# Professor Ann Skelton’s Honorary Graduate speech transcript

Professor Jennifer Davidson: And so it is with the greatest pleasure therefore, my Lord Chancellor, my Lord Chancellor, that with the authority of the Senate, I ask you to confer upon Professor Dr Ann Skelton the degree of Doctor of Laws honoris causa.

University Chancellor: Congratulations on being awarded the degree. Very well done.

Professor Ann Skelton: Chancellor. Members of Court and Senate Academic Staff Secretary. Honorable Bedellus. Today's graduates and your families and friends. And I also want to mention my friends and families who family members who've come from a long way. Some of them all the way from South Africa to be here today. It's a huge honor for me to stand in this very grand hall and to receive this honorary doctorate.

Let me begin by thanking Professor Jennifer Davidson for that very kind, overwhelming address and also for her collegiality and support in the work that I've been doing with her and the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures here at the University. The letter of invitation that offered me the opportunity to take up this honorary doctorate was sent to me by the Principal.

And in it he said that it was to recognize my track record, both in research and in practice, because the University prides itself on being a place of Useful Learning capital U. Capital L and is committed to using education for the benefit of society. And that really is very meaningful to me. It's an ethos that I fully subscribe to as well, that education should lead to positive change.

When I was six and living in the UK, I developed an early ambition to be a lollipop lady and I was inspired because there was a woman who stood outside our school holding a stop sign and that shaped like a lollipop, obviously, and she helped the children to cross the road safely. I thought that that looked like a great job and it was what I wanted to be when I grew up.

And as Professor Davidson has said, I was recently appointed the Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. and I thought, I am making progress in that ambition. Although I definitely haven’t reached the end of that task because I’m helping children to cross the road at the international level, is quite challenging. And let me give you some examples to explain.

450 million children in the world are living in a conflict zone. The highest number in 20 years. So the roads that they have to cross are patrolled by combatants. And there are landmines just under the surface. 36 million of those children were displaced in 2022. So they're not crossing roads. They're traversing roads on incredibly long journeys ending in refugee camps.

Another group of displaced children and we'll see more of these are children displaced by climate change. The roads they have to cross are already underwater in some small island states. Migrant children don't only have to cross roads, they have to cross seas and rivers and face all kinds of perils at the border. Controls. And while there are so many physical roads to cross, there are also digital pathways to navigate.

Some children don't have access, which leaves them behind, and those who do have access are at risk because it's not always safe to be traveling on the roads of the Internet. And finally, children also don't only have to be protected, they have to be empowered. They have to have information. They need to participate. And so, yes, I think you'll agree with me that being a global lollipop lady is quite a tough job.

So I know that the majority of you are probably not considering a career in children's rights or in traffic control. So I'll leave that narrative there. And I understand that all of you here today are graduating with a law degree. So congratulations. And it's wonderful moment when you're going out into the world and starting on your legal career.

My first job when I left university with my law degree was as a public prosecutor, and they put me in what was then known as the juvenile court, because the practice was the thinking was if you made mistakes, it didn't matter if you did it with children. So I got to see how harsh the criminal justice system was during the apartheid era.

I saw children who'd been beaten by police. I saw children who'd been bitten by police dogs. The system itself was carrying out thousands of whippings on children as a sentence at that time. This is in the 1980s. Yes, a long time ago. But I'm glad to say that at least none of that is permitted in South African law today.

So I quickly realized that prosecuting was not my game because I was very worried about what was happening to the children. And I kept thinking, someone's got to do something about this. So I left and I joined Lawyers for Human Rights, and I started off doing general human rights work. But after a while, I kept thinking about those children.

I thought, I need to go back and focus on how we can help those children. So as has been mentioned by Jennifer as well, after Nelson Mandela was released and became the president, I was then invited to chair the committee that drafted South Africa's Child Justice Act. And I worked on a project that also saw the number of children in South African prisons drop from 4000 to less than 100, which is it's today. So the point of me telling you all of this is to say that if you have started your first job recently or if you're about to start it, I think your first job tells you a lot about what you want to do as a lawyer, what you want to get out of lawyering, and what you want to put into lawyering also.

And and if you don't like your first job, you can always move and go on to something else. My favorite John Grisham novel is The Street Lawyer. The protagonist is Michael Brock, who is a young antitrust attorney at Drake and Sweeney. Near the beginning of the book, a homeless man takes him hostage together with some other attorneys and is rambling on about the unfairness of his eviction.

So Michael starts to get interested in this, and he he investigates and he finds out that the big shots in law firm are actually purposely evicting people because they've got an interest in the development. Cut a long story short. Michael ends up leaving antitrust law and going over to work at a street law clinic at a reduced salary.

Now, I think this story has a happy ending, but I appreciate that some of you might be considering a career in antitrust law, and you may consider it rather tragic, which just shows that there are many types of careers in law that we can consider. And by the way, I'm not knocking antitrust law. I see that Strathclyde's Law School boasts an excellent center for antitrust law and empirical studies with a smart acronym SCALES.

The important thing that I would like to leave with you is ensure that you work hard at what you do, but also enjoy it. You must enjoy what you do. Because we spend a lot of our lives working. And remember that you don't have to stay in the first job that you do. You can move. And I can't resist cheekily ending my address by inviting you to bring your skills to the pursuit of social justice.

And if you do, if you come over and work on human rights or children's rights, I show you you'll be welcomed with open arms. Thank you.