

Graduation speech for Helena College Class of 2021

By: Frances Theunissen

Thank you for inviting me here today, it is an honour to speak to you, the 2021 graduating class. Somehow it feels both *a life-time ago* and also like *just yesterday* that I was here for my own graduation...but here we are 11 years later, it is actually quite surreal.

I have always been a highly competitive, Type A, overachiever that definitely likes to be the best at things (what I like to call a bit of an academic psycho, and I'm sure my teachers that are here tonight know exactly what I'm talking about). To give you an idea, I was the only student in my graduating year at Helena to finish on straight A's, and after just missing out on dux of Science, I remember being absolutely devastated when this wasn't even acknowledged at my graduation awards night. Just ask my dad – he was pretty salty about it. But here I am tonight, talking to you about my journey over the last 11 years. To be honest – being asked to speak to you and impart any wisdom that I can, as you enter this next exciting phase of your life, truly means so much more.

I graduated from Helena in 2010 and went straight on to study my undergraduate degree at the University of Western Australia. I completed my Bachelor of Science majoring in Human Biology and Psychology in 2014. During my undergraduate years I had always aspired to gain entry to medical school, to one day become a doctor. I applied several times throughout these years; however, I was unsuccessful time and time again. After graduating my BSc and having yet another application rejected, I had no idea what to do next (thinking my life was over and that I was a failure), with a little bit of heartbreak thrown in the mix, I did what any normal person would do, I fled Perth and booked a one-way ticket to America.

I ended up working on board luxury superyachts for some of the world's richest people. If anyone is familiar with the reality TV show *Below Deck*, that was what my life was like. I travelled the world for the next 2 years and lived in many places like the Mediterranean, Caribbean, Bahamas, USA, Costa Rica and many more. I lived in crew quarters (the size of a shoe box) with 12 other crew members all with different nationalities and from different cultures. To say this was challenging is an understatement (especially because we all know girls can sometimes be really bitchy). During this time, to say I had some crazy experiences doesn't even cover it. Despite being a personal slave to the rich, I gained very interesting insights into how the other half live. Although, the work was tough and the hours were long, you can't put a price on waking up in a different country each day and getting to experience cultures that I never thought I would have the privilege to. After describing this kind of lifestyle, most people always respond to me with the same question "why the hell did you could back". Well, all I can say is....there is only so many times that you can

iron someone's underwear and listen to them talk down to you for 20 minutes about how to correctly slice an avocado, before you're at your wits end.

Never losing sight of my ultimate goal, I always intended to return to Perth to pursue further studies and try to reapply for medical school. I moved home in 2017 and started my Honours degree at UWA. Adjusting back to normal life was incredibly challenging after living in a fantasy world for 2 years. During this time, with another broken-heart in the mix my mental health struggled. To help ground me after working for the rich I took a job as a youth worker for kids at risk of homelessness, at a youth shelter in Midland. This helped to bring me back down to Earth and reconnect me with reality. As graduation for my next degree was fast approaching, I still had no idea what to do next, so I decided to convert my Honours degree into a Masters of Biomedical science, to wait out the next application round for medical school.

I graduated my Masters mid-year in 2018, and having another medical school application rejected, I began volunteering at a Neurodegenerative Disease Research Institute. At the time I didn't know much about neurodegenerative diseases or what it even meant to work at a research institute. However, I was able to get stuck into my own project straight away because of the lab skills I had learnt during my Honours year. After 3 months of volunteering, I had fallen in love with trying to solve the big questions about the genetic origins of neurodegenerative disease. I was offered a position as a part-time research assistant and soon after enrolled in a PhD to continue pursuing knowledge, building my project and to ask bigger research questions. I then applied for a PhD scholarship to make sure that I was able to financially support myself during this next phase of my studies, however, can you guess....yep, this application was also rejected. Safe to say, this did not help my complex of not feeling like I wasn't good enough no matter how hard I tried. Luckily, I have a boss and PhD supervisor that assured me that I had merely slipped through the cracks of a flawed system; that I needed to keep persevering, that I was in fact good enough and that he believed in me.

I am now part of the motor neurone disease genetics and therapeutics team. We focus on the development of genetic markers and tailored therapeutics approaches, to find new treatments for people with motor neurone disease. I am part of a start-up pharmaceutical company that designs targeted messenger RNA therapies and fast tracks them to MND clinical trials. I have had the privileged of presenting my research at international conferences and working with esteemed international collaborators in my field. I have published several research papers and have also had one of my scientific breakthroughs featured on the national news. More recently, I was awarded a quare of a million dollars in funding, to continue my work beyond my PhD. *Although, I never ended up going to medical school, I am very grateful that I have had so many amazing experiences and found another way that I can help people that*

I never previously thought possible. When I graduate mid next year, I will be a Dr of molecular genetics. I will still be a doctor, just not the kind that I thought I would be in high school.

To conclude my speech this evening I would like to leave you with a few life lessons that really resonated with me after reflecting on my journey over these last 11 years. So even if you haven't been listening to anything I've just said, **TUNE IN NOW** because this is actually the most important part!

Lesson 1: Don't feel guilty if you don't know what you want to do with your life. The most interesting people I know didn't know at 22 (let alone 17) and some of the most interesting 40-year-olds I know, still don't have a clue.

Lesson 2: Building relationships will be imperative to your success. The world has a funny way of bringing the same types of relationships into your life, whether they be professional, personal or romantic, they will keep popping up until you learn your lesson....so a good motto is this: don't be reckless with other people's hearts, and certainly don't put up with people who are reckless with yours.

This next one is a big one!

Lesson 3: YOU ARE GOOD ENOUGH! So please be kind to yourself and look after your mental health. In times of a global pandemic, where travel may not be possible, pursue knowledge instead, volunteer, there are still many ways to seek new experiences, and when world opens up, please get vaccinated so you can go and explore. You will learn so much, not only about the world but about yourself.

Lastly, lesson 4: Life sometimes has more twists and turns than you were expecting. Don't waste your time on jealousy. Sometimes you're ahead, sometimes you're behind. The race is long, and in the end, it's only with yourself.

Finally, please remember, failure is not an option – it is the ONLY option for success.

Thank you and congratulations to the class of 2021!