Good morning everyone. Thank you for having me back here and thank you for taking the time to listen to me this morning.

When I look back at my experience of Year 12, I don’t see myself as having many regrets. This, I believe, was the most important thing for me in 2018. A sense of personal achievement and pride in who I am and what I could do was what I strived for, and so my scores brought with them an incredible feeling of fulfilment, as I knew that I gave it my best, and they were proof of that.

I worked hard in Year 12 not because I wanted to get into any particular course at uni — in fact, I’m not attending university at all this year. I worked hard because I wanted to prove to those around me, but most importantly to myself, that I could achieve anything I set my mind to. The goal I set for the year of 2018 was to know myself. And, I believe I achieved it.

I didn’t immerse myself in my studies so much that I lost any aspect of my personal life. It was incredibly important to me to find a balance between school and real life. Instead of making schoolwork my one and only priority, I made personal growth my priority, which in turn left my mind in a healthier state, making it easier for me to want to learn. It doesn’t feel so much like work if you take everything as a learning experience.

During school hours, I tried to completely devote myself to my work. I won’t lie, it was very easy to lose sight of why that was important, but every time I started to slack off I reminded myself of my goals. I convinced myself that if I just continued to give my teachers and my work 100% of my attention until 3.15pm, I wouldn’t need to sacrifice my own time to catch up on what I’d missed. As soon as the final bell rang, I cut myself off from the stress, and I spent time doing things that made me feel mentally strong, healthy and happy. I recognised just how important it is to make time for the people that you care about, and how it is even more important to put yourself somewhere near the top of that list.

When I sat down to write what I would hope to convey to you all today, I realised that it was so important for everyone to understand that it’s not all about the scores, or the level of academic achievement, and that, as cliched as it sounds, you really can do anything you set your mind to. What you accomplish is only worth as much as you put in. The only significance my score has to me is that it makes me feel satisfied in the fact that I set a goal, and I worked hard to attain it. You don’t have to have Medicine as an aspiration in order to try really hard in school. That was certainly never on the cards for me. But I still gave it my best. In saying that, not all those who want to be doctor, will be willing to work hard enough to become one. Setting goals for yourself is the only way that you can define your own level of success.

When I got my ATAR, I was told by family friends and peers that I should apply for Medicine or Law, that I could do anything I wanted to. So, I took their advice, and I did what I wanted to do. I didn’t apply for any university courses. Instead, on the 5th of January I got up at the crack of dawn and I caught a couple of planes to Tamworth, New South Wales. For two incredible weeks, I attended the CMAA (Country Music Association of Australia) Academy of Country Music. I spent time soaking up wisdom from countless industry professionals, met a handful of people that I now consider my family, and I was surrounded by music from sunup until long after sundown, every day.

During the course, we met a man named Travis Collins. He’s a six-time Golden Guitar winner, won four CMC (Country Music Channel) awards and is one of the most down to earth people I’ve ever met. I wanted to share with you some of the wisdom he shared with me. He told me that he once had somebody ask him how he felt knowing that he has ‘made it’. His response was, “define ‘made it’. There’s a roof over my head and I can afford to feed my wife and children. And I get to do it by doing what I love every day of my life.”

I think that is such an amazing message. I believe that everyone has something that makes them tick, and I think that once you find it, you have to give it everything in order to be truly happy. Whether it be Music, Acting, Medicine, Law, or even Bricklaying or Carpentry. You have to find what you love to do, and make it your craft. For a lot of you, tertiary education will provide the foundations for that craft. But whether it does or doesn’t, work hard at whatever you want from life. Nothing comes for nothing. And if it does, it won’t feel like yours.

For many people, Year 12 is important because it will potentially lead them to a career they want. For me, it was about learning self-discipline and commitment. But, no matter what my reasons were for applying myself to my studies last year, I know for certain that I would not be the same person I am right now if I hadn’t pushed myself through every stressful assessment task, every morning that I couldn’t get out of bed, and every long week where all I wanted to do was give up. Even after I’d gotten through the whole year, up until five minutes before the start of my last exam, I was considering not doing it. But I reminded myself how far I’d come, and I challenged myself to go further. And, as it turns out, that exam was my English Language exam, and I ended up getting a raw 47 in it. That proved to me, that mindset is everything.

It’s not often that you get to decide your circumstances in day-to-day life, but it is always up to you how you handle it. You can be stubborn, refuse to do your work and make life difficult for the people that are trying to help you, or you can accept what you can’t change, and make it into a positive experience. I can say with my hand on my heart that last year was one of the best years of my life, because when I turned my mindset around, school became a challenge rather than a chore.

Surrounding yourself with people who believe in you is critical. The harsh reality is, not everyone is going to clap for you all the time. So you learn to clap for yourself, and you find those who will cheer alongside you. It is so important to find your tribe. Your behaviour is influenced by who you spend time with, so choose your friends wisely. It is equally, if not more important, to be good to people, wherever you go. You never know who could change your life. I remember sitting with one of my teachers in the library last year, listening to them give me a speech about following my dreams. For them, they were just doing their job and supporting their student. For me, it gave me one more person to win for, which made me forget those who wanted me to lose.

Every one of the incredible people I had teaching me last year supported me in their own way, and you’re all so lucky to have them to be not only your teachers, but your friends through what is arguably the biggest year of your schooling life. Appreciate them, because they really are great.

Once again, I want to thank you all for welcoming me back to this school. When I was sitting in this room listening to the Dux speeches year after year, I felt like I would never get here. Now, I wish I had taken in every moment and maximised every experience because, just like that, my school life is over. I hope that you all embrace how lucky you are to be here. Keep smiling your way through every day, and don’t let any opportunity pass without reaching for it.

Thank you.

Rachel Ricciuti