

WEBB

Julia Alexander, VWS 1985
VWS Commencement Speech
4 June 2016

Thank you so much Kate for that lovely introduction.

Good morning, Trustees, Mr. Stockdale, Faculty, Families of the Graduates, and friends. **Good morning, Vivian Webb School Class of 2016.** It is SUCH an honor to be here to support YOU, the 33rd class of my Vivian Webb sisters.

Now I would like to ask everyone please to close your eyes and picture the scene:

It is a warm September day in 1981...A cluster of 34 girls hovers on the threshold of Price Dining Hall. All the girls are 14 or 15 years old. They range in height from 5 to 6 feet. All have yet to grow fully into their skin. Many sport braces AND glasses—and, let's be honest, these are NOT the cool, colorful braces of today, but are speech-altering, radio-conducting Amtrak systems for their teenage mouths. Each of these girls adheres rigorously to the regulations of the recently published Preppy Handbook. Each sports a meticulously selected Talbots cardigan (some monogrammed), draped over the shoulders of a pastel color Lacoste Polo shirt, which is tucked into a high-waisted a-line skirt or pressed trousers, that rubs against the cotton argyle knee socks that peek or scream out of Sperry topsiders. All are alike in their overwhelming mismatch of self-confidence and awkwardness. In the foyer of the dining hall, these girls stand before their Everest. As you picture this, remember how you felt at the basecamp of your first climb. That extra cup of coffee this morning doesn't sit so well right now, right?

So how did these girls get there? And, indeed, how did I get HERE?

Between February and May 1981, 35 years ago, the Vivian Webb School accepted the 34 girls who would be its founding students. In the inaugural application materials, the first headmistress Ann R. Longley declared:

"It is our particular responsibility as educators of young women to instill in them **the confidence to examine** the opportunities now available to them and **to choose** those paths that will lead to personal fulfillment."

She went on to say that women – IN 1981 remember –

“must decide...to devote their lives to their families or to their careers or to an integration of both...We...want to endow our young women **with the basic skills for living and with the assurance that they can make a significant contribution to society by enriching the lives of others...**”

On September 11, 1981, 34 young women, I among them, had the privilege and responsibility of leading by example, of conducting ourselves with integrity, and don't forget of making a “significant contribution to society by enriching the lives of others.”

Wow. JUST WOW. That's a lot for anybody—much less gangly, awkward young teenagers.

35 years of conversation and friendship later, I know that each of my fellow “Pioneers” saw this as the ultimate “opportunity challenge,” if at times we sometimes found it burdensome and sometimes even annoying. After leaving Webb, each of us has taken it on throughout our lives with intention, a sense of adventure, and sometimes a bit of reluctance. When asked about going through the births of her three children, each time without the benefits of the pain relief of an epidural, one of my best friends from Webb remarked “What...do I have PIONEER tattooed on my forehead.” And yes, I have deleted the expletive.

As I pioneer my way through my own life, I spend a lot of time pondering whether Mrs. Longley's choices—of family, career, or “an integration of both”—are necessarily “choices” anymore. Even as we ambitiously and continuously forge new ways ahead, I posit that in fact what was an “or” to Mrs. Longley has now become a both/and. It is the expectation that women can – and MUST —“do it all.”

And you know what, since I am here today, I am pretty darn excited that apparently I have hoodwinked enough people to think that I actually “do it all.” I'm the first woman director of The Walters Art Museum, an internationally-renowned art museum that houses 55 centuries of art from around the world, and is also a \$15million non-profit business on a campus of 5 historic buildings. I am the mother of 12-year-old boy/girl twins. I'm the wife of one of the great curators of his

generation, who heads the drawings department at the Morgan Library in New York City (and yes, he is the guy who found the Velazquez in the basement at Yale). I “DO ME” really well, right?

And I am certain that VWS is the secret in my sauce. I have always credited that moment of walking into the dining hall that first day as the moment it all became possible for me. According to my acceptance letter, my recommenders thought that my traits of “leadership, a positive attitude, and a high sense of integrity” were what made me a perfect fit for the nascent Vivian Webb School. What I didn’t know then, and, on the eve of the big 50, what I do know now is that leadership and integrity are merely the by-products of the most important quality of all: a positive attitude. Good morning, my name is Julia Marciari-Alexander and I am a Pollyanna. To be precise, I identify as an excessively optimistic and overly cheerful person.

So, Class of 2016, listen as this Pollyanna imparts some very important wisdom—in a cheery voice of course: We cannot do it all. We really can’t. Frankly, we shouldn’t.

I am exhausted. I can’t answer all my emails. I open my mail weekly at best. I pretty much never listen to my personal voicemails. Even at work, I can’t get my work done in a timely fashion because I am out late and up early every day for my job, which I love. I struggle at every minute to be the best parent to my fantastic, creative son whose severe ADHD makes every day his own personal Grand Canyon—oh and did I mention that we discovered only this year that he has been deaf in one ear for the past three year (YES, WE GET THE PARENTS OF THE YEAR AWARD). For you Gilmore Girls fans, I struggle—even with an overdose of coffee in hand at all times—to be the Lorelai to my fabulous daughter’s Rory. And, I REALLY struggle to be ok with saying a supportive “have a great week” to my husband every Monday morning at 5:37am as he leaves for NY where he lives until Friday. In the face of my reality, it is my inner Pollyanna, coupled with my deepest Amy Schumer, that sustains me as I climb my mountain each day. Positive attitude topped off with a daily dose of humor more than coffee helps me transform that word “struggle” to “succeed.”

On the one hand, I salute with my whole being, the women and men of Webb who more than any others (besides my beloved parents and family, of course) have made

it possible for me to “do it all.” On the other, Vivian Webb School class of 2016, I charge you with the task of demanding and implementing a different paradigm.

Yours is the DNA of the 34 who crossed that threshold of Price Dining Hall to change the “Webb Experience” from one exclusively male to one that is both co-ed AND single gender. Yours is the DNA of those who carved out a unique place for themselves in the world as the Women of Webb. Yours, THEREFORE, is the DNA that ENABLES you together to create a world in which our daughters don’t have to live the impossible lives that your mothers, aunts, and older sisters have had to live. Like it or not, we as women, still have to be better, still have to juggle more, and still have to negotiate harder than our male peers. I charge you today to drive **more change** than we have in the last thirty years. Here are a few things that you must do—and I know this from personal experience—in order to craft not just a better but truly a sustainable work-life balance for all: You MUST

- Demand hiring policies and practices that allow for the realities of a couple in which both partners must work -- and yes, some of you will be with someone who shares your profession and wants to work and live in the same town as you and your children
- Require that parental leave be 1) actually LEAVE (not work from home with phone in one hand and baby in other); 2) EQUAL in duration for BOTH PARENTS and 3) PAID
- REQUIRE that not only our daughters—BUT ALSO our sons—be resilient, thoughtful, daring, and tolerant...

So, let’s close our eyes and imagine ourselves in the shoes of our prepster Pioneers in September 1981. As we wade together out into the sea of young men, we each know in our hearts that we are on time to this lunch period, but we are SUPER LATE to the meal. In this land, hitherto barren of our kind, ours is the task of seeding a NEW ecological cycle in this place by joining with our male peers to create a new WEBB Experience. Now open your eyes. It’s not 1981 but 2016 and we’ve all done a terrific job – not only are we **AT THE SAME MEAL**, but we together we have made it a **feast**.

So, as I near the end of my talk, I want especially to give a shoutout to Christina Mercer McGinley, Class of 1984, one of my very best friends and one of the original

34. In the first graduating class, she was the first Vivian Webb graduate to earn her PhD, and the first VW alum to become a Webb Trustee. “Mercer” as we called her in our day, was also the first of the original 34 to have a daughter at VWS, and that daughter Cori, is here—graduating today. Now that ROCKS.

Finally, could I ask all VWS grads in the audience to stand.

Tremendous Graduates of the class of 2016, look with gratitude and admiration—as I do—at these amazing women who have climbed so many Half-Domes both for themselves and for YOU. Remember these women as you climb your next mountain, and never fail to remind yourselves that now it is YOUR job to make our daughters—and our sons—“strong.”