



St Andrew's College

ESTABLISHED 1867

IWD Speech SAC Formal Dinner 7 March 2022

Kate Harper

Thank you Principal, Council, Leadership for asking me to say a few words tonight. I will be brief and to the point and will focus on two things;

Firstly, what is relevant about IWD in the context of Drew's.

Secondly, how has my life journey shaped my thinking about IWD.

As you know, Australia has a very high level of students attending private schools (in contrast to other OECD countries) and many of them are single sex, or denominational, or both. If you, like me, come from such a background, I hope you are loving the ability to live so closely in a diverse cultural and academic institution. I would encourage you to make the absolute **most** of all the wonderful opportunities on offer at College and to know that you are making lifelong friends with whom you will share great moments, learn from, be inspired by, and inspire.

The voices of Chanel Contos, Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins have recently had a marked impact on us all, and not before time. I don't wish to dwell on those words but rather make a few points that I hope may help you in your journey through Drew's and beyond into professional life.

I have nieces and nephews, most of whom went to Drew's, living all over the world from Beirut, to Iraq, to Germany and Holland working for humanitarian NGOs and in the Arts. In our family WhatsApp, I asked them what IWD meant to them. One of my nieces sagely pointed out that even though places like College are full of empowered women, this isn't the case everywhere and that many women are still subject to discrimination due to certain cultural or socioeconomic factors. This is generally not something you see within the confines of the College, but of course exists in the wider world.

To the women of Drew's I say, be mindful that there is discrimination, learn to identify it and to call it out. Do this with grace and dignity as in some cases, it is not always intentional. Learn to identify what is known as unconscious bias and identify it with confidence and with the assumption that, it just needs to be knocked on the head each time it emerges, rather like an unwelcome cockroach appearing out of the woodwork and scuttling across the floor.

To the males of Drew's, I call upon all of you to be mindful of this potential for bias, and to play a central role in calling out discrimination against women and to hold other men accountable. Without you, we can't do it. A good question to ask yourselves is, what am I doing to empower women in my life and more generally?

Since 1902 when my great grandfather became Principal of St Andrew's, five generations of my family have been associated with the College, however I am the only one of these nine Harpers who did not attend the College, as it wasn't co-ed in the early 1980s. Although I enjoyed Women's College, it's fair to say I spent a significant amount of time at Drew's and I would have loved the co-ed experience. I was, however, lucky enough to attend a co-ed College at Cambridge later, and the co-ed environment benefited me enormously.

That Cambridge College, (Downing) celebrates 42 years of women this year and when I was there it was five years into the female student journey. I loved the way everything centred on



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the college - sports, drama, drinking and eating and the odd bit of study! I also loved the enduring friendships I formed and admired the way the genders supported each other in their respective sports, academic and social endeavours.

I presume you know what I mean by **unconscious bias**, but if not, I will use an example of it in my own life to illustrate. Note that it was entirely unintentional on the part of my parents, they just thought they were doing the right thing. I grew up with two older brothers, both of whom attended this College. My parents were very keen that I have an excellent education and pursue a career but for some reason, thought I should go to private school much later than my brothers (my protests fixed that) and that taking a Master's degree wouldn't be necessary. My father worked closely with my brother on his application for a Master's overseas whilst when my time came, I quietly did my own application without them, (perhaps even behind their backs?) and they were all surprised when I got in!

In many ways, I realise how lucky I was to be the girl in these circumstances; I was not expected to take a Master's or to travel abroad and pursue an extended career, so really, as a female, the pressure was off, and everything I achieved was a bit of a surprise to all.

So, **how has my journey shaped my thinking about IWD?** Well, let's start with a quick recap. I studied Arts/Law at the University of Sydney in the early 80s and attended Women's College for two years. I would have been there longer but I had the unfortunate habit of just failing each of my law exams and having to take supplementaries over the summer. So wanting my summers back, I spent my final three years in a shared house with friends from Drew's.

After graduation, I knew I was unlikely to secure a position in one of the law firms as it was fiercely competitive and my results just weren't there. But a different opportunity arose ... the banking industry was taking off in Australia, the dollar had been floated and foreign banks were granted licenses to operate. I was offered a job by Macquarie Bank which had just rebranded from the subsidiary of a British merchant bank Hill Samuel, which seemed a fun place to work and was full of optimism and opportunity, but it wasn't regarded as a real career in my family that was heavily weighted to the legal profession. So I made an application to undertake the Masters of Law at Cambridge and I hoped this extra credential would facilitate entry into the legal world.

This brought my short tenure at Macquarie to an end and in October the year after my graduation I set off for Cambridge for what was to be the best year of my life to date. Of course the plan was to return to Sydney, do College of Law and enter a law firm as a newly minted Cambridge graduate. However, at that time, another opportunity arose, and that was in the investment banking industry in London.

The "Big Bang" had just happened which also saw investment banks hiring graduates from law and accounting into their graduate programs and I was snapped up by a very British Merchant Bank called Hambros. So off I went into the city of London where I spent the next 15 years working in investment banking. It was the crazy 80s, a time of big deals, lots of fun and poor behaviour. I am ashamed to say there were times working in the Dealing Rooms that I walked past bad behaviour that I should have called out. I too suffered from unconscious bias, however, having grown up with two older brothers simply brushed it away saying, "that's just what boys do isn't it?" Well it was, but it shouldn't have been.



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My life in London included travelling to as much of Europe and America as I could. All in all, in 22 years away, I visited 50 countries, which in the wake of COVID I now recognize as a significant luxury. In 1989 the Berlin Wall came down which opened up the whole of the Soviet block for both business and exploration, and any plan to return home was definitely put on hold.

My banking career came to an abrupt end when I was made redundant in a bank merger, which left me thinking it was time to return home to Australia. I also made a career change into professional headhunting. The plan was to be trained in London with a global firm and then return to Australia to take up a senior position in Sydney.

Fortunately, as was common in the 90s, in the lead up to the dot.com boom, opportunities arose and I seized a job with Egon Zehnder executive search specializing in financial services. Looking back on that period, I now realise I reacted against banking because it was too 'blokey', and the high growth executive search industry then attracted women like me - well educated, savvy, ambitious, confident and impact-oriented women who graduated fast into senior positions.

Then, during my training in London, I met my husband who was living in Paris, and rather than relocate to Sydney with the firm, I moved to Paris without a job and learned French at the Sorbonne for a year. This felt rather risky as jobs were few and far between in the wake of the dot.com crash. However, I saw what was a great opportunity to spend a year zipping around Paris on a Vespa, learn French and hang out with gap year students from all over the world, a sort of delayed gap year.

This was followed by marriage, a child in my early 40s, and finally a relocation back to Australia so our son Charlie could grow up with all the benefits this wonderful country offers. Now I work with company board directors and applying the law that I learned about all those years ago to governance and directors duties. It's no coincidence that most of my clients are searching for women to occupy board director positions on ASX 200 companies.

So for me, there was no great career plan, there was no strategic pathway that I followed with rigour and discipline. Along the way I have undertaken continuous learning, becoming a qualified coach and administrator of psychometric testing, taken study tours abroad and updated my corporate law knowledge.

What I find interesting is that this is the world that YOU live in. There is no longer a job for life, but a series of opportunities that will lead you from one to the next. As long as you maintain a continuous learning and open mindset, the opportunities along the road will be many and varied. I encourage you to pursue your dreams, but in doing so, keep an eye on the big picture. Make plans but be prepared to deviate from them. Make time to continuously upskill to remain current and an attractive employment option. Treat yourself as a sort of "indefinite work in progress" – an unfinished essay!

What does this mean in the context of International Women's Day? It means "Carpe Diem" – seize the day. There is great momentum in the understanding of some of the greatest challenges women face in today's society – and how best to achieve gender equality in the world right now. In Australia, Chanel Contos, Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins have moved the dial significantly in the last three years. I have no doubt you will all factor it into your decisions and behaviours and to keep the dial moving.