

Anne Wafula Strike - Honorary Degree Acceptance Speech

Dear Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, honoured guests, families, and friends of graduates, and most importantly, Graduates.

I am thrilled and delighted to receive this honour from such a wonderful and forward-thinking University. It's a blessing to be in your midst together with my family.

And so, it is from a heart of thankfulness that I do not take the honour bestowed on me today lightly. And, I really wish my father, who is a great encouragement and inspiration in my life, could have been here today to witness this event. An event that is organised to celebrate and honour all your hard work and achievements at the University of Essex. Each of YOU is the future of this nation, a nation whose media, so often, does not look to young talented, and enthusiastic people like yourselves as a source of hope and inspiration, but rather, negatively speaks of young people. Well, I profoundly disagree with this perception of all of you who sat before me today.

To all of you graduating today, I never imagined that I could compete in the Paralympic Games but I did. No matter what your dream is pursue it. Hurdles may come in your way and it might be hard, but you have the world ahead of you and I encourage all of you to go out there and be the best you can be in whatever you choose to do.

Just look at Martin Hibbert. Paralysed from the waist down after being injured in the awful Manchester bombings in 2017. In June this year, Martin climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. What an amazing achievement.

You are also the generation that can make a real difference. The impact of the pandemic has opened many organisations eyes and made them realise they need to be better. They need to improve their diversity and inclusion; be more sustainable and provide better support for anyone who might be suffering from mental health.

"Be the change they want to See" within our society; a saying derived from Mahatma Gandhi.

Who would have imagined a girl born in a mud hut in rural Kenya, Africa, who contracted Polio at the age of two and half years and was therefore ostracised by villagers because of her disability, would go on to earn a degree in her own right in education, like all of you today - thanks to the belief and unconditional love that her father had in her. That little girl is me. As a young person with a disability, I used to have those days when I didn't know who I was anymore because of the stigma and prejudices that I faced. I often felt insecure, and excluded and that I did not "belong" in a world that so often only values those that are so-called "Normal"; not those with disabilities. But after a challenging physical, emotional, and spiritual journey, I found myself.

My father, who is my hero, believed in me and he also knew education was a magic key to life, and indeed it is. I ask each of you today, Who believed in you? Perhaps, one or both of your parents, carers, or foster parents, perhaps grandparents, or, one of the academic members of staff that are here today to celebrate your success with you. Today is a day to express your thanks to them--give them a hug, or maybe get a selfie with them!

In a celebrity culture, in which so many young people are constantly trying to be somebody else, one of the best pieces of advice I have heard is, "Be yourself". God only created one of you; you will never be truly content and happy trying to impersonate somebody else.

Decide today that you won't give up on your dreams and desires. Keep pressing forward, believing that you are very capable, regardless of how many times you may fail, you are blessed and empowered.

I always said if I was given a platform and a voice, I might say something worth listening to and here I am today, truly honoured to address you--I hope in some small way, that something of what I have shared of my life today, may have offered you hope, as you leave Essex University and create your own path in the world.

As a disabled woman, a teacher, a Paralympian, a charity worker, and a campaigner for disabled Rights and Inclusion, I believe our lives end and we die when we stay silent about issues that affect society. As you all take your next steps in your careers, remember to be kind, be supportive, and think before you judge. Be the generation that helps and truly recognises everyone is different but at the same time everyone should be treated the same. (Inclusion is an ACT and Diversity is a FACT!)

I wish you all the success and thank you again for this wonderful honour.