

Speech Night 2016

Extract from the Occasional Address

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A profile of Alison Watkins can be viewed on our Inspiring Old Girls gallery here

- <https://collegiate.tas.edu.au/about/inspiring-old-girls/>

These days I am sometimes asked for my reflections and advice. This is often for young women starting out or part way into their careers. When I thought about my reflections for tonight it struck me they are just as relevant for girls who are still in school and for parents of all girls, even those just beginning school. The opportunity to speak tonight has caused me to reflect on just how deep the influences I experienced here at Collegiate have been on my life.

If I have any regrets it's only that it's taken me so long to figure some of them out and. I share them with you tonight in the hope I may speed the process for you.

1. **Go on, just give it a go.**

So many of us, girls in particular, are susceptible to a lack confidence in our own abilities. I remember heading off to boarding school in Year 6, full of excitement, to find I'd landed somewhere very strange - where I clearly didn't belong. The big city girls of Hobart seemed very sophisticated. They

were smarter and better at everything than a farm girl, or so it seemed to me. I remember heading off to Sydney when I started work and feeling very sure that a Tasmanian wouldn't cut it in the big smoke.

I remember joining McKinsey, the international consulting firm where I worked for 10 years, convinced they would soon uncover the massive hiring mistake they'd just made. In each situation I eventually found to my surprise that being a girl from the country, or being a Tasmanian, or only having a single degree among a sea of PhDs wasn't actually a major disadvantage after all. In fact it meant I was practical, could create rapport with pretty much anyone, and best of all that I could learn a tremendous amount at accelerated pace by putting myself (or being forced into) these uncomfortable situations.

When I look back I started having a go when I was at school. I look back on a girl who got involved in pretty much everything and wasn't particularly talented at anything, just loved to be involved. I was fortunate to be strongly encouraged and pushed into getting involved, into taking on leadership roles, into staying with Maths, into playing team sports.

Collegiate aspires to create strong, independent girls today in a way that is much clearer than when I was going through our School. That's never been more important if we are to accelerate the progress of women into leadership roles in our societies.

What I understand now is that having a go is important - confidence is gained in the process of having a go. You recognise that everyone else is feeling just as inadequate as you are and you recognise that it's so important not to close off options, not to just assume - what you'd like or not like, or what you'd be good at or not.

2. Connect, really connect with great people.

In every stage of my career and life I can point to a small number of people from whom I am learnt and grew. If I'd recognised it more clearly I would have done a better job of seeking out and absorbing their wisdom, and importantly, given them better acknowledgment for the vital role they were playing in my development.

The teachers who were so formative for me at School are as clear in my memory as ever - when I look back they were warm, they went the extra mile, they were great coaches and they cared. Mrs Joscelyn would pick us boarders up tirelessly on Saturdays for sport, Mrs de Blas was passionate in her pursuit of acting excellence and made us all feel we could all be on Broadway. Mrs Scrivener brought English to life and taught us to enjoy Austen and Shakespeare. Mrs Stevens motivated me to do well in Biology. Since then I've worked in professional services in environments where leaders could only succeed by being great developers of people. Today my Chairman is David Gonski, a wonderful rounded leader from whom I continue to learn so much, including what it is to be generous spirited and kind. People, even people who seem intimidatingly successful, generally love to be asked to help and their advice and ability to create opportunities is an invaluable resource.

3. Challenge yourself to be your best everywhere, everyday.

This Year 12 cohort express empowerment as an overriding theme. Collegiate's vision is "Empowering girls for their future". This is all about creating a future where gender never gets in the way of our choices and doing everything we can to let that be the case for all women. I am glad to see this as so top of mind for the School and the girls. Because one thing

that it took me way too long to figure out was that how I am is how I choose to be. I am not a victim. I am in control. OK, bad stuff happens, but I get to choose how I respond. I can make a big difference to how others feel and see the world.

To reinforce this mindset of empowerment and accountability I try really hard not to use the language of blame or to generalise. This mindset motivates me and allows me to be concerned much less with what others think, to be less vulnerable to the judgment of others, to recognise I simply can't keep everyone happy. I've learnt that it's much healthier to find motivation from inside than to leave yourself vulnerable to the judgments and approval of others.

4. Be True To Yourself.

A bit like the concept of empowerment, I didn't ever really think about my personal values. When I look back I can see that loyalty and doing the right thing were important to me. I can also see I had high standards, possibly unrealistic, and that I had a high need for approval. My parents taught me to want to be independent, not to rely on others. When I look over my career and life I can see these characteristics have been very consistent, even though I didn't ever think about them consciously. If I had, it would have helped me understand why the situations I have enjoyed least are when I've been in organisations or with people with whom my values weren't aligned.

You will reach many forks in the road, big ones and small ones. Choose which path you will take – make a conscious decision. Think about what you will be proud of and what will stand the test of time. Don't just run

with the crowd. It is easy to follow, to simply go with the flow. But you are your own person. If you feel uncomfortable then don't do it

5. **Strike the balance**

Today I am still friends with girls I was at Collegiate with like Sally, Sally, Marg, Sandra, Maree, George, Katrina, Julie and many more. If you asked them they would roll their eyes and say I am absolutely hopeless. We have a bond that has lasted well over 40 years, that endures despite the very different paths we have taken. Today I have a strong family - Rod, Grace, Elliott, Ilsa and Meg. My mum and dad, my sisters, my in-laws. These are people who don't judge. They will be there for me and on my side whatever happens. They keep me centred and help me avoid the tendency of people like me to define themselves by their job. An important subset of this piece of advice is to marry well. I would not have the opportunities or I would have talked myself out of them without Rod to make them possible.

Staying healthy has always been important and with a busy job and a lot of travel it's never been more important for me. One of my favourite sports is golf, which my Dad taught me when I was about 8. I enjoy tennis - great value from the one term of lessons I had from Mr Harris in Grade 6 and I enjoy swimming. I don't recall ever having any lessons, but I certainly recall learning to swim at Dodges Ferry and lots of lifesaving at the Tepid Baths.

The older I get the better I appreciate my family, my friends, my health and the need for balance.

My school, St Michael's Collegiate, shaped me in ways I certainly didn't think about at the time. Both good luck and good management built very solid foundations I've drawn on throughout my career and my life.

I hope you will consider learning from these experiences and the advice you will receive. Above all, I know you recognise your parents and the School have given you a gift. A gift of education and personal values that stands out especially here in Tasmania where Year 12 completion rates are the lowest in Australia. A gift that empowers you to contribute to our society and community, wherever you choose that to be.

I hope that some of you will choose to contribute to the diversity of the business community in Australia. The scope for strong, independent women such as you is enormous. I did look back to my leaving School Magazine to see if there were any clues pointing to my career in business and found the description of me included a reference to my aggression and ruthlessness - in the context of the defeat Hutchins suffered against us in hockey and football. Well I am glad to say that aggression and ruthless are no longer prerequisites for a successful business career. I am also glad to say that most businesses today recognise the value of diversity and are very focused, as we are at Amatil, on accelerating the progress of talented women.

Let me finish by wishing the Year 12 girls, who have so many possibilities ahead of them, well as they embark on this exciting next stage of their lives.

May the road rise up to meet you and may the wind be always at your back.