

Speech by Mrs. Kirsten (Butterworth) Faria at SGY 2010 Graduation Ceremony

Good evening! Faculty, parents, family and friends and to the stars of the night – the graduates -- Congratulations!

I am honoured to stand up here with you on this special occasion. Although I graduated from Saltus 17 years ago, I remember sitting right where you are now. With so many feelings bubbling up: excitement and relief, maybe mixed with a little fear; all of that overshadowed by the tremendous sense of freedom that comes with being a high school graduate. Whether you are about to head to university or down another path, you *have* earned a new degree of freedom – that is certain. But, with that new and expanded freedom there is also a new type of responsibility and self-sufficiency that you will need to develop. I hope to be able to give you some of my insights into what that means.

A few weeks ago I was sitting with some friends, all of whom have done varying things since high school. Some of them make gobs of money. Some live paycheck to paycheck. Some are happy with their jobs and some are miserable. By the way...some of the miserable one's are the ones making gobs of money. I asked them one simple question: if you could go back in time and give yourself any advice just after graduating high school, what would it be? The responses I got were.....let's just say.....colourful. But I did hear a few things that I wanted to share with you; some of which I wish I had heard when I was in your shoes.

Part of the conversation with my friends centered around how different your generation is from ours. After all, yours is truly the internet generation. Your social lives are guided by emails and texts and Facebook. Unlike you, computers didn't enter my classrooms until high school and email didn't come until university. I can't imagine what it is like to grow up with the kind of access to communication that you have had. The positive power of it is undeniable. But, as with everything good, there comes the potential for abuse.

To illustrate that, I asked the school to email me a list of the names of the graduates and I googled and facebooked each and every one of you. What I learned about you all for the most part was pretty impressive. Collectively you have achieved some fantastic awards and sporting feats.

That being said I was able to get pretty broad access to your personal lives by looking at the somewhat interesting and at times amusing pictures and postings

on your facebook pages, including: a slightly unsettling homage to Chinese food and declarations of undying love (I stopped reading that wall post after then 5th – “no, I miss you more”.) And ten points for the graduate who can guess which male classmate is still upset that Mufasa died in the Lion King.

And before you think that I am just some vaguely creepy woman with too little to do, let me dispel that by telling you I Google job applicants and I know that other employers make that part of their standard practice as well.

You aren't the first generation to do what you are doing, but you are the first generation to chronicle your social lives in a very public domain. So, our first piece of advice to you is: before you post a picture on Facebook or send a questionable email ask yourself the question – am I truly comfortable with putting this out there? Because once you click send it is not private anymore... Nothing is private anymore.

Another important element that came out of my conversation with my friends is the truth about what this new step forward means as regards your “sense of self.” What do I mean by your “sense of self?” When I look back on my high school years, one of the overriding themes that colours so many of my memories, is that I spent those years wanting to be someone else...or be more like someone else. I've realized now that I felt that way because I was only able to see myself through others' eyes and a large part of me revolted against the constraints of that.

An undeniable element of the high school years is the inevitable classification of you as a student; you as a person. Your teachers, your friends and classmates and yes, even those who love you most, your parents, tend to put teenagers into neat and tidy boxes. She's an athlete; he's an academic; she's the troublemaker. This next step of your life presents the opportunity to break from that box and from how others define you today. You get to start afresh in university, or in whatever the next stage of life brings, without being constrained by someone else's notion of who they think you are. That clean slate was one of the most valuable elements of my university experience.

So my friends and I advise that you should not underestimate the opportunity that a clean slate presents. Don't view yourself through others' eyes and assume that what they see is who you are. Years later, I now know that I am so much more than simply what others see in me. Unlike my teenage self - I have also

realised that it's more important to have found my own voice than to be a poor imitator of someone else's.

Since I am in a confessing mood, I'll tell you a secret. I have a fear of public speaking. I don't mean some silly fear of tripping and falling flat on my face. And I don't mean that I have a mild case of stage fright. I mean a gut-wrenching, throat closing, palpitation invoking and sweat inducing, physical reaction to public speaking. At this stage of my career, I present regularly to my executives and to clients that are CEOs and CFOs. So, how do I handle it? How am I able to get through situations, like this one?

Well, I asked for help. I sat down with my boss and explained to him the scope of the problem. He didn't laugh at me. He didn't judge me. He listened as I explained how I felt I could not only benefit myself, but also the company with the enhancement of my speaking skills. He listened and then helped me find the resources that I need to be better. I was neither embarrassed nor shy about asking for his help. I now recognize, that I don't have the skills to leap over every hurdle thrown in my path. I need help and will continue to need help. That admission, and the desire to progress despite my shortcomings, is the first step in overcoming any sense of embarrassment or failure.

So, that is our third nugget for you. Ask for help. You *will* need it. Everyone does. And don't wait to ask for it until it's too late. University is not high school. Your professors will not call your parents if you do not come to class, or hand in a paper or choose not to show up for an exam. They will not care that you had a sudden onset of a mysterious food poisoning (trust me, I tried that one and many more). They are academics and aside from teaching class they are focused on getting tenure, writing their next book, or on their blog...and they will not coddle you. But they WILL help you, if you are willing to ask.

It's a shocking concept (at least it was for me), but your professors actually expect you to care about your education. So it's up to you to care. Take full advantage of their expertise and the time that they offer to you. And remember that aside from your professors there are so many resources and support systems in universities that are there for you.

This very basic concept of asking for help is one that carries through into my life and my career now. I call it being an advocate for yourself. What do I mean by that? Well, you've all heard the expression "the squeaky wheel gets the grease".

Being an advocate for yourself is simply a more sophisticated and less whiney version of that old adage about asking for help.

Even with help, you know what? You will still make mistakes. And that's ok! It's expected actually. University is HARD, and I don't just mean the classes. There are all sorts of unexpected lessons waiting to be learned, and to be honest, most of them are outside the classroom. Some of them involve painful relationships, or the consequences of poor decisions. Whatever they are, today's trauma and drama, will be tomorrow's lesson. Let me share with you one of my experiences:

I'm a planner. I like to know what my path is, how I think I am going to get there, and what I need to do along the way. Entering university of course I had my plan. I was going to be done in 3 years -- not four -- and then enter law school and then start my wildly successful practice and voila -- my ready-made life awaited. As they say, the best laid plans.....

By my second year, I realized that the plan to finish early was dead in the water. Then about half a year later I reached burnout stage, and withdrew. I did end up going to back to school and finishing my degree, but it took 3 more years.

(sorry to make some parents out there shudder -- I'm still trying to make it up to mine). So, it took 6 years in total and some hard knocks along the way, but I finished. Although my dream of being the next Jack McCoy -- for those Law & Order fans - died by the end of it, I learned so much about myself from those failures. During our discussion, each of my friends gave similar examples of a perceived failure that ended up being a pivotal life lesson.

So we challenge you to have the courage to turn your wounds into wisdom. Inside each of you burns the spark of possibility - don't let a setback or the unexpected snuff it out.

I believe that one of the great things that will fan that spark and turn it into flames --- is your curiosity. Curiosity is one of the most powerful forces of creation and progression because it is inherently the desire to understand, to know and to better things. After all what is never questioned, can never be improved. All it took was one person to ask, "Why can't I vote?" to change the world. One of the biggest questions you need to ask yourself is what your passions are. So I encourage you to take at least once course each semester that is simply of interest; because you should be on a quest to see what will fan your flames. And don't be afraid if your pursuits change over time.

I have often been asked if I would change anything if I could go back in time. And in short, my answer is no. My mistakes and my continual questioning of myself led me down another path and I am so glad that it did as it has led to me to a career that I love.

So in short, here is our collective counsel to you, whether you are headed to university or not:

1. Have fun, just don't share it with the world
2. Enjoy your fresh start
3. Ask for help, because you will need it
4. Turn your mistakes into knowledge

AND

5. Never stop being curious

Almost all of that has served me well in my life and my career to date.

Much of the advice I have given you has already been said before, in rhyme no less, by the immortal Dr. Seuss in this book "Oh, The Places You'll Go!" That book is my gift to each of you.

So as you go forward, I hope that you all: Fall down, make a mess, break something occasionally. Just remember that the story is never over. Ask for help when you need it and you will get stronger and progress as an individual. Remember that you are the lead character in your play and you get to write your own script, no one else should be holding the pen. Feed your curiosity it could lead you down pathways that change your life. And don't underestimate the luxury of being able to roll out of bed and head to class in your jammies. It's the only time in your life that you will have that minor lazy indulgence.

Congratulations Saltus SGY Class of 2010!