

June 11, 2010

Speech at the University of Calgary Spring Convocation

**Irene Lewis,
President and CEO,
SAIT Polytechnic**

Lieutenant Governor Ethell, Eminent Chancellor Cuthbertson, Board Chairman Perraton, Interim President Veale, Graduands and Distinguished Guests.

Thank you for this honour.

For the past 12 years I have stood on a similar stage, shaking the hands of thousands of proud SAIT Polytechnic graduates, sharing in their triumph and joy.

Today, I am on the other side of the handshake, and I have to tell you, it feels wonderful. I am very grateful and truly flattered to accept this prestigious honour from the University of Calgary.

I think it is safe to say that most of us who choose this field of education are not driven by awards ... or even money for that matter
... but at this stage of my career, it is humbling to know that one's efforts have been noticed and are appreciated.

It is especially gratifying for me to be honoured by *this* University, an institution with such a proud history and a recognized record of fueling the prosperity of this province and this nation. In fact, if I have it right, a U of C grad is leading this country right now.

It feels right, too, that you are the audience today, because SAIT, in 1916 until the 1960s, was known as the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art and was the location of teacher-training in Calgary in the 1920s to the 1940s ... back when it was called the U of C "Normal School."

I am a big believer in acknowledging such "moments" as this in our lives. These occasions are the reason photo albums are among the first things people reach for when they are forced to evacuate their homes. You are enjoying a moment today, and so am I – but we all know none of us got here on our own.

As I like to say to my team, it is not about the *me*, it is about the *we*. This honorary degree reflects 47 professional years of collaboration and cooperation, working with others to forge solutions and

to achieve success. It is about joint efforts with which I am proud to associate my name and my reputation.

Again, Chancellor Cuthbertson, thank you for this tribute.

There is no question that as graduates you are leaving with very impressive credentials. And as you enjoy your “moment” today, I hope you take time to create one for those who helped to get you here – whether parents, friends, professors, this fine institution...or even this province who have invested far more into your education than you likely realize.

In fact, graduates, let’s take the opportunity to do that right now with a round of applause for those who guided us to this moment in time.

(Lead applause)

Thank you.

As I mentioned earlier, I have been in the field of education for 47 years.

Now graduates, that may seem like a lifetime to you, but I know the heads of some parents will be nodding when I say ... “believe me, the decades ahead will pass faster and faster. And that you will not always land where you imagined.”

I’ll share with you a small piece of my journey to being here today. In 1967, at age 23, I was newly married and teaching elementary school in Kelowna. Eleven months later I was pregnant.

And while you may find this incomprehensible today, as soon as my “baby bump” began to show – I was shown the door. And I was a “respectably” married woman!

Without a paycheque – and long before the time of maternity benefits – this left my husband and me in a difficult financial position. He had recently started a new business. To say the least, money was tight.

While I was no Scarlett O’Hara, I *did* resort to using the drapes on the window to fashion a couple of maternity tops. My early training as a seamstress really paid off!

I also found myself collecting bottles along the road to buy food. At that time, bottles were worth two cents apiece, so you can imagine how long it took to gather and sell enough for groceries. Hot dogs became a staple.

To this day, I must admit, I do not count hot dogs among my favourite foods. I could have asked my parents for help. But they had been opposed to my marriage, so my pride interfered. I did not want to hear them say, “We told you so.”

If, at that point, my fairy godmother had arrived with a crystal ball to reveal my future, I would have had a hard time believing the journey that lay before me.

By the age of 24, I was back teaching grade one and I had a child. My husband and I had made it through challenging times – and had a beautiful son to show for it.

Five years later, at age 30, I was a divorced single mom. I was teaching; I had returned to university as a part-time student; and money was still tight. But I was determined that circumstances would not dictate my future.

Certainly, I could have bemoaned my existence and the pressure I was under – and for awhile I did feel sorry for myself. I cried a lot, and blamed the world for the circumstances in which I found myself.

In those moments of despair, I asked myself three questions:

- Do I expect a saviour to lead me to a better place?

- Do I believe I am entitled to someone's help in fixing this situation?

Or ...

- Should I look at the situation objectively, and consciously make decisions to change the outcome?

As you know, it is rarely the easiest path that turns a situation around. When there is something that needs to be done – no matter how difficult – we make a choice.

Mine? It was to move on.

I taught higher grades.

I taught illiterate adults who were striving to overcome their challenges and improve their lives.

I produced educational programs for Aboriginal people, then worked in Singapore for several years before returning to Alberta to become President of Norquest College in Edmonton.

That was followed 12 years ago by my appointment to SAIT.

Through all of these experiences it was my good fortune to work with people who inspired me – sometimes by what they did well... and sometimes by what they did not.

In both cases, most of what I learned was about how I would like to be defined... which is more about becoming *someone*, rather than *something*. And *that* can have as much influence on your career as anything.

I learned through my experiences:

- To always acknowledge hard work;
- To give credit where it is due;
- To always remember to say thank you;

- To look people in the eye;
- To be respectful;
- And, to listen.... I mean *really* listen closely and mindfully – to truly understand what people are saying.

Through your journeys, I encourage each and every one of you to pause on occasion and actively and thoughtfully think about how you want to be defined.

You have already achieved so much – and while this is a day to celebrate that, it also begs the question – what is next?

I believe it is healthy to imagine your next great accomplishment – but also to always stay open to new possibilities and opportunities that feed your passion.

I never would have imagined that my passion for education would lead me to boardrooms after years in classrooms.

Believe me, sometimes the knock of opportunity can be so faint you will barely hear it. But if you have inner strength to open that door, the determination to step through and the courage to walk a new path, it just might lead somewhere extraordinary.

It is *your* dream. It is *your* definition of success. And ... may I suggest that you do *not* let anyone dictate it for you.

And while you are imagining all that might be possible in your life, I hope you will always appreciate what you have been given, too.

You are among the most fortunate people on earth. You inhabit a prosperous, tolerant and safe country. Previous generations sacrificed a great deal so that you could pursue your dreams and visions free from repression.

Most of our world's youth and their families can only dream of a primary and secondary education. For them, post-secondary studies are beyond imagination.

I know your education has been hard work, but it is also a privilege. And with that comes responsibility ... to yourselves, to your families, to your workplaces and your communities.

In closing,

I wish you strength to weather challenging times.

I wish you success – however you define it.

And I wish you happiness.

Congratulations class of 2010!