



**Occasional Address**

**Academic Soiree – 16 September 2020**

Since I'm Catholic and this is a Catholic residence, I thought I'd start with a confession. When Helen and Shona called me and asked if I would be happy to speak at the academic soiree, I immediately responded with much exuberance, "Yes! Of course! I would be honoured to." As soon as the phone conversation ended, I thought, "Oh gosh. Why did I agree to that? Why on Earth would these women want to hear me speak? I'm not an Olympian. I haven't saved anyone's life (although I did have a dream of becoming a doctor... more on that later). What is so inspiring about me?"

So, I went through two weeks of what I call 'analysis paralysis'. There were many, many moments of self-doubt because never in a million years did five-year-old Sou, whilst standing on the tarmac in Bangkok as she was about to board the 'flying kangaroo' to Australia – ever think that 32 years later, she would be standing here in front of all of these incredibly intelligent and amazing women, sharing her story.

Many of you will know that I spent the first 5 years of my life in a refugee camp in Northern Thailand. I still remember many things – mostly unpleasant memories and I certainly have some battle scars to show – literally. There's a really cool one on my right arm. When my family and I first arrived in Australia, I remember being scared, yet excited. Scared because I had never seen so many people with white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes. Excited because we had finally left the horrors of war.

We were a family of 5 (at the time) and were relocated to a 2-bedroom flat in Cabramatta, South-West of Sydney, after having spent two months in Villawood. I did not speak a single word of English and remained 'mute' for at least the first 6 months of Kindergarten. I do recall my teacher telling my mother that she could no longer shut me up after I had learned the language. It was no surprise I became captain of the debating team in primary school and continued throughout high school. I would rehearse my speech in the shower, in front of the mirror, and even forced my family and the family pets to listen to me – much to their annoyance. You would think that having been involved in debating and public speaking for many years that I would be comfortable speaking in front of large groups – not so, my friends. Especially when the topic is about 'me'. Why is this?

Well, I think it's because as women, we are our worst critic and more often than not, we think we are simply not good enough. We often compare ourselves to others because we think that other peoples' successes define who we are, and it's because of this mindset that we often miss out on opportunities. Whilst in recent times we've been told to 'lean in' – this simply isn't enough and is unsustainable. What we need to be doing is build support structures to help each other, and you've heard the saying – when women support each other, incredible things happen.

This is what I want to highlight. No one predicted that 2020 was going to turn out the way it has. But even in the face of adversity, you have all demonstrated your ability to grow. We have thirteen residents who achieved a GPA of 7 in Semester 1 and a total of 86 in receipt of academic certificates. This is simply phenomenal and makes me incredibly honoured to be a part of the Duchesne community. I've said it before and I will say it again – I feel like a super proud aunty. I admire your intelligence, your resilience, your perseverance, but most importantly, your ability to show kindness, compassion and support to each other.

I do want to make special mention of those who are not receiving academic certificates today. Please do not feel that your achievements have gone unnoticed. You have faced a huge battle this year and yet here you are – not giving up - and that is still worth celebrating.

Earlier, I mentioned that I had a dream of becoming a doctor. My father was a doctor in Lao. My mother had 4 brothers and in her day, education for women was considered a luxury. This is why I am so passionate about women's education. She left school in grade 4 to work on the family's coffee plantation. My father never got to practice medicine in Australia because he simply couldn't afford to. He was offered admission into the MBBS program at UNSW but had to complete two years of English beforehand. At that time, English would become his fifth language. He could speak Lao, Thai, French and a little Russian. He never taught his daughters French or Russian because he learned those languages simply to survive the war.

So, I always thought that I would fulfill my dad's dream. I was going to be a doctor. Fast forward to the year 2001. I got into medicine but I soon realised that it wasn't for me. I felt like a complete failure and that I had brought shame to the family name. Yes, I grew up in a very typical Asian household, and yes, I did cry when I received my first B grade in Maths in Year 11. My father was

mortified when I quit medicine. And remember how I told you that I was the captain of the debating team? Well, I definitely put that skill to good use. I eventually convinced him to let me move to Canberra and that's where I would meet my future husband. I, still to this very day, do not recall seeing him in that art class. I was fixated on the model's hands!

Anyway, the point I want to make is please don't feel that you need to live out someone else's dream or compare yourself with others' achievements. For those of you who are thinking, "But I don't have a passion. I don't know what I want to do with my life." Guess what? Passions and interests and even dreams can change. Some of us are still trying to figure out what we want to do when we grow up. But what I do know is you should do things that interest you, things that challenge you, things that will help you grow. Set your own standards. Take ownership of your goals and your shortfalls. Surround yourself with an amazing tribe of women. Reach out to them. Share stories of your successes, but don't hide your failings or moments of weakness because those stories can have a profound impact on others.

Whilst I'm not a doctor, I feel I'm still able to help others. I'm incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to work at Duchesne and I hope that you will be just as fortunate as I am to work with the most talented, funny (as in funny ha ha, not funny strange), and humble group of women. I thank you for sharing your successes with me. I thank you for sharing your moments of weakness with me. I thank you for trusting in me to guide you through your educational journey and remember, be kind to yourself.