

BHS Prize-Giving Speech. February, 2013

I graduated from BHS in 1983 – 30 years ago. Those were the best years of my life. I remember sunshine, laughter, music, Inter-House competitions when Vyfhuis always won. Over the years, I have had many dreams and aspirations, but being offered the privilege to be the guest speaker at a Bishops' Prize Giving was something beyond my dreams.

I would like to speak to you today about Purpose-Driven Education

1. Close your eyes and picture yourself in 20 years' time. Visualize your home, family, neighbourhood. Now open your eyes. What steps do you need to take to get from this Oswald Parry Hall to that dream?
2. If attaining that dream involves acquiring a University degree, first get more information about the degree and how marketable it is. Then investigate the university, its accreditation by legal entities, and its recognition by prospective employers. While medicine, law and engineering are seen as traditional high income earners, there are many other less expensive fields of study which may generate greater income. Look for less popular fields where you could end up being the leading expert. The next world war may be about water. And Guyana, the Land of many waters, could be a crucial player if we protect our natural water sources. Above all, choose something you love.
3. An important step is to determine what skills you need to succeed in life. Honesty, ethics, integrity and a positive attitude have always been the hallmarks of Bishops' High School students.
4. Other crucial skills you will need, are critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, communication and negotiating skills. Furthermore, being in the elite top 1% of students nationwide and attending the top school in Guyana means that you are Guyana's next leaders. Hence you also need to acquire leadership skills.

Critical Thinking is asking yourself - does it make sense? Ask questions - who, what, why, where and when. Does it make sense that after years of going to school, many young persons have difficulty finding jobs, and many employers complain about how hard it is to find good staff?

Problem solving – Children are Guyana’s single most valuable resource. The country’s future is literally in your hands. Less than 20% of the students who sit the Grade VI Assessment, eventually achieve good grades at CXC. This seriously jeopardizes our country’s development. We need to urgently improve the performance of the bottom 50% of students. These children drop out of school. Instead of being an asset, a significant number become drug addicts and criminals and are a burden to the police, health and social services. You are the best ones to tell us where we went wrong in primary education, and how we could rectify it. Children can understand and communicate with each other better. Maybe you could do outreaches to other schools and teach those children, especially Maths and English. It would give them a foundation so they can access better jobs and it would do wonders for their self-esteem. This process of teaching others will help cement your own understanding of your subject and also help you to develop your communication skills. There was a first form student who was getting less than 50% in maths. So we met on Saturday mornings for a couple months. He would explain to me what he had done in maths that week. [I am outdated and did not know that stuff.] That term, he doubled his grade to over 90%. The self esteem boost spilled over into his other subjects. Teaching others is a win win situation for everyone.

Creativity. Guyana has a very scattered population living in different kinds of terrain. We need creative solutions to make potable water, electricity, health, communication and education accessible to all. Stimulate your creative brain by indulging in the arts. Music, dancing, poetry, drama are all vital parts of your development. I did every single one of these while I was a student here. Do not be unidimensional. Facebook, Amazon and e-bay are thanks to the creativity of very young men. When you study history, you will see that the survival of populations depended on the creativity of young persons.

Leadership skills. Understanding people is a pre-requisite for good leadership skills. Select someone in your class whom you do not know very well. Challenge yourself over a period of months, to get to know that child better. There was a girl in my class in Medical School. She was loud and bumptious and I could not stand her. One day, I visited her home in Jamaica’s countryside, and admired her so much after hearing and seeing her amazing life story. She had to fight for everything which I took for granted. She is now one of my closest friends, and indeed, is the only friend

who visited me when I was living in Kenya. Who knows, you may discover a new BFF - best friend forever. Try it.

Negotiating skills – School motto says “Labor Omnia Vincit” - Work conquers all. While discipline and hard work are essential, there are other important and vital ingredients in the success recipe.

I have 3 children. For the past 10 years, when we travel, we sometimes have to plead with airlines for the privilege of being seated together. 5 years ago, while waiting to embark on a 17 hour flight from Dhubai to New York, I discovered that we were not seated together AGAIN, despite our travel agent booking our seats beforehand. After yet another unsuccessful pleading session with the airline, I dejectedly returned to my husband and children to discover that my 3 year old was missing. Dubai airport terminal is bigger than any mall in Guyana. I had to go to the police outpost. It was a shattering experience. For years I cried anytime I spoke about it. Recently, I decided to take a strategic approach, and use the negotiating and debating skills which I acquired while a student here at Bishops. At one time I was on the same debating team with Nigel Hughes!

My premise is that the airline states that young children are not to travel alone. The golden rule is that one must always negotiate from a position of strength.

The setting: Piarco International Airport, Trinidad.

“Madam, since the airline has decided to give other passengers the responsibility of taking care of my children during the flight, as a parent, I have the right to be given details about these persons, especially their resuscitation skills in the event of a disaster. Furthermore, I am entitled to a copy of the results of the information gathered during your screening of these persons to assure my husband and me that you have not put our children to sit next to any pedophile.” We were seated together without any further ado.

Playing chess is very good for developing your strategic skills. Practise negotiating with your parents. Justify why you must have that particular school bag or shoe. Do not say it is because everybody has it, but rather because of its durability and comfort, etc. Negotiate with the school board to modify the curriculum to include Mandarin, the new international language of

business, Hindi in order to be eligible to work in local upcoming special projects, and Portuguese to tap into the growing Brazilian presence here, and also to take advantage of Guyana's relationship with the largest country in South America. Negotiate with the Ministry of Education to allow you to pursue science in the 6th Form in order to join the proud band of top class BHS Scientists. Develop cogent arguments why your feedback about your school experience is vital. It is mandatory to collect student feedback in tertiary institutions. Why not in secondary and primary schools also? Aren't your opinions important? Recognise that you are the centre-piece. Document your assessment of individual teachers, the curriculum, after-school activities, school premises, cafeteria, etc. Firmly ensure that the PTA and the School Board take your documented opinion into consideration when making plans about your education. Combine these negotiating skills with polite assertiveness. They may be life-saving as you enter the hazardous world of work, marriage and politricks.

Above all, do not let anyone damage your self-esteem. In the event that you are living in a hostile or nightmare environment at home, tell someone. Such an environment will hinder your education, development, future and enjoyment of life. Today will never come back again. Do not let anyone rob you of your childhood. Remember, you are an exceptional treasure, who has not yet reached your full potential.

Congratulations. And have a wonderful prize-giving. Thank you.

Dr. Vivienne Mitchell-Amata