

ABBIE FOR AUTISM GALA DINNER
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
WREST POINT, SATURDAY 16 MARCH 2019

Good evening and thank you for inviting Dick and me to attend this Abbie for Autism Inaugural Gala Dinner.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

May I congratulate Abbie on being selected as a National Finalist in Miss Diamond Australia 2019; and with your family, setting up Abbie for Autism to support Autism Awareness Australia, through this inaugural event here at Wrest Point.

When Abbie first wrote to me inviting me to the dinner and to talk this evening, she suggested that guests would be keen to hear, and I quote, “a successful woman ... someone who can encourage and empower our next generation of women to achieve their dreams and make a difference.”

I understood straight away the connection there with what this evening is all about: it is about being able to overcome adversity. In the case of autism, this is a natural condition, not an affliction and most certainly not a personal condition to attract criticism and bullying – which is exactly what happened to Abbie when young, and happens to many people with autism.

Now, I did not in my own journey suffer any extremes of bullying. And I have to say that I was very fortunate to have parents who not only strongly encouraged me to get a good education, they supported me to do so through Year 12 and University and later as a young mother struggling to break into an academic career – as did my husband Dick.

After I had graduated, gained admission to legal practice and was pregnant, getting a job in the legal profession was not easy. Child care centres were very scarce and I wanted work which not full-time and flexible. This was not possible

as a practising lawyer. Casual tutoring at the university was an option however, this was poorly paid and to go further in academia I needed a postgraduate qualification. With an honours degree I was eligible for a postgraduate scholarship but these were not then available on a part time basis.

So to start with, breaking into an academic career was a struggle. But I did, I completed my LLM thesis and graduated. And finally when my younger daughter Meg was in Grade 1, I became a full-time academic, only the second woman to have a full-time academic position in the Law School in its then 87 year history!

As a female academic, I was very much in a minority. One of the difficulties was that I was called up to serve on a lot of committees, particularly appointment committees to achieve gender balance. I can remember being asked to sit on yet another selection committee and was able to decline because I was about to go on leave. When asked what I had planned for my leave I said a sex change!

In my career I have seen privileged to teach many wonderful students and some of them have had to overcome considerable adversity to get to university.

I want to share with you one of their stories. Kimberley Martin attended Springfield Primary in the northern suburbs. She had very bad eczema as a little girl and was bullied and teased a lot as a result. She was miserable at Primary School. She was hopeful that at High School, with a bigger cohort of students, she would have the opportunity to make a fresh start with new friends. So she enrolled at Rosetta High School, now Montrose Bay.

This did not work out. Again she was bullied and teased and by one girl in particular. Complaints to the teachers did not help, they did not try to assist her. One day her tormentor was teasing her again and in frustration Kimberley punched her and was suspended.

While she had no more trouble from the girl, she was labelled by staff as troublesome and a poor student. In years 7 and 8 she was a D student. In year 9 she decided to turn over a new leaf and try to work hard. She did. In year 10 she received a Rotary Scholarship to College and then gained admission into Law. Despite ongoing problems with the depression that her plagued her through her school years she flourished and graduated with Honours.

Just last year, Kimberley was flown to London where she was awarded International Young Practitioner of the Year by the London Society of Trust and Estate Practitioners. Her determination and courage is a wonderful motivator for young people today and she has allowed me to share her story.

My message to you this evening therefore is, first, to consider carefully what you want to do with your life; second, if you decide to commit to it, remember that there are almost always going to be obstacles, no matter what you do. You can overcome them by trying to understand why they are in your way; by perseverance, and through patience. And good humour!

Congratulations again Abbie and Tanya for your wonderful efforts with Abbie for Autism, working for Autism Awareness Australia. I wish you all the very best as you move forward with this very humane, compassionate project.

Thank you.