

## **CLOSING FUNCTION ADDRESS**

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When I stand here about to make a final Closing Function speech I am almost overcome by a host of other Closing Function memories. I remember my secretary saying "Just skip the speech this year; they'll love you!" Or my wife, seeing the wad of typed papers advising, "Read every second page." Perhaps just two minutes from each year. Work that out! I always feel that the prizewinners themselves tell the story of the year as you hear their varied achievements. I want to tell other stories.

My role this evening in particular is to share some personal and hopefully interesting observations which connect the past, the present and the future.

To be connected is a concept teenagers understand and, personally, I feel connected to you girls on my left, to the parents on my right, to the teachers and personalities on stage, not through WhatsApp or Facebook, but through Eunice as a collective teaching and learning and living community which has contributed, contributes and will contribute to a society in dire need of our contribution.

2014 has had its share of highlights for our school and its girls. Our Board Medal Assembly helped us to Catch the Spirit from Day One with our 11<sup>th</sup> Top FS Mathematics and Physical Science School Award, with Anje Venter as the province's top performer, with all three age group trophies at an Inter High Gala with such a stylish and respectful "Leandra" walk-in, with a colourful Alice in Wonderland production, with the trophy for the most medals at the Eskom Science Expo, with our hockey firsts ranked second in SA and reaching two national finals and one national semi-final and with our choir earning one of only two cum laude awards over 90% at the National ATKV Applous Finals over 4 days. A Eunice year is filled with achievers and achievement, public and personal. This is a place of opportunity where people matter and I urge you all to seek inspiration from each other. But I'd like to emphasize this from my 2005 speech. "While we provide encouragement and incentive to our top achievers and our board medal winners, it is the manner in which we support and actively help the weakest and the less secure among us that remains the real measure of a top school".

This hall, named after Adele de Jager who was headmistress for 26 years, always connects the past, present and future for me. We listen to topical speakers here like 1994 head girl and mining executive, Martie Molapo or Elsje Neethling, Ronel Strauss, John McInroy or Gilie Hoffman; our Matrics say thank you here, we host Mothers and Fathers with their Daughters here, we danced here a month ago with a party which started the moment you all arrived, we worship here, we choose conductresses here – Eunice style, we write exams here, we rehearsed Beauty and the Beast here, we celebrated my birthday here with 1989

head girl Ruchelle Cilliers, 1991's Margaret Nienaber and 1997's Tracy Hoy, we inducted Nicole and her RCL here and will do the same tonight, we welcomed Gr 8s and we'll bid Matrics farewell right here. I'll be connected to this hall's memory like a Facebook history accessed randomly and instantly and vividly. It was one of the subjects of my 2004 speech and I quote: "Nothing motivates our girls more than the dreams and decisions made in this hall when they see and hear and feel the pride of ambitions achieved as board medallists at our Opening Assembly and our speakers explain their own personal journeys and the inestimable role played by personalities such as parents, teachers and close friends." Jim Wittaker was the first American to reach the summit of Everest. He noted: "You never conquer a mountain. Mountains can't be conquered. You conquer yourself, your hopes, your fears." Vincit qui se vincit! She conquers who conquers herself.

No spot in this school, besides, perhaps, the photo wall of my office, gives me a sense of place, a sense of connection to the past, present and future like the main quad. Its sixteen Chinese Maple trees are protected from the harshest of the elements much like you are protected from a harsh, fractured and frightening world. I love its colours as it signals the green promise of a new matric class, the welcoming shade for girls in brand new blazers, the rich autumn gold as our old girls reconnect with the innocence of their youth and the wealth of their school heritage, and the sharp cold starkness of winter branches as we bury ourselves in our books for mid-year exams. Above is the ever-present blue of a limitless Free State sky. Limitless, like the goals to which we aspire. The quad has an Ivy-league quality, if you'll excuse the pun: a fountain as its focal point with the figure of a young woman, who privileged to be at Eunice, "dwells besides the waters of wisdom and of life". I remember sitting at the fountain with a few matrics when my daughter, in matric at the time, tapped me on the shoulder and complained "Dad, don't you have your own friends?". The last long phone call from the UK – (she has a scheme which allows her 1000 free international minutes to 3 numbers and luckily I'm still one of the three) – I came to sit at the fountain. I told her where I was. "Get up," she ordered, "go and sit on the bench facing Dr Paine's class." "Are you sitting there?" "Yes", I replied. "Well, Dad, that's where I copied all my Maths homework from Liza!"

Let me share some personal stories of my 2014. Two unplanned things happened to me last month. While on my way to Rhodes University with 50 other principals as guests of the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, and while I was helping the lady principals with their luggage I forgot my own suitcase at the PE Airport Wimpy for over an hour only to face the wrath of the bomb and dog squads, the police, the airport security and the evacuated Wimpy's manager. I felt like a little boy in a rather serious disciplinary hearing. It's good for a principal to feel how it feels to be in some serious trouble.

The week before I had met one of my first Eunice matrics at the College Crossing robot begging for small change. I spent half an hour with her trying to understand how a tragic car accident changed her life. Two personally traumatic incidents but perfect opportunities to

use one's education, experience and one's occupation to simply feel what it feels like to be in quite serious trouble and to place oneself in the shoes of another in some difficulty. So much of principalship, of leadership ethics, of being decently human is about being able to see through the eyes of others. It's what real people do. It's what home and school and life should teach us.

I love Charles Handy's idea that school teaches us so much more than subjects and marks and medals. It teaches us about trusting one's own judgement, about the pitfalls and pleasures of relationships, about whom to trust and whom to avoid, about how to succeed and what counts as success, about getting things done, about coping with everyday life, about doing things together with others and about learning to find what interests us.

In Barcelona in March this year I was one of two principals helping to load 21<sup>st</sup> century skills teaching applications on to 64 Microsoft Surface Tablets on the day prior to our Global Education Forum. Our director of operations was a young, confident and very helpful Danish techie, Kirsten Thorndahl. He guided us through the 12 steps in the process, offered individual help where necessary and set us to work on the next task. I was proud of my technical skills, and thanked my boss for that morning for his friendliness and patience. "Kirsten," I asked him. "Can I ask you a personal question? How old are you?" "Nearly 17, Sir," came the reply!

The point is that the world's new school elite students are multi-skilled, flexible, critical and creative thinkers who collaborate globally in diverse and complex environments to maximize opportunities.

The world keeps changing and in so doing it relies vitally on great schools and universities. It's always been my mantra as a principal to strive for a world class standard and to have our girls, schooled in the safety and closeness of Bloemfontein and the diversity, vibrance and relevance of Eunice, find their voice in the real world, in the world's workplaces and its boardrooms. And I've always felt deeply that Eunice is a school worth leading.

That's why our guest of honour this evening is 2006 matriculant Jolynn Minnaar who was recently awarded the Woman of the Year: Change Agent title by Glamour magazine. Featuring 10 inspiring South African leaders, including Public Protector Thuli Madonsela, Jolynn was acknowledged for her work using film and camera to tell stories that matter in the country. Her film 'Unearthed' challenges the assertion that hydraulic fracking is safe, time-tested technology and questions whether shale gas in her home region – the Karoo – is the solution for our energy hungry world. Jolynn's film has won the Best SA Film Audience Award as well as local and international recognition. I remember the mini heart attack I had at our gala in 2006 when Jolynn, without my knowledge, as part of Brebner's walk-in, abseiled from the top of the Stadium's floodlights. I should have known, Jolynn, that not only were you the tallest girl in the school, but that you were heading high.

They say teachers touch the future and ours, in the recent past, have shown their class, their consistency and their willingness to develop themselves, to put in their 10 000 hours. Teaching is as much an art and a science as is medicine or architecture. It's about engaging young minds and these skills don't come easy. They need lots of practice, enterprise, currency and collaboration. . I'd like to quote from my 10<sup>th</sup> Closing Function speech in 1996. "My younger daughter, who turns eight today, turned to me in her innocently wise way last week and asked: "What are you going to be when you grow up, Dad?" I take that as a great compliment." I thank each and every one of our teachers for being young in outlook, for making school vibrant, for giving it fun, colour and character. You learn little if you're not enjoying it. In Barcelona, Anthony Salcito, whom some of our girls will remember introduced us live to Windows 8 on the day it was released, said: "When learners walk into their school they need to expect more of themselves and more of their teachers". That's what we strive to achieve as a school.

Let me connect to the past with some extracts from early Closing Function speeches. I picked up a 1987 magazine one Saturday a month ago, but by the time I put it down it was already dark. The faces, feelings memories just flooded back into my mind and I was reminded of the richness of my Eunice life and of how much my wife and children have sacrificed. A few highlights of that speech: Eunice girls won six gold, five silvers and two bronze medals at the National Senior Swimming Championships in Cape Town, Volkswagen gave us a brand new blue Citi Golf Sport to teach our matrics to drive, we did three shows including the whole school in one, we beat Oranje 2-0 and I ended my speech thanking the 404 girls who had made 1987 the most challenging and rewarding year of my life. And that was just the beginning. I was thrown in the deep end and I couldn't even stand in the shallow end!

A thought struck me. Every one of the last 28 years has been the most challenging and rewarding year of my life. Look back on your own, especially those of you who have more than 18 years behind you. Challenge demands that we dig deep, that we absorb pressure and bring out the best in us. It was President Obama who said recently, "Nothing in life that's worth something is easy"

My 1991 speech included a new hostel project – that of inviting boarder parents to spend a weekend in Eunice House. Our girls moved into the prep room and over a hundred parents thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated our gesture. I quote "Although some rules will have to be adapted and some parents banned there will definitely be a 1992 Eunice Hotel. They have forced us into it because half of them have to come back for record marks and detention." At the braai on the Friday evening one parent passed me a note "Dear Mr Cassar. You are invited to a midnight feast in Room 168 from midnight till Monday!"

In my 1992 speech I thanked the retiring principals of Grey College and Oranje, Dr Heyns and Miss Pellissier. I also thanked the Chairman of our Grounds Committee, Mr Stuart Waldie for the imaginative methods he employed in persuading the many moles we had under our fields to further their education at Grey College!

Here is a paragraph from 1993. Die dag toe twee St Agt dogters die Vrystaatse Kampioendebatspan geword het, het Eunice se skoolhoof amper gevoel asof hy gevra gaan word om by die Broederbond aan te sluit. We won the national Afrikaans debating competition three times with the late Mrs Ansie du Plooy in the nineties.

In 1993 the West Indian Cricket Team visited SA for the first time and played a one day international in Bloemfontein. As a cricket lover I invited the girls to pay R25 for a ticket to get the day off school to watch the match. I commented "Maybe we'll get more school fees if we charge girls to miss school instead of attending it!"

In the early 90s we embarked on a school visiting exercise to identify the special strengths of SA's top schools with a view of improving our own. The simple most valuable lesson learnt was that being at the cutting edge of educational development implied dependence on a sound financial base. Whether we're Model C, Model T or Model GTi we'll need the funding source necessary to offer our girls high quality resources and opportunities. This was the rationale behind the appointment of Mr Pat Uys as our Financial Manager. I regard his appointment at Eunice as a forward- thinking positive move which will allow us to face our uncertain future with confidence and direction"

I remember the first Winter Sports Day Raffle we arranged in 1987. I sold the first ticket to the headmaster on the other side of the green fence and I asked him to fill in the answer to the raffle question. It read "Alongside which distinguished school is Grey College situated?" He only bought one ticket. What a wonderful community resource to have two of the top public boarding schools in SA on the same property. Sure, we add glamour and an unmatched quality to Jock Meiring Street, but we score the example of incredible pride, loyalty and belonging which our neighbourly gentlemen bring to the hood. I could write a speech just on Grey boys. I asked one a few weeks ago what he was doing visiting the Art Centre. No, Sir, he replied, I'm not visiting, Sir. I'm allowed. I'm evangelizing! I remember years ago Grey asked us to co-host the Hoerskool Linden choir. We phoned to let them know how many girls we could accommodate. "Sorry, said the choirmistress, "the girls have all been taken; there are only boys left!" Strangely our girls didn't protest.

I have thanked our teachers but I'd like to acknowledge the contribution of our support staff in our offices, on our grounds, at our gates, with our teams and at Eunice House. Tonight I include appreciation to all those personalities who, throughout my tenure, have contributed to our standard and reputation as one of Fair Lady's Top SA Schools. We won an award last month as the number five school in SA (including independent schools) in terms of

consistently providing eligible Allan Gray Orbis Foundation Fellowship nominees. Academics only count 30% in their evaluation criteria.

Allow me to make special mention of our head girl, Nicole Gomes who has made a significant contribution to the success of 2014 with strong leadership in terms of a special presence, unwavering service and, importantly, academic example. Our RCL has been outstanding and that speaks volumes about our school and the way it develops leadership. Thank you, Mrs Norval and to you Mr Igno van Niekerk. Mrs Dale, thank you for 21 years of joint leadership and for a constant stream of green talent. Mr Dell, I will get the chance to thank all our governors, past and present, at a special function after our next board meeting. Thank you, Sir for always being available, for your expertise and for your quality support of our school.

I would like to thank those who share the leadership of our school especially our two deputies and our management team. Mr Leon van Rensburg is an indispensable aid to me providing the rigour, detail, discipline and organization every school day needs. He'll have a knee replacement later this month which means he'll be able to run to and from the Lazyboy. Mrs Mag Marais is a remarkable project manager whose magic market, two Eurotours this year and uniform shop all bear a commitment to quality that is staggering in its complexity. Later this month this hall will be transformed into a Christmas Market which will generate a turnover of over 4 million – an exciting but daunting task Mrs Marais. Mrs June Norval invests so much time, loyalty and experience in adding substance, style and sparkle to the school calendar on a weekly basis. Mrs Daisy Munro gives Eunice House loving leadership with courage, compassion and so much common sense. I've mentioned Mr Pat Uys's critical role but I would like to thank him for his passion for Eunice, his lifelong support of its principal and the cheerful smile he never ceases to share with us all. I thank all our subject heads, the *other* members of our management team: Mrs Karin Kok, Mrs Lanelle Kleinhans, Mr Ferdi van Wijk and Dr Don Paine as well as Mrs Elmarie Odendaal, Mr Danie vd Merwe, Mr Carl Pritchitt, Mr Louis Botha, Mrs Wilmarie Swart and their teams. I'd like to recognize those closest to my day; my wife Moira, Mrs Myra Wienand and, especially Mrs Liza-Anne Meyer and her very able stand-in Mrs Candice McLaren.

I quote from 2004 because it's topical and because it's what I like about Eunice. "Saturday is the Matric Dance. I have signed permission notes for boarders for weeks now for dress arrangements, hair trials, nails and spray tans. No one asks time off to find a partner. No one ever has. Men don't really count here!"

I'm not doing any farewells as I will have that opportunity in two weeks' time when all our girls are present. Let me end with a little story Moira and I heard at a friend's wedding in Germany in June. The father of the bridegroom told a story about three theologians discussing when life begins. The first stated clearly that life obviously starts at the moment of conception; the second disagreed saying that life starts when a child is born. But the wise old theologian said that life starts when the children leave home and the dog dies.

Well, Eunice's children get to leave every year. But I hope and pray that this old dog, after nearly three decades, will get a chance at life after Eunice, especially with his own three Eunice girls, but it's thousands of children will remain on his mind and in his heart for as long as it keeps pumping that pure green blood.