

Graduation 2013

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Sir Keith Mills

Well what a wonderful afternoon and well done to everyone who picked up their degrees today. I'd particularly like to express my appreciation and administration for the lady graduands who have I think very elegantly managed to work their way down the steps and up again with the most extraordinary high heels I've ever seen in my life. Well done to the ladies.

I took a look over the weekend through the past recipients of honorary doctrines here at Essex and I have to say it's a really very impressive list. Going back to the early days of the university, our then prime minister Harold Wilson was given a doctrine and in recent years some of the most famous I guess and impressive individuals in business and the arts. David Dimbleby I seem to remember and Helen Mirren and I understand that yesterday one of my favourite singers Annie Lennox received an honorary doctrine to. So an extraordinary list of honorary doctrines and I have to say I stand here very honoured to receive this degree today.

I'd certainly never imagined when I was 16 in the D-stream, that's the lowest stream, of a secondary modern school in Brentwood Essex, just down the A12 from here, I'd ever see the inside of a university let alone receive an honorary degree. I think at 15 my school had basically given up on me, so as certainly the least educated of the graduands here today I have to tell you I feel very humble, particularly as I know or assume most of you worked jolly hard for your degrees and all I got was a latter in the post, which is a much easier way of getting one incidentally.

I know how proud I was when my two children had their graduation. My wife and I sat in the audience were very proud of their achievements and I'm sure all the friends and family that are supporting you today will be equally proud of what you've done. Congratulations everyone and a very well done.

For many of you here today I know your future career is well set and you know exactly what you're going to do. But for others the future looks a little less certain, you probably know exactly what you want to do but you've yet to land your first job, or perhaps simply looking around to see what to do next. Wherever you are the one thing that is sure, life will through all sorts of numerous challenges and opportunities at you and it's how you'll deal with them that's most important.

Listening to my citation then you might well imagine that my career has been all plain sailing but you'd be very very wrong. There have been some very hairy moments I can tell you. In fact I don't know anyone, that includes some of the most famous and successful people in this country, that's haven't had to cope with adversity in their lives and in their careers. It's how you deal with these challenges that is key in my opinion.

Over the last 10 years I've been lucky enough to work with some of the country's greatest athletes; indeed some of the world's greatest, all of them without exception have faced really tough times in their careers. Sometimes physical challenges through injury, sometimes mental challenges when they lose their ability to win. For many of them their failures are made even worse because of the media attention that they receive, I guess that Andy Murray in recent weeks a good example of that point.

Some of the most amazing stories that I personally heard are from our Paralympic athletes, their stories of overcoming their disability and then competing on the world stage are quite simply amazing.

So how do all these amazing people do it? What lessons can we learn? Well first of all they have this amazingly positive outlook to life. However grim things seem for them the glass is always full. Secondly they're not afraid of hard work. I don't know anyone that's been successful in business or anything else for that matter that has not had to work jolly hard to achieve success. Thirdly they're unbelievably tenacious. They never ever give up and I'm a taurean and much to the frustration of my wife who's sitting in the audience here, that I just keep going, a bit like that energy battery and I see that in certainly all the successful people I meet that is a successful trait. And finally most of the vast majority of them give back and I've always thought that life's like a piggy bank, you can only take out what you put in, you just can't take all the time.

In this country and indeed around the world over the next 5 or maybe 10 years things are going to be tough economically. Unemployment will continue I think to be a problem and salaries and standard of livings will stagnates. But as with previous recessions around the world, there'll be plenty of opportunities for those with drive, imagination and a positive attitude.

I say to you be ambitious. Reach for the stars and you'll be surprised what's out there. My mum from Brentwood was my inspiration. Despite starting work at 15 with no qualifications she told me that I could do anything I wanted to, as long as I set my mind to it. Last year as you heard Seb Co and I lead a team of over 200'000 people that delivered the largest event that this country has seen in peacetime, the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. Over 3 Billion people around the world watched and listened to the games and over 30'000 media came to the Olympic games following every part of the event.

So what would all these people say about this amazing event we were preparing to organise, what would they say about the 2012 Olympic games? Would it be the best sporting event ever? Would the venues be ready and working? Would our transport in London be able to cope and most importantly would we be able to keep everyone safe?

Well thankfully it all seemed to go pretty well, there were no disasters and I think everyone can look back on 2012 with great pride but I can tell you back in 2003 when we started to plan the games and prepare the bid against 8 other countries it looked like a daunting task. The public support for the games was very low, the media were basically hostile and the prospect of first beating 8 other countries and then organizing a massively complex event seemed almost impossible. But somehow we pulled it off. Last summer was I believe not only the biggest and best sporting and cultural festival we have ever seen in this country but it really lifted the nation. It boosted our reputation around the world and it made us all feel very proud.

So as you now move onto your next phase in your life and deal with the challenges that come your way I suggest you take a little advice from my mum. "Aim high, you can do whatever you want to do, you can be whatever you want to be". I took her advice and I haven't done too bad.

Congratulations everyone and thank you very much.