

## **Judith Judd – Honorary Degree Acceptance Speech**

I am amazed and honoured to be standing here today. Part of my job as a pro chancellor of the university was to sit where our pro chancellor is sitting today and to present honorary degrees. And what remarkable people the university's honorary graduates are: the nurse who caught ebola because he wouldn't desert his patients in an epidemic, the founder of a charity that supports black and minority ethnic teenagers, lifelong campaigners for human rights to name just a few.

How can a journalist possibly compare? I don't know how the parents here feel but it used to be the case that parents put journalism at the bottom of careers they wanted their children to follow: only estate agents and sometimes politicians did worse. So I started thinking about what contribution journalists make to the world and that led me on to think about you – graduates in language and linguistics and, I think, in some cases journalism too. You and I have this in common, that we trade in words. We think about words and how to use them and many of you will go on to jobs where you will spend a lot of time communicating your own thoughts or other people's.

And that's incredibly important. Words are dangerous things and in my lifetime that's never been more obvious than now. Our political leaders can use them to persuade people that a war is not a war, that they are threatened by the arrival of thousands of migrants when they are not and even that they should storm violently into the seat of the United State government. So using words accurately and responsibly matters. We may not be as obviously vital to society as nurses or scientists but the way we use our skills is just as important.

I wouldn't presume to tell you how to run your lives. You are Essex graduates and I'm sure you're as independent-minded as all the other Essex graduates I've met but I will just say that when I look back on my career I do wish that I'd sometimes had a little more courage: courage to speak up when I was the only woman in a meeting full of men who seemed to think that their contribution would be measured by the length of their speeches, courage to speak out when I was the only person in the room who believed that what was about to be agreed was wrong.

When I was first asked to be pro chancellor of Essex university, I asked what the role involved. Someone said to me: "Not much. You have to put on some scratchy robes and shake hands with some graduands on degree day."

How wrong they were. In the first place, they've made the robes less scratchy. Most importantly, it's been one of the great delights of my life to congratulate hundreds of smiling, proud graduates, sometimes wearing impossible shoes, sometimes giving me such a big hug that my hat fell off and always stamping and cheering to support their fellow students.

So thank you Essex and thank you particularly to all of you.