

**Princes Hill Secondary College
Valedictory Speech**

**23 October 2018
Manisha Blencowe**

Thank you very much for the invitation & privilege of speaking to you this evening.

I would firstly like to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

It is 22 years since I graduated from Princes Hill. In all the stereotypical ways, it felt like the dawning of a whole new world to me. It has certainly been a wonderful and wide world, and I'm not finished exploring it yet.

This time, it's your turn to burst into a new world – quite a different world to the one I entered after school. I am so excited for you!

Me? I'm on the verge of endless middle age, which somehow seems a bit less exciting!

As you launch into SWOTVAC, final exams and all that is beyond, I hope I can share a few stories and thoughts with you that help you with the pressures of the time ahead, and with launching into the world beyond school with a mindset that helps you take advantage of the opportunities ahead.

I'd like to tell you a little about my journey since school: not because I think I'm the bees knees, or because I think my life has been a model for anyone else to live by. I don't profess to know how each of you are feeling, but I suspect we've shared some common feelings along the way and I hope my experience will speak to you a little.

As a high school student, I was in the music room far more than was reasonable and I spent endless hours reading the newspaper and thinking about issues of politics and justice. I had a very good time, and I made incredible friends and felt privileged to learn with teachers who were some of the most devoted, spirited teachers I could have hoped for. I studied hard and took formal achievements pretty seriously.

To be honest, I found anything less than perfection a bit embarrassing. Thankfully, I've become completely comfortable with the fact that I have heaps of weaknesses, and that I really don't need to be the smartest, or best, at anything. But, I digress.

Initially I thought I would be a journalist but during year 12, I dared to express an ambition to do law.

At the end of year 12 I waited anxiously for my results, and then Uni offers. I was thrilled to be offered a place at Monash Uni studying Arts/Law. I was not thrilled that I didn't get into Melbourne Uni, which seemed to be where all my friends were going, where all the exciting

political activity happened, and apart from anything else, was a short bike ride from home – a big deal in my mind since Monash was a 3+-hour return trip by public transport.

Which brings me to my first observation (#1): **there is always something to be disappointed about, something more to want.** What a trap. If you recognise your self-talk finding all the faults and ruining your pride and excitement in what you have achieved, give yourself a stern talking to. Honest self-reflection and critique: that's a skill, but talking yourself down is 100% counter-productive.

It might help to remind yourself that the person you regard as the most successful person you know is probably having the same self-doubt over in their corner, and may not even be happy despite their incredible objective success.

Thankfully I managed to snap out of that woe-is-me moment. I embraced uni life with full gusto – more the political and social life than the academic life. What I learned at uni has defined my life to date. Yes, I got a law degree, but I'm absolutely certain that that was not the thing that has helped me most in life to date.

I became deeply involved in the student union, environmental and political activity. In my first year, I was super keen to be involved but also a bit overwhelmed at how politically astute, well connected and confident everyone seemed. It was a world of people who had gone to the most exclusive private schools. They all seemed to know each other. When I said I lived in Brunswick, they all said they knew Brunswick Street. It was a bit of a different world.

Nothing could have underscored my experience of being an outsider more than a night I met up with a new friend for drinks after our first semester exams. We were going out Prahran, because that's what you did, darling. My mum offered to drop me off, and collect my friend from her family home on the way. It was in Hawthorn. Shakespeare Grove, Hawthorn. Let me tell you, you can't get more ruling class than that.

As we drove towards Hawthorn, mum & dad's old Kombi van broke out into uncontrollable fits of backfiring. Loud and jolty does not begin to describe it. As we backfired our way down Shakespeare Grove, I shrunk in my seat, mortified looking at mansion after mansion. Surely this, most extraordinary one, wasn't my friend's? It was. Catherine was a terribly good sport about it – jerking down Chapel Street in our backfiring-mobile. But you may appreciate just how much the feeling of being an outsider struck me that night.

Thankfully my enthusiasm overwhelmed my embarrassment and I soon struck upon another life-changing trick.

I had become joined at the hip with a new friend (the only other state school graduate in law school – or so it seemed) who also shared my passion for social justice. The Law Students' Society was a club that reeked of privilege, beer and sausages. Mostly beer. But a lot of privilege. Anna and I liked to be agitators but it was tough as a solo act.

When election time came around we decided that the committee position of Social Justice Officer was treated as all-together token, and needed a needed a radical shake-up. Were either of us game to contest the election solo? Probably not. Our solution: We ran together, as co-Social Justice Officers, campaigned hard and scored a stunning electoral success. We learned a heap and achieved a lot in that year – and because I did it with a great friend it was exhilarating: we motivated one another, we talked things through endlessly, we strategised about how to influence these people who were not people-like-us, we laughed when we got things horribly wrong, we did bold things that we wouldn't have on our own.

It was such a great way to take on challenges that I might not have been brave for alone, that I did it again in 2 other major roles during uni years: As Women's Officer at the student union, and job-sharing a Team Leader position in my early years at Slater & Gordon (while I studied part time).

So my next piece of advice (#2): **you don't have to do it all alone. Share roles, challenges, adventures, and burdens. Teams are amazing.** They complement your strengths and flatten out your weaknesses. They help you learn, make you brave. They will enable you to do things you never thought you could. They lead to further opportunities. The skills I learned in political and leadership roles at Uni, particularly in the job share roles, have been some of the most important skills in my life and career.

These were not the skills that my ATAR reflected. Here's my 3rd point: In reality, **the things that your VCE score will reflect are a tiny spectrum of the skills, qualities and attributes that will be important in your life – to the people in your life and your professional opportunities.** By all means, try hard to do your best. But if the score that summarises this tiny segment of your abilities and personhood isn't what you hoped, try not to be disheartened. Know it doesn't fully or properly represent your capabilities. And soon that score will be irrelevant. The world will see you, hear you and welcome you because of any number of dimensions of you that having nothing to do with your ATAR score. (#3)

With so much to occupy me at Uni, it took me a while to wrap it all up and get a proper law job. 7 years to be precise. In 2005 I did Articles of Clerkship at Slater & Gordon. That was 13 years ago, and I am now a Practice Group Leader in the commercial litigation group working with a team of lawyers who – you guessed it - complement my strengths, hide my weaknesses, and add all kinds of dimensions to our team that I would not bring myself.

I have done a wide range of work during my time as a lawyer, including running a landmark environmental contamination class action, providing governance advice to indigenous organisations over many years, and acting for people against government in claims akin to 'The Castle' – which I hope is not an outdated cultural reference.

I have 2 young children with my husband and have taken 2 years out of work on parental leave. I now work 3 days per week – the ideal work-life balance, in my view!

Life is wonderful, and I am surrounded by inspiring people who I have met along the way.

Although I am short on time, I want to leave you with 5 hot tips – things I’ve worked out since high school:

1. **Be part of good things** – I’m not here to tell you what ‘good’ means in this context – this is a values-free zone. What’s good is for you to decide.
You don’t have to be the leader or have the first brilliant idea. Throw yourself in. Get among it. Contribute what you feel you can. You’ll meet good people who inspire you, learn good skills, feel engaged and probably have lots of spin-off opportunities. That is good for you in the moment, and good for you in your journey towards a life lived with meaning and happiness.

My second hot tip:

2. **Life and careers are a series of stepping stones, sometimes a meandering route:**
You must define your own measures of success – Graduation and the trepidation of what is next can be a time of incredible pressure. Relax in the knowledge that it’s a long journey & there are endless ways to get there. A grand plan is a luxury, but completely inessential. If you are one of the many who are still racked with uncertainty about what it is that you want to do with your life – take a breath.

My advice: Plot your way with values and principles that guide you, small steps at a time. I refer to and repeat hot tip #1: *Be part of good things*. You’ll never regret those things and slowly, but surely, they’ll lead you to a life that you own as your own. Unique. Its own quirks and bumps and turns and successes.

And certainly do not waste a moment worrying that you don’t know what you want to do with your life.

Along the stepping stones, check yourself periodically: Are you happy? Are you generally content that life is on a good course? If you feel proud, you are doing it at least 90% right. And remember, perfection is a fool’s goal.

Hot Tip 3:

3. **Make a positive contribution** – Sometimes it’s hard not to feel overwhelmed by all the dysfunction and hate and idiocy in the world. But don’t disengage. Life is lived in many parts – you are more than your income-generating self. Make an impact in the way you live your personal life. The big and the little things matter. Be a supportive friend, call out disrespectful behaviour, ride a bike, reduce your environmental footprint, role model good behaviour. The current power structures in our society are failing us in many ways: So think critically, reimagine the world, be revolutionary, help make change happen.

Hot tip 4:

4. **Look after yourself** – life is a marathon not a sprint. You don't need to achieve everything at once. You do need to recognise when you need to be gentle on yourself, and when you need support. Doing this makes you stronger.

To this end, may I strongly recommend that you use the long summer ahead of you to develop a routine of doing something that is good for you: swimming, running, walking, cycling, meditation, dancing. Routines stick. In years to come you will love yourself for being able to swim a few nice laps of breast stroke (or whatever it is) to clear your head when you need a break from it all. A really radical suggestion: start your routine during SWOTVAC. Maybe don't start running marathons, but you will need breaks.

5. My last hot tip: Do **practice exams**. Exam technique is sometimes 50% of the result.

Finally, I want you to take moment to look at all the people surrounding you in this room: you are surrounded by a bunch of legends.

Recently I received the shocking news that a legend of my lifetime, and one of my most influential teachers at Princes Hill, had died. Don Scott exemplified the joy of living a life shared meaningfully with others. He inspired people, gave people opportunities they never would have had without him, extended people's skills and self-belief in transformative ways. He changed the way things were done, and he brought people with him. All with complete humility. He did it all motivated by a deep sense of fairness and a commitment to public education.

When you hail from Princes' Hill, you don't have to look far for legends who have lived interesting lives, crafted to their own mould, and connected to a community of people who love and respect them.

You will be among them.

I wish you good luck, joy, a sense of purpose and great adventure as you launch into the wide world before you.

Thank you very much.