**WILLOW THOMAS (2019 CATHERINE McAULEY AWARD RECIPIENT)**

**— TOP ACHIEVERS’ ASSEMBLY SPEECH**

Good morning Mr Morison, College executive, staff and students. My name is Willow Thomas and I am honoured to be here today to share with you my journey here at Mount Lilydale Mercy College as the recipient of the Catherine McAuley Award for 2019.

My journey started back in 2013 when I entered Mount Lilydale as a Year 7, not knowing what the next six years had in stall for me or really having a relationship with God to guide me. Through the trials of life, I found myself drawn towards the opportunities Mount Lilydale offered, to push myself to explore who I was. And this was the best thing that I ever did during my time at school. Although daunting at first to put myself out there, I soon realised that there was so much more reward that came from taking these opportunities than running in the other direction. I tried debating, helping out with the musical, sports carnivals, tournament of the minds, the CSYMA Youth ministry team, leadership roles as well as many other things the College offered. I soon realised that not all of these activities were quite for me but by exploring different areas of the College, it granted me confidence and the chance to meet like-minded people.

My relationship with God blossomed here at the college when I took the opportunity to go to the Australian Catholic Youth Festival in Sydney in 2017. This experience along with many other possibilities the College offered, changed my outlook on life, who I wanted to spend my time with and how I wanted to journey through life. Catherine McAuley made the same decisions in her life. Catherine chose to have a positive and godly outlook on life, despite the struggles she faced within her family. She chose to surround herself with people who had the same values as her even though they did not have much to live off — she chose to serve, care and build up others all for the glory of God.

Catherine McAuley’s story is truly inspirational for me and I am so grateful that I was able to have the opportunity to attend a school the Mercy Sisters founded and I am humbled to have received an award in Catherine’s name.

My faith journey is ever growing, changing and developing, and so is all of yours. No matter where you are in your journey with God, whether you are deep into your exploration of God, just starting or are a little confused, know that you are not alone.

For a long time there was part of me that felt alone, confused and I questioned why God was allowing certain things to happen the way they were in my life. These two verses gave me hope when I was lost.

Jeremiah 29:11 says, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”.

And John 13:7 says, “You do not understand what I am doing now, but someday you will”.

Reflecting on these hope-filled verses helped me through the small obstacles and large trials of life and I hope that you all can use them to guide you too.

I sincerely thank all the teachers and staff for extending me, not only academically but personally and spiritually. Whether or not you taught me, you all touched my life in some way and helped to create the beautiful community we are amongst. Many of you were not only teachers but great life mentors and supporters to myself and my peers, and for this, I, along with other students will cherish the memories for many years to come.

My prayer today for everyone here, is that you may take opportunities and have the courage to challenge yourself. Doing these things may be difficult and daunting, but trust me it is worth it. It not only builds character, resilience and confidence, but friendships and memories too.

Dive into the deep end, explore, and give yourself the best opportunity to become the best person you can be - that is, the person God has called you, and only you, to be.

Thank you and God bless.