Year 12 Graduation 2004 – a photography theme

Terry O’Brien

May I introduce to you some very special people – Year 12 2004, our graduates!

In preparing my speech for today, I was wondering how many photos would be taken today? If every person here took just five photos, we would have about 15,000 photos!

Talking about photography, Jane Welsh Carlyle said, *“Blessed be the inventor of photography. It has given more positive pleasure to humanity than anything else that has been cast up in my time – this art by which even the poor can possess themselves of their absent dear ones.”*

There are some interesting lessons that we can learn from a camera and from photography – lessons about education and about life in general, on this day of graduation after 13 years of school.

The first lesson comes from the lens. Most of you have seen a camera with a zoom lens that is adaptable and lets you zoom in and take a close-up view, or zoom back and take a wide angle view. Year 12, I believe that at Oatley we have taught you that as you zoom through life, you need to be adaptable people, to take time to look at the bigger picture but also pay attention to finer details. At Oatley you have learnt, in preparation for the HSC and for life, to keep your lenses clean so as to see and think clearly and have a sharp focus.

A photograph is made from letting a specific amount of light reach the film. The exposure is set by balancing the amount of light and the length of time the shutter is open to let the light in. Oatley is a two year snapshot, but combined with the experiences provided in our excellent middle schools, your education becomes a time exposure. I hope, Year 12, that we have let light and knowledge into your life, and given you the knowledge and skills you will need as young adults in this great country – Australia.

To do this it is important to be exposed to as many different life experiences as possible, and this is something Oatley does well with its 930 students – 50% Australian background and 50% who come from over 27 different nations, a variety of religions, viewpoints, cultures and life experiences. This country was and is continuing to be built by different people from different places with different ideas, and this makes us strong. Oatley is truly a slice of Australian society and you are all richer for having belonged here. We are strong.

We are also successful. People like our photos and want to photobomb into our photos and stand next to us smiling at the birdie, for we have already become the educational destination of choice in our local area. For year 11 2005 we have received applications from over 500 students – from our three middle schools but also students from 34 other schools with 56% of applicants coming from private schools. This tells me you don’t need a very, very expensive and exclusive camera to take excellent photos and have excellent outcomes.

Public education is easy to criticise. Whenever anything is wrong with society, people have a go at public education – they have a black and white view. But our graduates today represent public education in full colour and at its best. Public education has got you here today, and I hope you will always remember the fine education you received in a public school and be a vocal supporter of public education for the rest of your life. You, Year 12, are public education’s finest and I am very, very proud of you. A photograph of you and your achievements would be the best answer to any critic of public schools.

Speaking of a photo of you, you will notice that we have hung the photos of Year 12 2004 in the foyer. Your photo will be part of our school for ever more, just as you have been part of our school for two wonderful years.

Sometimes a photographer uses a tripod to support the camera and keep it steady. Just as a tripod has three legs, Oatley students have learned to value three important things to keep their lives steady after they leave school: 1. their family and friends, 2. their health and a healthy lifestyle, and 3. their personal spirit and beliefs. If one of these is missing, your life will be grainy, out of focus and off balance. The poet WH Auden said, *“Love each other or perish.”* Our Oatley photographers have shown great care and love for each other and for others. I have seen them care this year for fellow students such as [name of student], as he bravely faced his cancer treatment, and for [name of student], who graduates today having faced great personal adversity. These are just two examples. This here is a group of students who, in one day, raised $1,900 for the students and families of Beslan in Russia, following the tragic siege of their school. This is the Oatley Way. You are good people and we are very proud of you.

Great photographers are able to take ordinary situations and give us a new vision of the world – just like education does. I believe that at Oatley we have given you strong character education and like a roll of film, you leave us with the ability to turn a negative into a positive. When the light first meets the film, the image it creates is initially reversed – a negative of reality. If you let the film stay that way then you will only see the negative view of life, but if you wait to see what develops and let the light shine through the negative, you will create beautiful positive prints. You will have a better life. Your two years at Oatley have contributed to this.

Photographs represent past experiences. They give us a remembrance of the past, of where we have been and what we have done. It is from past experiences that we can build a vision for the future. Oatley’s vision encourages students to reach for the stars – and that is a beautiful photograph.

Photography is a science but it is also an art. Particularly with digital photography and mobile telephone cameras, the creative aspects are integrated with the technical. Oatley graduates are able to take creative advantage of technology for they have been taught how to approach modern technology and utilise it. Dr Gregory Farrington of Lehigh University in Pennsylvania said, “*The problems in real life don’t come with little tags that say ‘Open me only if you are a physicist’, or ‘Open me only if you are an engineer. They require many capabilities to solve them.”* Oatley students have learnt how to connect all they have learned and apply it to their lives.

And who has given you this knowledge and these skills and concepts? Who but the master photographers – your teachers. The teachers at Oatley are very skillful and very dedicated. No one becomes a teacher to be rich and famous. We teach because we want to share knowledge, to work with young people and help them to learn and to give them the skills to keep on learning and make the world a better place. I encourage many of you here to consider teaching as a profession. Your teachers from Oatley will remember you and they won’t need a photograph to do so. We remember you because you are more than someone we just met in passing. You are our job. There might be another student with your same wacky sense of humour or your smile, or one who looks a bit like you or answers a question the same way you did, or who has trouble with a bit of the topic just like you did, and your teacher will suddenly think of you and wonder how you are. They will wonder how the film developed, how the photo finally turned out.

And now you are about to end school forever, Year 12. Don’t be like Murphy’s Law which says *“You’ll always be out of film when you have the best opportunity.”* The knowledge and skills we have given you are your spare batteries and film. You have already read the instruction booklet and taken the lens cap off. You are all about to take different paths from Oatley, close the photo album that was school days and start a new album that is the rest of your life. As the song ‘Good Riddance’ by Green Day (which you will hear later today) says:

“*So take the photographs and still frames in your mind, Hang it on a shelf in good health and good time,*

*It’s something unpredictable but in the end it’s right. I hope you had the time of your life.”*

Now I ask you all to smile if you are not already doing so. May the photographs in all of your lives turn out well.

Goodbye Year 12 2004. We give you permission to go but not permission to forget your time at Oatley. For Oatley will not forget you.

And now for the last time, I want to ask BOTH years 11 and 12 a question. Please tell our visitors today very, very loudly, “What is the best school in the best city in the best country in the world?”

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