

Slaying dragons with bare hands

By RAYSHAWN PIERRE



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Ms Rayshawn Latoya Pierre (Bachelor of Arts, Theatre Arts & Carnival Studies, First Class Honours, Faculty of Humanities and Education) gave the valediction at The University of the West Indies 10:00am Graduation Ceremony of Saturday, October 27, 2018. This is her speech.

I stood outside the fence of the northern end of the campus on Agostini Street, and scanned the campus slowly and thoroughly. Sweaty, anxious and four months pregnant, I glanced down at my stomach and whispered to my daughter: “If this is too overwhelming, just kick”. She never moved.

I had left my home in Tobago with an equal amount of optimism and fear and an important note to self: just try to survive. The thought of being away from home and living amongst complete strangers made settling in a well-orchestrated nightmare. But what appeared to be a nightmare was actually a period of self-discovery, within which I grew to understand some important lessons that I will shortly share, because living in the Department of Creative and Festival Arts has been a life-changing experience.

Three years felt like a long time, didn't it? Perhaps there were moments when it felt almost impossible. Today, aside from the actuality that we are all being awarded by The UWI St. Augustine Campus for outstanding academic work, a number of other things make us, if not the same, connected: Long days and even longer nights; headaches from rolling our eyes at late shuttle drivers, financial constraints, complete emotional breakdowns and the most common of all, group members who mastered the Houdini complex by disappearing until assignments were completed. We are also connected by our sacrifices, our display of resilience, and the discipline that we have manifested. All of these things have strengthened the ground on which we now stand, have ignited a flame for excellence and innovation and have endowed us with badges of honour. These badges remind us of the path to success that we must now navigate, with chests high and eyes fixed on what is ahead, recognising that success is process-oriented.

Imagine going into a supermarket and, instead of grocery items, the shelves are packed with values for success. Which would you reach for first? Integrity? Discipline? Dedication? Creativity? Accountability? Would you walk briskly past the lanes that have too many of the items that nobody wants? Like procrastination, failure and shortcomings?

Fellow graduates, The UWI experience has taught me that they are all intertwined.

I have had one too many conversations on the topic of withdrawal with one of my programme coordinators, now Head of Department, Louis Mc William, to whom I owe immense gratitude. It is beyond me how one student could navigate five-plus courses, late night rehearsals, a new born Chaezaya, no real source of income, family miles away and still feel motivated; for many reasons that sounded like a full course meal comprised of a well-seasoned plate of “deregistration” and a refreshing glass of: “Let me get my things together”.

It was during this process and by being reminded to “trust the process” that I realised that I had much more resilience than that for which I gave myself credit. Retrospect on the times when completing your programme felt like an abstract artistic concept; where the will to finish dwindled because it was too challenging. For it is within those moments of turbulence that you mustered and displayed resilience. The result is right now. This moment where you sit shoulder to shoulder with people who do not look like you or whose stories do not match yours but who have slain similar dragons, and with bare hands. We came, we endured and we conquered.

After arduous conversations with one of our generation’s most celebrated moguls, I have taken the liberty of furnishing you with a list of things he regards as pertinent for success. Please take this time to look beneath your seats for your personal copy of all that is required for success.

...Nothing? Truth is, there is nothing under your seats because there are no blueprints for your success. Many Anansi-like figures will come to you with clever and attractive blueprints for what your success should look like. Be careful, simply because for each of us, the road to success will vary and will require us to not only do, but become.

Become more resilient, more optimistic and more socially aware. Do not be afraid to endow yourself with the values impressed upon you during your stay here at The UWI. See life as a Gayelle and like any good stickfighter, *karray* to maintain balance and stay alert with eyes fixed on the goal. Hold your *bois* firmly in the defence position, strike, and then *karray* again for balance. Don't confuse movement with progress. To achieve success, we must attempt to honour that which has been taught to us: that adding value to human existence is greater

than simply making money. It is consistency, discipline, and dedication that fuels the process of success. Success will come to those who not only claim it, but who consistently labour for it.

Our Faculty maintains as its ethos the most human way of viewing the world. We have learnt to see perspectives through the eyes of others, to challenge traditional and conventional thought and to advance that the development of our Caribbean space is a collective social responsibility.

We are now proud and forceful charges of the Faculty of Humanities and Education, which remains a leading pioneer in education, history, languages, literature, film, heritage and the highest representation of what culture and art has done and will continue to do for our region.

And so we advance, conscious of the need for our skill and expertise and as the late Professor Rex Nettleford frames it, “Stretching inward but reaching outward”.

My fellow graduates, when the world seems to be sitting, we will stand; when the world is standing, we will be outstanding; and when the world has become outstanding, we will set new standards for excellence and innovation. With God-given wisdom, integrity and selflessness, I encourage you to soar high.