

University of the Free State Qwaqwa Campus Graduation Ceremony

Speech: Nikiwe Bikitsha

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honour to be with you today.

It is also very humbling for me to share this very special day with you. I'll tell you why. When I was 18 years old I had to drop out of University because my family didn't, at the time, have enough money to send me back to school for second year, I remember feeling shattered and at the time, I never imagined I would later attain a university qualification let alone, be asked to speak to graduandi and help send them on their merry way to the world of work, business and adventure. So there is something poetic for me in this moment and thank you for asking me to be a part of it.

But I did manage to go back to university many years later and don the gowns which you are wearing today. I put myself through university while working and being a single mother to my little boy, which proves if you are determined, anything is possible.

As I look at you today, I'm wondering what are the stories which led you here today. I imagine they are stories of resilience, of hope, strife, torment, late nights, hard slog, academic curiosity and immense sacrifice from you and your parents. But today, through it all, you emerge victorious and triumphant soon to be graduates of the University of the Free State.

You are wearing your gowns with such flair and distinction and you deserve it. This is an attribute of your excellence, dedication and hard work, so wear them with pride. With those words to the class of 2014 -2015, I would like to say congratulations, Halala! We are so proud of your achievement and academic prowess.

I know you can't wait to celebrate your success and it is a worthy success, so I will be brief.

My message today is a simple one. I'd like to share what I have learnt over the past 18 years as a professional. I hope some of it will resonate with you and serve to inspire you and hopefully make an impact as you navigate what lies ahead.

I've identified 5 key themes which I would like to share with you.

1. Learn everything, go everywhere

My mother has a wonderful saying in isiXhosa whenever my siblings and I start a new job or embark on something new. Her advice is “Mntanam zazi izitshixo uba ziphi “, loosely translated from Xhosa, that means you must know where the keys are. To expand, it means that wherever you go or wherever you work, the first order of business must be that you must be so familiar with every nook and cranny that you know where the keys for the door of each lock are. Now I'm not suggesting that you become thieves who pick locks, No. What this suggests is that is that you must make it your business to learn everything wherever you go or work. You might mistakenly think that now you have your degree, at work there are certain tasks that are beneath you, there is no such thing. You must make it your business to know and immerse yourself in every aspect of your field of work. Nothing is too sophisticated or high brow or low brow, or menial to be learnt. The opportunities are there for you, find someone who knows and ask questions. Make it your business to understand all the facets of the company or organization. What that does is that it immediately broadens your horizons, sharpens your skills

but it also communicates to those who've employed you; here we have someone to groom and nurture. Here we have someone who is determined and means business. Here, we have a leader.

What it will also do is that you may stumble upon an area of work that you'd never imagined or would have thought would capture your interest --- but you then end up in specializing in it because you were curious and asked questions .No—one else would have done it because they, unlike you would not have bothered to find out where all the keys to the locks of every door were, so it's important to **LEARN EVERYTHING, GO EVERYWHERE**

2 TENACITY IN ALL THINGS

I'm going to borrow now from the world which I'm most familiar with and that is the world of journalism, breaking news and storytelling. I think there is a strong metaphor between the craft of journalism and the business of life. It's certainly taught me a lot. In journalism, as in life, the scoop comes as a result of a few key ingredients. A scoop in journalism jargon means a big story or an exclusive. It is the one thing we all chase

as journalists, it's the exclusive (the get/big story) that puts your name in lights or the one big story you cover so well, people never forget your name. One of the most important characteristics to getting that scoop is tenacity. I often tell young journalists as I'm telling you, the big story won't come with you sitting around and waiting for it, it's a slog, you have to 'work the phones', build the contacts, be pushy and never ever take no for an answer, and that big scoop or exclusive interview will be yours. This has worked in my journalism career, but I've also seen it deliver in other areas of life. (Use Winnie Madikizela interview anecdote)

So what is the big scoop in your life? The one thing you are determined to achieve or secure. Once you've decided what it is – you work at it as if you were a journalist chasing a story or an exclusive. What I'm saying is that if you are determined, relentless, tenacious and work hard – success does come, but all this has to be predicated on a clear goal and vision of what you envisage for yourself, your goals, your scoop and not anyone else's. So as you head off into the world, I want you to ask yourselves - What is my scoop and how will I get it?

3. THE JUNGLE GYM OF LIFE

In her book, **Lean in, Women, work and the will to lead**, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg talks about the phenomenon of the career jungle gym as opposed to a career ladder. Now we are all familiar with the notion of the ladder. A ladder is linear and has steps which lead upwards or downwards and for many of us that's how we are socialized to think of the path our lives and careers should take. What Sandberg suggests though is that often times, life isn't that simple.

There is no- one single ladder taking us either up or down. What happens is that it's more of a jungle gym. Now we've all seen and played on a jungle gym, if you can remember that far back.

In a jungle gym you can slide down, you can hoist yourself upwards, turn to the side, it's multi directional. All those hops and skips and sideways lurches may not be what we had planned but often they are taking us to where we need to be, we are learning something new at every juncture, but eventually, we end up at the top. I raise the jungle gym because I believe because we've been told to aspire towards a ladder, we often think when we take sides steps or throw ourselves in something

completely different to what our peers are doing that we have failed – yet I want to say to you that the jungle gym is fun, It's an adventure, the view is often different and all the while you are learning something new. A diverse set of experiences create a richer you.

Often people want to punish themselves because their path hasn't followed the conventional path. Don't, because if you do, you may miss the important lessons such an experience was meant to teach you or the opportunities it may bring. Sheryl Sandberg for example, is a trained economist, worked at the World Bank, US Treasury and the Clinton Administration. Never in a million years had she imagined that when she connected the dots would she end up in the tech space and is now one of the wealthiest business women and the COO of one of the biggest tech startups and phenomena of our time Facebook. For almost two years when she arrived in Silicon Valley, no-one would employ her because she didn't have a tech background – but look where she ended up? So don't punish yourself if your career takes unexpected turns, it might be a good thing.

4. Life Long learning

While we celebrate your tremendous success and academic achievement today, we should be mindful that, South Africa is a developing nation and one whose skills need to be updated so that we are on par with our competitors. Let us as a nation strive to be the most accomplished, and continuously enhance our skills. I'm a firm believer in lifelong learning. When we have the capacity, curiosity and resources, we should constantly look to improve our skills and abilities. I'm sure that UFS would be happy to welcome you back in the next few years to read towards that Masters or PhD. Keep striving to improve yourself and your ability so that you can proudly assert yourself as an expert anywhere around the globe. Our country needs the best, and they can be found amongst yourselves. I don't believe that one ever 'arrives' at what could be described as a pinnacle of success. We must always work at it – and one of way of doing that is placing education at the centre of your personal and professional development.

5 .Service & teach others

Our country faces numerous challenges. Often we look to our leaders in government to have all the answers. For a number of reasons they may be found wanting in that regard. But we don't often ask ourselves, what are we doing in our own fields, positions or communities to be of service to others? We are all leaders in some or other respect – whether it's in our homes, our mosques, churches, neighborhoods and not just in corporates and government per se. As we progress in our careers, I think we need to inculcate the values of service – and not just look to achieve success for its sake, for ourselves and the financial gains which follow.

Don't get me wrong, we want people to be successful and uplift themselves. That's great. What we often neglect to think about, is what is the greater good which will be served by my efforts? How am I benefitting others with my time, skill, ability, money, influence? What this allows you is to think beyond yourself and your needs. As you go off into the world, I would like you to think of how and in which ways - you envisage serving your country and fellow mankind.

The leaders we send out into the world should embrace and reflect this if we are to build a society that not only succeeds but cares as well. I'm

not talking about charity – a concept I don't like or subscribe to – but rather that all of us make it our responsibility to actively play a role in being part of sustainable solutions to the challenges facing our country. In a similar vein, it is also important to remember once you begin to reach levels of success and seniority in your field, it is vital to teach others, be available to mentor where possible. I for example attached myself to some of the greatest journalists of our time, people like John Perlman, Jeremy Maggs and people who were only too eager to guide and teach me. Now as a mid-career journalist, I've made it a priority to over the year to do the same for the next generation of up and coming journalists. It is its own reward to see others thrive. This proverb from the Sumerians of ancient Mesopotamia aptly captures what I mean and believe: **“He who knows, why should he keep it hidden?”**

To conclude:

There was a wonderful article in the NY times a few weeks ago written by David Brooks under the title: The moral bucket list. You should read it. It explores deeper questions about the people we want to be and ways of becoming those people, Are good people born that way, if not how do they become that way?

It's a fascinating and lengthy piece but I will quote an excerpt which resonated with me that I would like to share with you;

“This is a philosophy for stumblers. The stumbler scuffs through life, a little off balance. But the stumbler faces her imperfect nature with unvarnished honesty, with the opposite of squeamishness. Recognizing her limitations, the stumbler at least has a serious foe to overcome and transcend. The stumbler has an outstretched arm, ready to receive and offer assistance. Her friends are there for deep conversation, comfort and advice.

External ambitions are never satisfied because there's always something more to achieve. But the stumblers occasionally experience moments of joy. There's joy in freely chosen obedience to organizations, ideas and people. There's joy in mutual stumbling. There's an aesthetic joy we feel when we see morally good action, when we run across someone who is quiet and humble and good, when we see that however old we are, there's lots to do ahead.

The stumbler doesn't build her life by being better than others, but by being better than she used to be. Unexpectedly, there are transcendent moments of deep tranquility. For most of their lives their inner and outer ambitions are strong and in balance. But eventually, at moments of rare joy, career ambitions pause, the ego rests, the stumbler looks out at a picnic or dinner or

a valley and is overwhelmed by a feeling of limitless gratitude, and an acceptance of the fact that life has treated her much better than she deserves. Those are the people we want to be.”

So class of 2014 - 2015 I leave you with this.

Be honest and kind; Do the things you said you would do, as there is nothing worse than disappointing yourself; Be of service to others; Be relentless in pursuit of your goals and success will come.

And as St Catherine of Sienna said: Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.

Thank you.