

## **Balaklava High School Presentation Night 2019**

It's an honour to come back tonight and speak to you all about what I have been up to since leaving high school in 2005 - 14 years ago! Everyone says it, and I'll say it, I can't believe it was that long ago. I still think of myself as a high school student and still remember my own BHS presentation night in this same town hall.

I thought that in describing life after year 12, I would give you some insight into my life before year 12.

### **Prior to Year 12**

I grew up in Balaklava, attended the local Balaklava kindy and primary school, and obviously Balaklava High. My parents, Brian and Fely Schumacher, were farmers. My Dad passed away from cancer in 1998, when I was aged 10, leaving my mother widowed and a single mother. However, I always saw the township of Balaklava co-parenting with my Mum to raise me as there were many people in this town, including my teachers, sport coaches, parents of friends, neighbours, and other community members, some of whom are in this audience tonight, help shape the person I am before you right now.

I enjoyed school. I liked learning and did well at most things I put my mind to. My Mum always told me the importance of education and doing well. School was of course not without its troubles. I was probably one who was seen as a bit of a nerd (but who was also coordinated enough to do sports). I enjoyed playing musical instruments, doing art and of course playing the very cool and on trend sport of the time, lawn bowls. I was probably the unpopular kid, in the popular group, and I certainly wasn't immune from being teased and exposed to the unfortunate trials and tribulations of friendships and teenage angst.

### **Year 12 and first year of university**

Year 12 felt like the longest, most testing time of my schooling life. I pushed myself to get the best results I could. I felt the pressure, whether it be real or perceived, that I was expected to excel. Whilst I did well very in year 12, it wasn't as well as expected and I was disappointed. The best laid plan had crumbled away and what I wanted to do at university was now out of reach.

I got accepted in one of my preferences at Flinders University – a Bachelor of Medical Science with the aim of specialising in physiology and neuroscience, which I commenced in 2006. During year 12, I had become aware of a residential College where you can live whilst studying called St Mark's in North Adelaide. I applied and was successful in getting a full scholarship for my first year. The intention was that I would only live there for one year but I ended up living there for the full six years while I attended university. Many other former Balaklava students also attended in subsequent years. Whilst the College was not without its issues, it did give me a support base in Adelaide, helped me through university and helped me build the Adelaide connections that ultimately kick started my career.

First year of Medical Science went well and I got solid grades. However, science and math never came easy and I had to work extremely hard. At the end of first year I decided to change degrees for a number of reasons. I used my year 12 score to start all over again and transfer into a double degree of a Bachelor of Laws and Legal Practice, with a Bachelor of International Studies (majoring in International Relations).

Neither of those courses were in my year 12 preferences. I never did legal studies at high school, nor did I do anything that involved a language, or a subject that touched on anything international. The only international thing I had was a Filipino mother. I was never a wide reader. I read what I had to for school and have never been one to read to pass the time. So with that all in mind, naturally I chose two degrees to complete at the same time that had the most reading.

### **My career**

Fast forward another 5 hard, gruelling years, where I had many doubts about my ability to have a career in the law, I landed my first role in March 2012 as a Judge's Associate in the District Court of South Australia. Again, it was hard work, mixed in with luck that I ended up with that role, not knowing how sought after Judge's Associateships were.

This legal job involved me being assigned to a Judge to work with them on criminal and civil matters they hear in the Court. I would draft sentences, do legal research, liaise with barristers and ensure that the function of a Court room ran as smoothly as possible. I had just entered a world where I was interacting with the most highly educated, highly recognised members of the South Australian legal community – a girl who grew up in a tiny town of Balaklava, with a public education, who was a farmer's daughter and then raised by a single mother. My first legal job was polar opposites of what I knew.

After 17 months as a Judge's Associate, I landed my first job practicing as a lawyer at the Crown Solicitor's Office. The Crown represent and provide legal advice to the Government and its agencies. This was my first exposure to child protection law, where my role would be to represent the child protection Department in the Youth Court of South Australia on applications involving the removal of children from their parents' care due to serious abuse or neglect.

In 2014 I became a lawyer on the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, the highest form of inquiry of matters of public importance that can be requested by the Government of the day, which was led by former Supreme Court Judge of South Australia Margaret Nyland. This Royal Commission was instigated as a result of criminal actions of paedophile Shannon McCoole who was unknowingly employed by the State's child protection agency formerly known as Families SA. The task for the Royal Commission was to examine Families SA, the adequacy of existing laws and policies relevant to child protection, and provide recommendations as to the improvements that could be made. The Royal Commission went for 2 years (a year longer than anticipated) and at the age of 26, I was the youngest lawyer on the team of the original six.

In 2016, I then went to work the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption (known as ICAC), led by Commissioner Bruce Lander, former Supreme Court Judge of South Australia and former Federal Court Judge of Australia. The primary function of ICAC is to investigate corruption in public administration and assist government agencies in identifying and dealing with misconduct and maladministration.

### **My current role**

Fast forward to 2019 and I am now the in-house lawyer for the Department for Child Protection. I started this role in January 2017. I was the first lawyer to be hired by the new Department and assisted in establishing its legal directorate.

The primary function Department is to care for and protect children and young people who are at risk of abuse and neglect within their own family unit, and keep them safe from further harm. Where children and young people cannot safely stay in the family home, the Department finds another place for them to live, preferably with kin or foster care families. Where child protection concerns cannot be resolved, the children are placed under the guardianship of the State. That is a very simplistic explanation of the complex nature of the work undertaken by this Department but with complex work, comes very complex legal issues.

My role is to provide legal advice to employees of the Department, so that they can execute their duties and functions within the boundaries of the law. Those legal issues can be matters that directly involve children and parents, or are legal issues involving the day to day running of a Government Department like employment or contract matters.

Given the nature of my work it is difficult for me to explain to the audience tonight the true nature of the matters I deal with on a day to day basis, but I can summarise it like this - having to be involved in matters where children (including babies) and young people in South Australia have suffered serious sexual, physical and psychological abuse and neglect within their own family units, from their own parents, having been denied the very basic care and love of a standard that the community expects, is certainly the most challenging part of my role.

However, with that does come some truly amazing stories of bravery, strength and determination, whether it be from the child themselves, or the parent to accept the help they need to work on their issues. It also shows

the selflessness of others who take children into their care, whether related to them or not, and to raise them as their own.

Has my line of work changed me and my world view? Most certainly. Do I feel like my role contributes to make a society a better place? Most definitely. Did I think when I left BHS as an 18 year old, that 14 years later this would be my career? Not at all.

### **What is success?**

The path I have taken since year 12 is only one of the many ways to build a successful career. I want to be clear that success is not defined by holding a university degree. I know plenty people who hold university degrees who have not done so well. I am here before you because I am an example of someone who was, 14 years ago, just like you, sitting in the audience, listening to a guest speaker, who was about to embark on the next stage of their life. University was the pathway for me, and I've had a reasonably successful career so far.

For example, just from my year 12 group some went to TAFE, some started their own businesses, some pursued a trade or an apprenticeship, some returned to the family farm, and some went on to become successful mothers and fathers who have raised beautiful children.

What I can guarantee the graduating year 12 class is that whatever path you take, you will require a level of learning to master a skill. The learning never stops. What will be different for each person is their definition of success and the challenges faced by that person to reach their goal.

Applying someone else's definition of success to your life isn't going to work for the path you take. It's like putting on a size 8 shoe but you're a size 7. It's never going to feel quite right. But whatever you chose to do, remember that coming from a small town, from small country school, absolutely is not a limiting factor.

### **What have I learnt?**

So what does my experience show? I finished year 12, it didn't go to plan and I was a little disappointed. On pure luck, mixed in with hard work, I got a scholarship to a residential college. I only found out about that college in a passing conversation. I actually didn't apply for any other colleges (there are 4), because I didn't know they existed. If that scholarship fell through and I didn't get it, I'm not quite sure where I would've lived while going to university.

I started my first year of university doing Medical Science, a year later I changed my mind, started all over again from square one with a double degree that was polar opposites of what I originally started with. I then chose to do 2 degrees at the same time, none of which I showed any interest in in high school and wasn't even listed in my university preferences. I now have career in the law and in child protection, both of those two things were not even on my radar when I was 18.

And from my experience, what I have learnt? By all means you can have a plan and a goal of where you want to go and do, but there will be moments of disappointment and some mistakes will be made. It is how you deal with those mistakes and the disappointment that will open you up to new opportunities. But sometimes opportunities don't land neatly in the palm of your hand – you have to seek them out, you have to work hard, you also have to take risks and you also need a bit of luck. Sometimes what looks like the perfect fit, isn't, and that's more than ok.

I wish the Class of 2019 all the best in their endeavours post year 12, and whatever you all choose to do, do it well. Master your skill and be eager to learn. Work hard, be respectful and do it with kindness. If you do those things, it will not only give you the foundation to build a successful career, but it will also give the foundations to be a decent human being, which is arguably the most important thing of all.

**Scarlett Schumacher**  
Old Scholar 2005