

SPEECH DELIVERED BY MS. ALICE ASAFU-ADJAYE, GUEST SPEAKER AT THE NOVEMBER 2018 CONGREGATION OF THE COLLEGE OF HEALTH SCIENCES AND COLLEGE OF BASIC AND APPLIED SCIENCES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA, LEGON.

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Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour to have been asked to address the 2018 graduating class of the College of Health Sciences College of Basic and Applied Sciences of the University of Ghana, Legon.

Let me confess that when I agreed to accept the Guest Speaker role, I had not thought through what I would actually say to you. I assumed that some truly important and inspirational speaker had let CHS down at the last minute and you were desperate for a replacement and my old buddy Dr. Kyerematen decided to scrape the pot and landed on me - and one must help out a friend in need. Not being an academic I assumed an informal gathering of maybe 50 bright young students stepping out of the ivory tower into the real world for the first time. Imagine my horror when I subsequently found out there would be up to 800 people - of all ages, numerous degrees, various specialities, different stages of your careers - basically Legon, and Ghana's brightest and best. I eventually recovered from the shock of course. My 16-year-old daughter announced, somewhat prematurely, that she was proud of me, which both assured and frightened me at the same time! I figured Rosina who I have known since Form 1, and who is a decent judge of character, must have her reasons for thinking I could carry this off. So here I am. Thank you, Dr. Kyeremanten.

Rosina asked me to deliver a speech that would inspire you. I do not know that I can quite achieve that. To get where you are now you must have already found significant inspiration to excel in life -inspiration that I probably cannot top. Indeed, at my age and with what I have experienced I hope you will appreciate it when I tell you that if anything, I am inspired by you, by your dedication, your obvious ability and your hope. What I can offer are some words of advice from someone who is older than most of you and has had some life and work experience, and hopefully the right to offer it.

Let me tell you a bit about my self.

After sitting my common entrance examinations, and with an academic scholarship from VALCO, I attended Wesley Girls' High School, one of about 100 girls about to embark on a course that would produce bright, able, feisty and confident girls.

I was unfortunately 'half-baked', as my colleagues on our Gey Hey 1985 WhatsApp group often remind me when I am too cheeky, as I left for the UK in the mid-80's after Form 4, during the political upheavals of the time. My father relocating the family partly due to the disruption of the education system, affecting this very University amongst others.

Thrust into the 'freedom' of life in the UK, my aptitude for Science and Mathematics, combined with a creative flair cemented my desire to do something artistic that was also a 'serious' profession, my dreams of becoming a fashion designer during my early years, having been abandoned because I was regarded as being too good at Science to do fashion. How things have changed and how lucky you are as a generation to be able to tackle so many configurations of degrees at this university.

I ended up as an Architect. A profession I am passionate about...although I often joke about wanting to become a fashion designer when I grow up.

Like you, I am a product of Ghana (yes, I am aware there are sisters and brothers in the hall who are not from Ghana, but today, in this Great Hall, we are all Ghanaian) via the UK perhaps - but a proud product of Ghana. I recall a colleague at university teasing me that it was only in order to sound exotic that I would proclaim that I was from Ghana, rather than West London where I had lived since 14. The truth however is that I have always felt that my grounding in our unique culture and my education at Wesley Girls' High School set me up for everything I have undertaken to date.

I trained, as you have, at some of the best schools for my chosen profession (Nottingham and the Bartlett).

Fresh out of college I was recruited on a temporary basis by the prestigious firm of Foster and Partners to assist with a one-week deadline. Twelve months later, I was

still working in the Foster's studio and was offered a permanent position. I had to remind my boss that a formal interview and portfolio review might be required when the Firm announced my permanent appointment.

My second 'proper' job was with Adjaye Associates, after I was asked by (now Sir) David to meet for a chat. David's own career had inspired me as a student. He had made waves as a young Black African Designer with some of the best architects in the UK. He had then courageously set up his own studio and was taking the profession by storm. That chat led to a job offer running one of Adjaye's most important projects the Stephen Lawrence Centre built in South London in memory of the young black man who was killed in a racist attack in Southwark over 20 years ago.

I relocated to Ghana 6 years ago as Director of African Projects for Adjaye Associates. I came back home because it felt right and because I felt I now had something to contribute to the profession and Society.

3 years ago, I parted with Adjaye's. This allowed / forced me to realise a long-held dream and set up my own Studio here in Accra. I even had a name for it years ago - "Mustard", and undertake a wide range of architectural and artistic projects reflecting my own ideas - things that I would not have been able to do in a major corporate firm. And so here I am. Most would say that my career has been a great success - and my CV an impressive one. Of course, there have been bumps and setbacks along the way in both private and professional life but nothing that could block movement upward and onward. And with all the challenges of living and working in Ghana today, I am a happy and fulfilled person.

When I was younger and reflected on my career - its sheer scope, the exposure, the opportunities, the excellent mentors under whom I have worked and the relatively smooth transition from an international corporate practice to Mustard, I used to think how lucky I was - things falling in to my lap before I even fully realised I needed them e.g. appointments with 2 of the firms in my industry Foster and Partners and Adjaye Associates with relative ease. I have never actually attended a job interview. I used to ask myself whether I had a very active guardian angel or whether this was karma for a very decent (or very difficult) past life?

As I have matured and have been involved in training and mentoring many other young architects I think I have gained a better perspective. And that is really what I want to share with you today. Yes, there was luck and I am grateful for it. But more important was the work ethic, the constant striving to understand, to get to the heart of things, to improve - to do my best and the confidence that after so many people - parents, teachers, friends, colleagues had invested so much in me, I was indeed capable of delivering. It is not that I have never been troubled with formalities like interviews. Rather every day of my life has been an interview.

Opportunities came my way because those in a position to provide them had assessed me and found me worthy in terms of conduct, consistency, character, integrity and of course technical ability. Everyday, every task, is an interview a chance to share with others who and what you are, and encourage them to open doors to who you might become. Even this “inspirational address”, this speech is an interview for me - who knows what could come of it?

It will be the same for you. You are equipped with an excellent education. You must have some drive to have brought you to this day. There will of course be more learning to be done, be it formal or informal. You have excellent networks of professors, classmates, colleagues, etc who can help you move forward if you learn to use them. I am not in medical / biological sciences and cannot speak with any specificity about the way your profession is changing and the new fields and opportunities that are opening up every day. However I do read and have a general sense of how scientific and technological break-throughs will transform your field in the next few years. Everything is changing. Boundaries between disciplines are melting away. Much more than your educational achievements to date, how you move forward will be a function of how you “interview” daily in relation to this changing terrain. No matter what you do from here onwards, remember you are always in an “interview”. Be prepared for opportunity, recognise it when it comes along and grasp it with both hands.

So how do you ensure you are always ready to tackle life’s daily interviews? It is partly about being self-aware and partly about being aware of your environment and totally about dedication. Interrogate your life aspirations. Find what you really love in your profession (and if you do not love it begin to gravitate towards what you actually do love)! Interrogate your own unique strengths and weaknesses - talk to your professors and career counsellors etc. Develop a strategy for progress. And work your backsides off. Always give of your best - no matter how small or insignificant the task may appear. Be yourself - but be the best version of yourself that you can be.

The other thing I might say to you is seek contentment - not just wealth or professional recognition. If you love what you do then you are more than half way there. Find a synergistic balance between your professional and personal life. Love your community and society not just your immediate family and friends. Be fulfilled.

A friend recently shared this ‘*Simple Formula for Living*’ (author unknown), which I would like to leave with you as this is how I try to do me....

- ***Live beneath your means.***
- ***Return everything you borrow.***
- ***Stop blaming other people.***
- ***Admit it when you make a mistake.***

- *Give clothes not worn to charity.*
- *Do something nice and try not to get caught.*
- *Listen more; talk less.*
- *Every day, take a 30-minute walk.*
- *Strive for excellence, not perfection.*
- *Be on time. Don't make excuses.*
- *Don't argue. Get organised.*
- *Be kind to unkind people.*
- *Let someone cut ahead of you in line.*
- *Take time to be alone.*
- *Cultivate good manners.*
- *Be Humble.*
- *Realise and accept that life isn't fair.*
- *Know when to keep your mouth shut.*
- *Go an entire day without criticising anyone.*
- *Learn from your past. Plan for your future.*
- *Live in the present.*
- *Don't sweat the small stuff.*
- *It is all small stuff!*

And this last one from my own experience, '*Give credit where credit is due*'.

And to the ladies in your group, take credit when it is due! Allow yourself to shine. Do not hide your talents.

I can genuinely say I can tick at least 56% of the list (60% if I am lying to myself or just want to round it up to the nearest round number....), which isn't bad going in this day and age.

In this age of technology and social media, where we are bombarded with fake news, fake images, fake everything, from within and from out, remember to strive to do you, and remember the small stuff, but don't sweat it.

Congratulations to you all as you embark on this new beginning.

Ayeekooo!!!

Alice Asafu-Adjaye

Mustard Architecture

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