellor Duncan and the University of New England have asked me to address you. Thank you, Vice Chancellor for this warm welcome.

For me it is almost like coming home. Some 40 years ago, my wife Hanna and I graduated from this great university.

The University of New England education has opened enormous professional opportunities for us and allowed us to make a solid contribution to Australia.

I wish that all of you, who are about to graduate, will also be able to look back in 40 years' time and reach the same conclusion.

MY STORY

By now, you have possibly started guessing of what my accent is?

I was born in Poland.

My wife Hanna, my son Adam (also a graduate of this university) and I arrived in Australia in June 1975 after spending 2 years as refugees in West Germany.

We had chosen Australia, because it was a new country and far away from the old world.

To stay in Europe, we would need to wait two or three generations to be accepted into German, French, English or any other European society.

We were inspired by the Australian tradition of "fair go" and her egalitarian ethos.

We also chose Australia for her British inheritance.

After the experience of communist Poland, we searched for a country with parliamentary democracy, freedom of the press and the rule of law.

We were looking for a society able to judge people on their basic individual worth.

Perhaps, the warm Australian climate had something to do with our choice, considering that the alternative we were looking at was winterish Canada.

Upon arrival in Sydney, we initially lived at Villawood Reception (not as it is currently known Detention) Centre.

Soon after, I took employment as night-shift process worker in Western Sydney.

My great breakthrough came when a few months later I was awarded Commonwealth Ph.D. Scholarship.

In March 1976 we arrived in Armidale.

We were overwhelmed by its beauty and the warm welcome we received at the University. We soon met our neighbours and established many long-lasting friendships.

But, to be honest, we were often lost. My English was still rather poor.

And then, the Aussie culture was a real puzzle and source of constant frustrations and amusements.

We have learnt, that an invitation to a party may not mean fun, but rather a request to purchase plastic containers – here of course I talk about the cultural icon of the 1970's - the Tupperware party.

We learnt that simple words *"bring a plate"* or *"she will be right"* may have very different meaning to us and to our Australian hosts.

But I managed. With time, my understanding of Australia grew.

In April 1982, I was awarded a doctor's degree. It was a very special day for me and my family as it is for you today.

So, let me offer my best congratulations to our guests of honour, the graduands. Well done!

Also, my best congratulations to your families and partners who have encouraged and supported you in your journey.

LOOKING FORWARD

So, where do you go from here?

From tomorrow you will be alumni of this wonderful university.

Your degree would provide you with enormous opportunities.

It will bestow benefits on you as an individual.

To start with, you will earn more than those who did not study.

You will be also much better equipped to handle the technological and social changes that continue to revolutionize our workforce.

But your education will also provide you with a greater capacity and duty to contribute to Australian society.

Some of you will become leaders of national standing.

But to succeed, you would need to play your hand right.

Looking back, I believe the following factors worked for me:

- integrity;
- constant search for opportunities; and
- a degree of healthy pragmatism.

I would also be the first to admit that a bit of good luck is important, too.

INTEGRITY

Let us start with integrity.

This is not a very fashionable word nowadays. Today, we prefer to talk about our entitlements to various rights, to respect, to fair treatment and social justice.

Oprah Winfrey, an American entertainer, describes integrity in following words: *"Real integrity is doing the right thing, knowing that nobody is going to know whether you did it or not."*

In other words, integrity is about you and your honesty, probity, fairness and trustworthiness.

But above all, integrity is about your self-respect.

The truth is that if you have no self-respect, others will be unlikely to respect you.

Lack of integrity will undermine your position in your family, amongst your friends and in the workplace. It will make achieving a position of leadership difficult.

Integrity also means that your decisions should reflect your values and ethical convictions and that there may be some risks attached to it.

For me, civil and political rights are of great importance and there were some costs attached to acting on my convictions.

For example, in communist Poland – I was arrested for smuggling Orwell’s book ‘1984’ in from England

In Australia, my term as Human Rights Commissioner was not extended, and my Public Service carrier terminated, after I published a report that was critical of the government about children in immigration detention. This resulted in me being in academia today.

SEARCH FOR OPPORTUNITIES

Now let focus for a moment on opportunities.

Opportunity is often defined as a set of circumstances or a situation that makes it possible to achieve something that you want to do.

Education is seen in Australia as our greatest pathway to opportunity.

But the fact that you will obtain your degree does not necessarily mean that opportunities will start knocking on your door.

Your personal choices and predispositions may impact your ability to spot an opportunity and use it to your advantage.

As Winston Churchill said: *‘The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.’*

In fact, we need to work hard to learn how to spot opportunities and to take advantage of them.

Sometimes, it would mean, that you would need to step outside your comfort zone, work harder, learn new skills or sacrifice leisure, especially since great opportunities will always present themselves at inopportune times.

So, your success will be where your readiness and opportunity meet.

For me, the Polish Solidarity movement of the 1980s and the subsequent introduction of martial law provided a huge opportunity to advance in Australian society.

You may wonder how?

Because of my commitment to human rights, I became a key lobbyist in Australia for the Polish Solidarity movement and one of the key organisers of protests and humanitarian help.

For me, it was an opportune time, because of extensive, bi-partisan support for Polish workers.

I joined national networks, which involved many politicians, including the then Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, church leaders, artists, trade unionists, and other people in leadership positions.

These networks have proven to be of enormous benefit to me over the time.

HEALTHY PRAGMATISM

Finally, when your values are in place and you spot a great opportunity that can make or break your professional career, a dose of healthy pragmatism and common sense would not hurt.

It may require you to leave the clouds and dreaming and to start planning practical steps and clearly define an outcome you wish to achieve.

On occasion it could mean using of the art of compromise, or seeking allies or even the capturing of ordinary openings to make them great.

In this context, I wish to mention a project I was involved with.

When I was appointed to the position of Australian Human Rights Commissioner, breaches of human rights law in Australia's immigration detention were already well documented but no action was taken.

I concluded that to secure better observance of human rights I would need to move away from an ivory tower approach dealing with the points of law and focus on winning the battle for the minds and hearts of Australians.

I decided to undertake a public Inquiry that would focus on the rights of children, as they are innocent in the public mind and deserving of protection, regardless of what their parents have done.

As a result of the inquiry, public opinion shifted dramatically from about 65% of Australians supporting government mandatory detention policies, to 65% opposing children being kept in immigration detention.

Considering that there were clear electoral consequences of such a public opinion shift, within a month, following the tabling of the report in Parliament, the children and their families were released from detention centres.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude, graduands.

Use the learning that you now carry in your rucksack to advance and serve others.

Cherish your integrity as you go through life.

Seize emerging opportunities and do not forged that a degree for flexibility may add to your success.

Again, my best congratulations and wishes for the future.

Well done! Thank you.