

Abridged Speech for the Māori Graduation Ceremony at Te Herenga Waka Marae

17 May 2019

Judge Damian Stone

1. I am a graduate of Victoria University of Wellington. I spent many lectures and noho marae at Te Herenga Waka Marae, here at the university.
2. This speech will be about my role as a Judge of the Māori Land Court. However, because I became a Judge only a matter of weeks ago, I do not yet have many stories to share with you about my new job. Unfortunately, that means part of this speech will have to be about me, so I also want to talk about my time here at this whare wananga and some personal learnings through my career that I hope will be useful as you all embark on yours.

Victoria University

3. I attended this university in the early 1990s. In my first year the Boys II Men song “End of the Road” spent over 3 months at number 1! That will explain why I purchased a bright green suit at the time. I suspect most of you were not born then. But looking around, not much has changed.
4. I came here straight from a Māori boys boarding school – Hato Pāora College located in the metropolis of Fielding. That was an environment of predominantly Māori students, set timetables, specified study periods, limited or no access to technology (and by that I mean televisions) and no wāhine. So, you can imagine the shock to the system when I arrived here – a place of many cultures, flexible timetables, no fixed study periods, unlimited access to televisions and other distractions, and wāhine! Needless to say, it took me awhile to adjust.
5. But adjust I did. And central to that adjustment was this place. For it was a place with which I was already familiar, having come from a Maori education background, located in a broader context of university life. It was an oasis of familiarity in an otherwise foreign environment. It taught me that, no matter the environment in which I may find myself, I would always be able to find comfort in knowing who I am and where I am from. Although I didn't realise it at the time, being true to who I was, and who I am,

has been the single most important influence in my working life to date. There is, I think, a lesson in that.

Māori Land Court Judges

6. The Māori Land Court bench at present is made up of thirteen judges. Eleven out of these thirteen judges are Māori, and all judges have extensive experience in Māori land and Treaty of Waitangi legal matters. Five out of the thirteen judges on the bench are women – Chief Judge Isaac has recently noted that such a gender balance does not exist on any other Court bench in New Zealand outside of the Supreme Court. And speaking of the Supreme Court, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the recent appointment of Justice Joe Williams to the Supreme Court bench. He is the first Maori to be appointed to our highest court. His appointment is one of the most significant events in my time in the law and we are all very proud of his achievements. And it so happens that he is also a graduate of this very fine learning institution.
7. I am the 114th Judge of the Maori Land Court. But, of course, I am not the first graduate from this university to be appointed to the Maori Land Court bench. Justice Joe Williams himself was the Chief Judge of the Maori Land Court before his appointment to the higher courts, and indeed the Chief Judge before him, the Honourable Sir Edward Taihakurei Durie, is also an alumnus. And although the records on the earliest Judges of the Court are often incomplete, it appears that Judge Hugh Fraser Ayson was the first VUW graduate to be appointed as a Judge of this Court. He was appointed as a Native Land Court Judge on 3 February 1919. He entered practice in 1905, only 8 years after Victoria University was established, so it seems a fair bet that he was our first judge to attend VUW. Perhaps it is appropriate that, exactly 100 years after the first Victoria graduate was appointed as a Judge of the Native Land Court, I am here today speaking as another VUW graduate appointed to that Court.¹
8. But enough about the Court.

¹ Editor's Comment – Other alumni currently on the Māori Land Court bench are Deputy Chief Judge Caren Fox and Judge Carrie Wainwright.

Personal Learnings

9. In preparing for today, I thought about an inspirational mantra I could impart with you all as a means of firing you all up for the next step in your life journey – which for most of you will be working in your chosen fields. I even looked on YouTube for some inspiration myself! However, at the end of the day I think the best inspiration I can leave with you is based on my own first-hand experiences and what I have learned so far.
10. The first observation I would make is that work is exactly that – work. It's not called play for a reason. Working in the real world can be tough, even unpleasant at times. There will be set-backs. For me personally, there were times in my legal career when I wanted to toss it in. But there were also times when I thought my job was the best in the world. Being able to work through those difficult times, and appreciate the good times, was key for me. Perhaps you could call it perseverance. By being here today, all of you have already shown that you can persevere. So, my first message today is to not worry too much about set-backs in your career – they are inevitable. It is how you respond to those set-backs that matters.
11. My second observation is about passion. I have been fortunate in my career to be able to work in an area that I am passionate about – the development of our people. When times have been difficult at work, that passion has pulled me through. So, my advice is to follow your passion. You never know where it will take you. If someone had told me back when Boys II Men were number 1 that I would eventually become a Judge of the Maori Land Court, I would have laughed at them and told them to go to the “End of the Road” (or words to that effect). But here I am, and I think it is because I followed my passion.
12. My final message today relates to the fact that today is Pink Shirt Day. A day when we show our support for speaking up, and standing together, to stop bullying. My own profession has been under intense scrutiny over the last few years, which has exposed a profession rife with bullying and harassment. The profession is taking steps to address this disease, but it would not have been exposed but for the brave actions taken by a few who decided to speak up and stand together.
13. The message I want to leave you with is to look after yourselves and each other. Part of that includes exposing harassment, in whatever form, when you see it. But it also

includes taking active steps to promote your own health and well-being. Believe me, nothing is more important than your own health and well-being. Nothing.

Conclusion

14. So, I hope these observations assist you as you move to your next stage in life. The motto for this university is “Wisdom is to be more desired than gold”. Your desire for wisdom has led you to this point, today. May your continued desire for wisdom lead you to where you want to be.