



Guest Speaker's Address

2023 Valedictory Dinner

Address by The Honourable Justice Catherine Muir
on 19 October 2023

Good evening, distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen.

I am immensely honoured to have been invited to be your guest speaker at this, the 2023 Women's College Valedictory Dinner. I begin this evening by acknowledging the Turrbal people and the Jagera people, the first owners and traditional custodians of this land on which we gather, and I pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

To all the Valedictorians, congratulations on your graduation in your respective disciplines. Tonight represents the culmination of a significant amount of hard work on your part, no doubt with the support of a village of family, friends, tutors, lecturers, and College staff. You have every reason to feel immensely proud of yourselves.

As I look out into the room and rest upon the magnificence of this night, I feel overwhelmingly compelled to publicly confess something you all right from the start. Okay, here goes.

Not only am I not a former Women's College girl but, rather, back in the day, as a good Catholic girl from Far North Queensland, I had obtained a place to reside at ... Duchesne College.

But alas and much to the complete and utter devastation of my 17-year-old self, I missed out by a few marks on obtaining the first option on my QTAC form, being a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Laws course at The University of Queensland, but I was offered my second option, which was a Bachelor of Laws at QUT.

In those days, a number of the colleges didn't take students from other universities, so at the very last moment, instead of living an exciting college life on campus at UQ, my parents had to rush around and find me alternative accommodation in Brisbane. This led to me boarding with an elderly woman for my first year at university.

A lovely old lady with a house in Ashgrove, who made me wash up in a bowl to save water, thought I was the devil's child because she found some beer bottles in the garbage bin one evening. She also rang my parents one night to say that she was concerned that I may have had worms because, after dinner, I proceeded to eat three pieces of toast and Vegemite. I have always enjoyed a hearty appetite. And I did grow up as the only girl with three brothers.

Now I expect that a number of you have had to overcome far worse adversity and many more difficult challenges to get to where you are tonight. But with the weight of that sad story off my shoulders, I stand before you with a message of hope and excitement as you each venture out on your own individual journey, way over yonder to the place you are bound to the land where the honey runs in rivers each day and the sweet tastin' good life is so easily found; a way over yonder that's where you're bound.



As you can see, I bring this message at a great risk of having you all think I am actually an outdated woman who lives in the '70s and goes around conflating lyrics from Carole King's famous 1971 album, *Tapestry*. I make no apologies. Classics live on.

This is such an exciting time of your lives; you have graduated and now many wonderful opportunities await you. But regardless of the career you have chosen, it will not always be easy; things will not go as you planned and there will be many hurdles along the way.

I have enjoyed a lucky life. I am in a role that I find interesting, challenging and rewarding; it is such an honour and a privilege to have practised in the law as I have and then to have served as a judge of the District Court and now as a Justice of the Supreme Court. I had a great childhood, a wonderful husband and family (yes, including my crazy dog Frankie). I have loyal and fabulous chums and many interests.

But make no mistake, my journey was not a conventional or an easy one; quite the roller coaster, really. To steal the lyrics of Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, I squandered my existence for a pocketful of mumbles ... all lies and jest but still a woman hears what she wants to hear and disregards the rest. (Okay, I promise no more music correlation at least until the end.)

But seriously, I have and I still do make mistakes. There are a few court of appeal decisions that are public testament to that. I have insecurities, regrets, failures, disappointments, heartbreak and, well, way too many embarrassing moments to count.

So, in bringing my message tonight, I want to be frank as I share some of my personal journey since I sat at the family table in Cairns all those years ago, my tears soaking my crumbled QTAC offer, thinking my life had been ruined before it had even started.

My story is not being told from what some media outlets like to refer to as my ivory tower, as a Judge of the Supreme Court. But rather as a woman who, in preparing to speak to you tonight, has let herself reflectively indulge and has allowed herself to be nostalgically transported back in time to her youthful self, a time full of glorious indulgent exciting insightlessness, to a journey that first commenced when Bruce Springsteen and Clarence Clements came to town in '85, when Expo '88 made Brisbane come alive, and when even gals with curly hair got a perm.

The starting point is that I really wanted to be a journalist, a foreign correspondent. But my father, who I respected and adored, discouraged me. I think he was mainly happy I studied law so he and his engineering mates could amuse themselves recounting bottom-of-the-ocean kind of lawyer jokes.

I am embarrassed to say that, despite going to an excellent law school, I did not work very hard when I did my degree, and surprise, surprise, my marks truly reflected that. But I got through and then commenced two years' articles of clerkship when I was about 21 to 22.

My experience of going out into the big world after my graduation was not an easy one. I entered the work force as a young graduate with truly no idea. I was incredibly naïve and immature and lacked direction and, to a great extent, enthusiasm for the career I had fallen into.



I didn't have a great experience undertaking my articles. One was due to my immaturity, but my early experience in the workforce also included being exposed to sexual harassment and bullying. In those days, saying something did not seem like a realistic option if you wanted to keep your job. It remains a regret of mine to this day that I didn't stand up to some entirely unacceptable workplace conduct.

But then, I perhaps have something to thank for these experiences, because it made me angry. It made me determined. It also led me to running away, exploring, living a life that I had not expected – it gave me the opportunity to take up some new challenges and travel a different path.

So, much to my parent's chagrin, after being admitted as a solicitor at 23, I bought a one-way ticket overseas, and I landed in London with a thousand dollars to my name, which was equivalent to about 400 pounds. For the next three years, I worked as a nanny, tennis coach and as a legal inquiries officer. I had never seen snow – and could only cook two-minute noodles – but I managed to score a job as a chalet girl in France. That is where I learnt to juggle. I also travelled overland from St Petersburg nearly all the way home to Australia.

By the time I came back to Australia – over 3 years later – I had negative \$1,000 but a great desire and determination to pursue a career in the law.

I hadn't made things that easy for myself, having had a break and little post-admission experience – although I could get down most black runs and I could pour a very good beer – I really had to start at the bottom of the rung as a first year solicitor. I worked really long hours and after a while I found a real strength in being able to write, analyse and apply the law; it was not all beer and skittles. It is hard when you think you can write, and you get back a draft letter with red pen all over it. And it was hard being sent off to court at the last moment with a file you knew nothing about, only to be yelled at by a judge. For those of you going into the law, don't worry, most judges don't yell that much anymore.

It was also hard being me because embarrassing things just kept happening.

Like the time I was at a big client function at the races – all dressed up in my best suit – feeling fine, doing my best to mingle, but I had felt all afternoon that people were looking at me and I was quietly thinking *I really don't think I look that good*. But then one of the clients said to me, "How is your leg? You poor thing, what did you do?" And I looked down. To my horror, it seems that some toilet paper (it was clean) had wrapped on the inside of my stockings on my calf, and it looked like a big bandage. What do you do? You go to the ladies, remove it, have a laugh at yourself and keep going.

I eventually worked up the courage to do the bar prac course and I became admitted as a barrister in 2001. I remember thinking, *well if this doesn't work, I might just go back overseas*.

I was 33 at this time – single and with little savings – the bank would not give me an overdraft, so I got a credit card with a \$10,000 limit. I seriously remember one senior (male) barrister saying to me at the time, "Well, you know your chances of finding a husband and having children now that you are at the bar have diminished considerably."



Again, I was lucky I had amazing mentors when I came to the bar. A few people that saw potential in me that I had only started to see in myself. People that I met during my time as an articled clerk, later as solicitor and chums from law school came out of the woodwork and really supported me by sending me briefs. Other barristers referred briefs to me or got me in as a junior.

I was lucky, but I worked incredibly hard, and along the way I also managed to find a way to forgive myself for, perhaps, squandering some opportunities that I had been given in my earlier days, and moving forward.

Although the embarrassing moments continued – including going to court with two different shoes on or turning up to court with robes on but without my jabot. In my defence, I had stayed up all night to get submissions handed in for a trial I was in, so dressing properly was the farthest thing from my mind.

Now, as I have said, I have never really done things that conventionally. Contrary to what that old Nostradamus at the bar had predicated, I met my husband when I was 38 and we married at 40, and I had my children in my 40s. I don't mean to suggest I am still in my forties.

Again, I did not make things easy for myself. I had 20 rounds of IVF and a number of issues along the way to have my wonderful son and my daughter.

And yes, I have regrets that perhaps I should have taken more time off when the children were younger. They are now 13 and 11, but I can still remember sitting in Chambers, sobbing into my double breast pump at 11 o'clock at night.

But our children seem to be going okay. Both of them say that they will never study law because you have to work too hard. Eliza's favourite saying at the moment is, "You are not the judge of me." Tim also tells me that my relentless nagging of him on a Saturday morning to pick up his things when he is having his 'downtime' is actually making him very unhappy. So, maybe I am doing my job well as a mum.

My life as a judge still means that I do not spend as much time with the family as I would like, but it has brought a better work-life balance than the six to seven days a week I was working when I was at the bar.

My elevation to the bench has not necessarily levitated me above those embarrassing moments. My robes constantly get caught in my chair, and only last week when I was sitting in court – I took my heels off under the bench – and had to scramble inelegantly to find them before court adjourned!

I am telling these tales of myself not to dampen your sprits or to cause you alarm about the current state of the judiciary. To the contrary, it is all of these experiences combined that have led me to my life at this point. Because without these experiences, I am not sure I would have learnt the true meaning of hard work, perseverance, resilience, empathy, humility, kindness, wisdom and love.

Though, quite frankly, I am not quite sure what I was supposed to have learnt from the toilet paper in the stocking story.



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So as you go way out yonder, I am confident that wonderful professional achievements await each of you in your chosen profession. But make sure you have some adventure too. Don't be afraid to take up challenges in all aspects of your life and embrace being part of the broader community.

And please don't be afraid to be yourself, and to make choices and decisions about your career and life that suit you best, rather than on the basis of a perceived norm or stereotype of what a woman in your chosen profession or age looks like, or how she is supposed to act. If you always strive to be yourself, work hard and do your best, good things will follow.

And when those challenging times happen – as they will – and at the risk of ending on a note that removes all doubt that I am a definitely a mad woman hell-bent on dishing out folksy home-spun advice from '70s and '80s pop culture, I want to leave you with one final piece of advice from none other than Bob Marley and the Whalers: "Don't worry about a thing, 'cause every little thing is gonna be all right."