

Oration for Ms Anne Wafula Strike MBE

Anne Wafula Strike MBE is a British Paralympic wheelchair racer, and an ambassador for the charities ADD, Action on Disability and Development, and Right to Play.

She is also a living example to us all here today of courage, commitment, and determination: her startling achievements have done much to challenge misconceptions about disabilities.

Although she now lives in Harlow in Essex, Anne was born in Kenya, and was a fit and healthy child. She was given the middle name of Olympia at birth, which turned out to have prophetic significance some years later. Anne contracted polio when she was only two years old, resulting in a later diagnosis of below T7 paralysis; this was to set her life along a very different path.

Following Anne's partial recovery from her illness, she pursued an education that involved taking her A-levels and then graduating from Moi University with a first class Bachelor of Education Degree.

But there were some difficult times along the way. Superstitious villagers in Kenya believed that Anne's family were cursed following Anne's partial recovery from her illness, which forced the family to relocate to Nairobi.

After graduating, Anne taught **Swahili Language, and Communication Skills** at Machakos Technical College in Kenya in 1998, before meeting the man she would marry which led her to Britain, and to motherhood – and a celebrated career. So, that word, and Anne's middle name, Olympia, how was it prophetic?

Anne was introduced to the sport of wheelchair racing in 2002. Her future career as a Paralympic athlete got underway in 2004, as she became the first wheelchair racer from sub-Saharan Africa to compete at the Paralympics in Athens.

In 2006 Anne became a British citizen and joined Team GB and in 2007, as a team member of Paralympics GB, she won a bronze medal in the Paralympic World Cup, and came fourth place in the World Championships.

That year she was also officially recognised by the Queen at a Buckingham Palace reception for her work as a disabled athlete, and for her involvement in charity work for people with disabilities. In 2014 she was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's birthday honours for services to disability sport and charity.

Today, as an athlete, author and sporting ambassador, Anne inspires achievement and excellence across a broad range of life situations, with a generous sprinkling of Essex Spirit, too – through her motivational talks and appearances, which encourage others to overcome their own difficulties and maximise their potential.

A past winner of the BBC's *My Story* competition, Anne went on to write her autobiography, titled, *In my Dreams I Dance*, published by HarperCollins in 2010. A natural storyteller, Anne's book charts her journey from Kenya to Britain, punctuated with anecdotes of prejudice, friendship, and motherhood, leading to triumph over testing circumstances.

Today Anne is also a regular opinion columnist for *The Guardian* newspaper, focusing on disabled rights issues, and has written a number of articles challenging injustices and demanding that disabled people have a stronger voice in the decisions made by politicians which affect them.

In November last year, in an article titled *One in five British people are disabled. So why does politics continue to ignore us?* She wrote: "*The issue of disability rights has risen socially and culturally in recent years. Politically, however, disabled people remain in the shadows...*

Growing up in Kenya, my family and I had to flee my village because the community thought my disability had brought a curse. They wanted to burn our house down. We

are a long way from this in the UK, but disability hate crime is on the up, and many disabled people are experiencing poverty and isolation.”

She adds: “One of the critical steps to real inclusion is the full representation of disabled people in political life... disabled people must be in the room, on panels and in leadership teams.... integrated into all areas of political life. Until this happens, our voices remain silent.

I urge every person engaged in politics – from the community level to the national – to make sure you bring disabled people into your movements. Broaden your discussions. You cannot legislate for what you do not know.”

Overcoming adversity, achieving so much, but, crucially, not stopping there – going further, and continuing to fight with passion for equality: we believe these values are truly inspirational.

Thank you, Anne, for telling your incredible and inspiring story. Thank you for demonstrating your own Essex Spirit, and for inspiring all the graduands here today.

We are immensely proud to recognise and honour your achievements, and to welcome you to the University of Essex family.

Pro-Chancellor, I present to you Anne Strike.