**2022 CATHERINE MCAULEY AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY DANIELLE GAZZOLA**

Good morning Mr Morison, staff, students and all other special guests present at this morning’s assembly.

Welcome everyone to what I hope will be an extraordinary year. First of all, I’d like to express my deep gratitude for being named the recipient of the Catherine McAuley Award for 2022. I am honoured to be back here at the College today to share my schooling experience and the many lessons I have learnt.

Catherine McAuley was a remarkable woman who displayed strong willpower and devotion to bettering the lives of those less fortunate. Hence the reason this award is particularly special and I hold it close to my heart. She was a voice for the unheard and silenced, a home for those with nowhere to go and a comfort to those who knew her closely. She has inspired me during my years here at the College in more ways than I can think of and has taught me to never stop fighting for justice even in the face of unknown challenges.

Upon graduating I have had quite some time to reflect on my studies and think about what I would like to speak to today. Ultimately, I decided to travel back to the start of last year for some retrospective inspiration. When asked what my goal for Year 12 was at the beginning of 2022 a particularly favourite quote comes to mind: “When all is said and done will you have said more than you have done?” I was inspired by this question as it made me ponder whether I would be able to look back on my schooling proud of the achievements that I had contributed to my community. Standing here before you, I can positively say that the nurturing foundation Mount Lilydale is built upon has inspired me to forge my own path and to be of service to people less fortunate in both the near and wider community.

A word I frequently use to describe my experience at the College is eye-opening. In 2017 I began my journey at Mt Lilydale unaware that I was in a protected bubble, sheltered from the real-life hardships that my privilege has blinded me from. However, as the years progressed and I found my footing in activities such as my Prefect role, volunteer breakfasts and the Catherine’s Cafe van, I began to see clearly. Most of my Tuesday nights were spent in the parking lot on Lilydale’s Main Street where — rain, hail or shine — we would serve coffee, conversation and comfort. Some of my favourite memories to date were created in that van, and the incredible people I met and connected with are an experience that I will cherish forever. From Alannah and her dog Bonnie, to best friends Daniel and Jarrad, to watching my teachers ballroom dance with civilians in the parking lot, the biggest life lesson I learnt was that sometimes the people who have the least have the most knowledge to give.

My time here has inspired me to reach out to those most vulnerable in our community, and to walk in their shoes for just one day. While it may be only one cold night volunteering for someone like you or myself, this is the harsh reality every single day for such less fortunate people in our community. Therefore, my advice to you all would be to step outside of the small world you know and are comfortable with, and use your privilege to make a small difference for someone who really needs it. For “change is uncomfortable but necessary for growth”.

In a few weeks I will begin my tertiary studies majoring in Archaeology and Ecology at La Trobe University, welcoming this new and unknown chapter ahead. And while I say goodbye to my high school experience, I cannot forget my time here at the College and the many people and lessons that have positively defined me. I will always think fondly of my teachers who helped me each step of the way and keep the school in a special place inside my heart.

To finish I emphasise the importance of having a faith to anchor yourself throughout the ups and downs of both your school and personal life. Faith can manifest itself in several different ways but I want to clarify that it’s okay for your beliefs to look completely different to the person beside you. Trust in your intuition and your faith can be the pathway to help you see the good in even the most grim of times.

Thank you once again for this incredible opportunity to share the lessons that Mount Lilydale has taught me, and many thanks to everyone who helped me on my journey.

And, in the spirit of Catherine McAuley, I pray for light and love for each and every one of you.

Thank you.