

Matric of the Year 2011

Editor of the Weekend Post, Deputy Vice-chancellors of the NMMU, Prof Thoko Mayekiso and Dr Sibongile Muthwa, panel of judges, Mr Pieter Swart, Ms Louise Liebenberg and Mr Isaac Metembo, recipients, parents of recipients, school principals, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to address you on this auspicious occasion. May I also extend my congratulations to the matric learners that are recipients tonight. This evening is a celebration and acknowledgment of *your hard work and the support of the various role-players in your lives.*

The theme of tonight's speech is

A Journey of Excellence and Responsibility.

I want you to imagine that we are all on a journey, and I want to paint some road signs/pointers that you may find beneficial.

1. **Do your best, always**

You have already achieved a lot of your academic potential, hence your presence at this awards function. In this journey, however, you need sustained excellence, which is an entirely different thing.

You must have a **sense of purpose** and display a need to **constantly seek** to perform your best. Oliver Cromwell (1599 to 1658) the Lord Protector of England in the 1600s once remarked and I will, since it is International Year of the Women, change the "he" into a "she"

"(s)He who stops being better, stops being good.

In our family my Dad used to tell us and this became a family motto, that **you can only be satisfied if you have done your best.** If you are competing with someone and that person fared better than you, be satisfied to be second, but then only if you have done your best.

If you do your best, you will be more open to feedback, you would be goal oriented, you would seek to be unique, and strive to make a difference through sheer hard work, determination and perseverance.

2. **There is no short-cut to success: Sacrifice**

There is a saying that goes as follows: “there is no elevator to success – you will have to take the proverbial stairs one by one”! In this journey you may need to take the gravel road!

With hard work and striving to achieve, you sometimes need to make some sacrifices:

Let me give you two brief examples of the types of sacrifices I had to make.

I attended boarding school at Gelvan High until the end of standard nine which is now grade 11. At the time, “lights out” was at 22h00, which meant that if you wanted to do extra work, you could not do that in your room. For many nights I would take some pillows and sit underneath the light in the passage or in the bathroom and the teachers got used to seeing the reflection of my pink gown. Of course there were sometimes jokes about it but that did not bother me. I knew that I wanted to do my best in the matric examination, go to university and study law.

The same happened when I was doing my masters in law. I was lecturing at the time and wanted to complete in degree in one year even though my boss at the time said it was impossible! I will never forget the temporary feeling of missing out on things when I only took Christmas off and New Year that year. While I was working flat-out, I saw a lot of people on the beach enjoying their summer holiday. However, if you know what you are sacrificing for and it is your choice, you stick to your choice and the rewards will come later.

3. **You are responsible for your own destiny**

The learner: I see the role of a learner and future student as the pilot of his/her own plane. You decide on your destination. Of course your short-term destination is to do your best in the Matric examination. Next year you will be treated as an adult. As an adult, you decide whether you want to attend lectures, you decide whether you are there only in body or with your body and mind, in other words, you dictate how much you put in.

Parents, guardians and those with special claims on these students, your responsibility will not end when your child matriculates. It remains your responsibility to guide them and to instil in them a sense of responsibility for their own learning. In this sense I see the role of the parent or guardian as that of an air traffic controller – an air traffic controller does not fly the plane like the pilot, but plays a crucial role to

ensure that the plane takes off and lands safely. The air traffic controller always needs to be on the ball to ensure that none of the other planes ends up on another plane's course, in short, an air traffic controller cannot be asleep and has to wide awake to guide pilots to safety.

Teachers and academic staff: During our Faculty welcoming session to first year students this year, I told the first year law students that, if I had to ask them why they have chosen the law, I am sure that some of their answers would range from watching television programmes such as Boston Legal, the Good Wife, Damage, to name a few, to making a lot of money and maybe, just maybe, there may be a few of you who want to see justice done. I am going to date myself now by saying that I was initially inspired by the character, Professor Kingsfield in the dubbed television programme called "*Beste Professor*" in the early eighties. Professor Kingsley said in Afrikaans (and I will translate it shortly)

"Die bestudering van die reg is nuut en aan die meeste van u onbekend. Dis anders as enige studie wat u aangedurf het vantevore; u leer uself die reg, maar ek vorm u denke...(he ends) (aan die einde) sal u kan dink soos juriste!

Loosely this translates as:

"The study of the law is new and to most of you unknown. Unlike any other study that you attempted before, you teach yourself the law but I will shape your reasoning and when you leave here you will be able to reason like a jurist".

Conceited as this statement may sound, it does invoke two important notions:

Firstly, as future **students**, you will have the responsibility of teaching yourself and learning the intricacies of your discipline.

Secondly, it is the responsibility of **teachers (for now) and academics** to ensure that students are shaped to use, in our case, legal reasoning to participate in legal discourse. In other words, the academic staff will guide students to think, speak and act like lawyers. In other disciplines the academic would guide the student to achieve whatever is necessary to achieve the knowledge, skills and other attributes needed for the discipline.

I challenged our academics this year to further improve in our quest to do what Professor Kingsley believes we should do, namely to “shape our students’ legal reasoning and produce jurists” that can make a meaningful contribution not only to our profession but in society as a whole. *This would be true for other academics, irrespective of your discipline.* While doing so the students may be challenged at times, but academics (and I daresay teachers) will do well to remember the words of Frank Lloyd Wright:

“I know the price of success: dedication, hard work and an unremitting devotion to the things you want to see happen”.

4. **Never forget where you come from**

Put on your “trip metre” when you embark on your journey so that you may know how far you have come.

I hail from a small village, a former Moravian Mission station called Clarkson. In Clarkson, English was a foreign language and I remember being very impressed by the one person who read the books in the English section of our small library!

Despite that, my love for reading and for hard work I learnt in Clarkson. Meagre though our possessions were, we had very dedicated teachers and a community that saw the school as an integral part of the community. In Clarkson I learnt humility. In fact, when I visit Clarkson, I am not professor of law or Dean of the Faculty of Law, I am Vivienne, the daughter of their highly revered “Meester” as they refer to my Dad. I am never ashamed to say where I come from, because it is only through acknowledging where one is from and what you have learnt that you will

have an appreciation for what you have become. You need to know your history to know where you are going.

5. **Enjoy the journey and learn to “pause”/rest**

We sometimes try to be all things to all people – we cannot always be that – so sometimes, I have found, I take time out.

I find that to have **a good laugh**, to try to see **the humour in things and to never take myself too seriously** help! Fortunately I come from a family that can see the humour in situations where other people sometimes do not see it, so I have learnt to share that humour with people that can take it and give the same!

It is draining to work hard, we all know that, but then sometimes, just that little bit of pampering which we all deserve – whether it is sport, reading, music, drama etc, make sure that you have something where you can hone the other skills that will be required later to complement your academic skills. And, while you are at it, make sure that you have time to pause, to reflect, just like you would make sure that you take a break in driving from Nelson Mandela Bay to Pretoria!

Coming from a teaching family, I will do what teachers do: repetition! Let me mention the five road signs again. I hope that I have inspired you to *strive for sustained excellence*, to *take responsibility for your destiny*, to *be prepared to make sacrifices on the way*, to *remember your starting point* (where you come from) and to *take some breaks on the way!*

Every journey has a destination and when one ends a new one begins. It is, therefore, important to pause while you are on this journey, because otherwise you may not recall how you got to a certain place. **I conclude** with a quotation of Nelson Mandela whose values we strive to achieve at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University:

“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter. I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.” (Long Walk to Freedom)

I thank you.

**Prof Vivienne Lawack-Davids
Executive Dean: Faculty of Law**

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