

2019 Annual UTS Law Awards

Address by Rebekah Giles - Kennedy's partner and UTS Law Alumna

Faculty Dean, Members of the University, Distinguished Guests, Family and Friends but most importantly – award recipients.

Let me start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land, the Gadigal people of the Iora nation and pay my respects to their leaders – past, present and future.

Congratulations to each and every one of you. While this rainy Tuesday evening is no doubt your time to be proud of what you have achieved, I only have to look around the room to see that this moment also belongs to these other smiling faces. Your support crew: the parents, partners, children and friends who helped get you to this place today. To those people – for the endless lifts to the train station, the proof-reading, the short-term loans, loads of laundry, packed lunches – congratulations also to each of you.

And for those who, for whatever reason, made it here without that support, you have an even greater reason to be proud of what you have achieved.

When I come back to the University I often think of the day that I graduated - almost 20 years ago. I remember little of the details of that day. I certainly don't remember who gave the occasional address or what they said or who received honours and prizes for what. I do however remember that my parents and my late grandparents visited a University for the first time in their lives. I was so proud to show off to them what had been my world for the past 5 years.

And I couldn't believe it when, at the reception that followed, my grandmother struck up a very lengthy and seemingly intense conversation with former Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia and University Chancellor Sir Gerrard Brennan. I wondered what pearls of wisdom were being imparted to my sweet grandmother by

this brilliant legal mind? Given they spoke for the entire duration of the reception, I knew that it was going to be mind-blowing.

When I spoke to my grandmother I was informed that the conversation was mostly about how to make a really great chicken sandwich. He made her feel special by having her talk about her passion for cooking and she went away feeling great about herself and of course having no idea that she had met one of the greatest legal minds of our time.

That story always makes me smile and reminds me that while I was at that time, as I should have been, so focused on my achievements, I had no idea that life lessons were being imparted to me that would have a profound effect on my life and my development as a lawyer and a person.

In my daily life, I meet lots of lawyers and law students. And I'll tell anyone who will listen what a special law school UTS is and how unique it is in its approach to learning. My lecturers were real life lawyers with real life experience who held a genuine interest in my success. If you have received an award this evening my guess is that you are not a stranger to the faculty staff. You would have been the recipient of chats about your assignment, feedback on presentations, coffees about legal developments.

You see, when I was at University, I was focused on accumulating knowledge and information, developing an expertise and all of those other quantitative measures that are said to form part of the formula of success. What I didn't know is that beyond my first job, my academic transcript didn't actually matter. This may fly in the face of a lot of things you may have heard, but for me - it was all of the other things that have been the point of difference for me - the processes, the skills and other qualitative measures. Developing analytical and logical thinking - the ability to persuade and influence, but most importantly, recognising and harnessing the power of personal relationships.

As a student, I was encouraged to fearlessly connect with total strangers who then became trusted mentors and advisors. Buoyed by a self-belief that perhaps I was

not entitled to, I pursued areas of interest that set me on the same path I walk today. So many people selflessly invested into my development – and this is something that informs and motivates much of what I do today.

And I can tell you all of this with confidence because when I have faced adversity my credentials and achievements were largely meaningless. It has been my responses to adversity that have defined me as a person and also as a lawyer. I've read a lot about resilience and there are a range of theories about whether it is innate or whether it can be developed. I don't have the answers but what I can tell you is that in the really tough moments – that involved extreme physical and mental challenge – using my lawyer mind to process things rationally and logically, to distil overwhelmingly large and heavy concepts into digestible pieces, as well as having a mindset of gratitude – that focused me on moving forward instead of wallowing in self-pity. That is not to say that I didn't have bad days – I had many. But it was a long road to recovery – both physically and mentally. And I'm convinced that this perhaps misplaced self-belief that willed me through the 140 plus surgeries, a return to legal practice and fast tracked me to partnership.

I was also willed to complete recovery by my own support crew which comprised of people from so many spheres of my life. As a student, I learnt how important it was to be part of a community, invest my time and financial resources into things that are bigger than myself and my personal aspirations. And it's been my experience, without exception, that living generously is a proven pathway to happiness.

As lawyers it's so easy for us to do this. We are trained to be skilled communicators, to advocate for others, to influence outcomes and be change makers. And this is not limited to legal practice – these transferrable skills can be used to powerful effect elsewhere. I have been lucky enough to contribute through corporate governance and philanthropy to organisations and causes that hold special significance to me. My involvement with these organisations genuinely enriches my life, give it meaning and purpose and actually make me a better lawyer.

And while you may not be able to do this at this level right now, I encourage each of you to expand your horizons, pursue your interests, give of yourself without

expecting anything in return, interact with the world around you. At the end of the day, while some legal concepts are, legal practice itself is not abstract. It really is the very best preparation you can give yourself for your no doubt bright careers ahead.

I thank you for the privilege of being able to speak with you tonight and again congratulate you on your awards.