

Shine Your Light to Help Others

By ZOE BROWN



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Ms Zoe Pearl Brown (Bachelor of Science, Psychology [Special], First Class Honours, Faculty of Social Sciences) gave the valediction at The University of the West Indies 10:00am Graduation Ceremony of Friday, October 26, 2018. This is her speech.

What a tremendous honour it is to stand before you today as your student representative! I extend my warmest and sincerest thanks to The University of the West Indies for the opportunity not only to speak on behalf of the student body, but also to express gratitude for the many opportunities and experiences which have assisted the process of shaping me into the person I am today.

When I started studying at The UWI in September of 2015 as a foreigner from New Zealand, I had not long since begun driving on the roads of Trinidad and Tobago. It was quite the adjustment, to say the least! My spatial awareness took on a whole new meaning, navigating narrow roads and figuring out how to squeeze my little car through traffic.

Looking back, I can liken attending The UWI to driving myself from A to B on the roads of St Augustine, Tunapuna, and even Port of Spain. What a metaphor! On most roads, I've come across more than a few potholes and on others, I've found myself stuck in the most frustrating of traffic. At other times, I've not been sure if I was going or stopping, and there have been moments I've easily laid a heavy hand on the steering wheel when people gave me a "bad drive".

But there have also been moments when I've reached the long scenic roads of Manzanilla and Mayaro and put my windows down and gazed out at the horizon and row after row of coconut palms, feeling inside that anything is possible. For all of us, today is one of those days: a smooth road. After travelling east from Port of Spain, through Mt. Hope, through St Augustine, Piarco, and Grande, we can now say we have reached our destination, a point of reflection; a place where we look back on the struggles, and exhale, "We made it."

My personal triumphs and struggles while attending The University of the West Indies all boil down to a construct in Social Learning Theory called "self-efficacy". In the 1960s, Albert Bandura discovered that what children needed most for successful learning was a sense of: "I can do this!" and that this attitude determined resulting success. As a child, I distinctly remember telling a close friend of mine that I would never attend university. My ten-year-old self was very adamant. My fear of failure tended to overwhelm the

vulnerability that comes from trying new things, sometimes big and scary things, and this I carried into my adult years.

Well, clearly I did not touch wood! It is only now as I stand before you, after three long years, that I can confidently say I have a strong sense of self-efficacy. This was developed and nurtured through my experiences at The UWI, a process which held a mirror in front of my face and helped me to see who I really am and of what I am actually capable. It was proven to me time after time, class after class, assignment upon assignment, midterm after midterm, stress after stress, and exam upon exam. I began to realise, I am, in fact, pretty capable! I may even be quite intelligent!

I am sure we can all relate to the experiences I've just mentioned. The long grueling hours into the night or the early mornings deprived of sleep, working away at an assignment or studying information which at the time may seem pointless and without meaning. But all these somewhat disjointed aspects of various course work and examinations were like pieces of a puzzle.

Today we stand as a student body marvelling over how beautiful the completed picture looks, when we all know in reality that the piecing together of the picture was anything but glamorous at the time. I'm sure there were days when each of us felt lost in the process of trying to fit together obscure jigsaw pieces, or felt exhausted wanting to jam in pieces where they didn't belong. We wanted sleep and liming, instead of mountains of books and endless deadlines. We wanted a light at the end of the tunnel instead of wondering when the semester would ever come to an end.

Each of these experiences developed within us a sense of camaraderie as we met new people and developed friendships that eased the intensity of the task. We learned to lean on each other for support, to share mutual moaning and grumblings, to associate similar experiences, like that last awful question on the midterm that nobody could figure out.

Until we realised the puzzle pieces we'd been trying so hard to fit together were not pieces of assignments, class attendance or examination, but rather each other. The true secret to the completion of the puzzle was found in discovering our fit amongst each other.

Look around you. Look at your fellow students, those who shared very similar battles and triumphs. Each one of us together helped to complete the amazing picture that is the graduating class of 2018! We did it together!

Albert Einstein made this statement: "Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value." At the end of this long journey, we must recognise and accept that the true lessons we have gleaned while in attendance at The UWI will not remain in our "gold stars" or A-pluses. They remain in the moments going forward where we choose to utilise what we have learned, not only improve ourselves, but to reach out and help others. Education is not about accolades or climbing a social ladder. What Einstein meant by "value" was this: Transform your focus on yourself into a focus on others. Now that we have reached the sweeping, breezy roads of Manzanilla and Mayaro, we take a breath... not only with relief, but with a sense of responsibility to reach out now and inspire others with the journey long travelled.

Let us utilise our achievements to improve the quality of life for those who have less opportunity than we do. A shining star only has value because it exists in a dark sky. My encouragement to each one of us today is to be light, be value; let us move beyond our immediate success with the motivation to illuminate someone else's darkness. We now have the skills and the determination forged from the fires of endurance.

Take this light. Sustain its brightness. Be not concerned in what you can gain with your degree or where it can take you. Be concerned with what you can now give. That is the mark of true success.

I wholeheartedly congratulate everyone with my sincerest and most joyous congratulations. Again, it is my honour to stand here on behalf of you to share our experiences. We stand here today because others helped us to get here. So, on behalf of the graduating class of 2018, I thank The University of the West Indies, our leaders, staff, lecturers and tutors. I thank family and close friends, those who sacrificed for us and gave from their resources to empower us and encourage us not to give up along the way. We appreciate you and do not count our achievements without you.

And so, let us now go forward and be all we can be, do all we can do, and become all that we are destined to become. Thank you.