

CAITLIN FIGUEIRDO ADDRESS TO MERICI COLLEGE AWARDS CEREMONY
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"Someone once told me that I was a changemaker.

Now I think that's a little bit weird. I think it's weird because I never saw myself as someone who could influence. I never saw myself as someone who could lead. Because the people around me told me I was unworthy.

They told me because I had a mental illness, I would never be able to stand in front of people because they would think that I was crazy.

I remember a friend of mine telling me that I would never be able to go to university. I could never have a family. Never have love. Or a career.

I was 15 when my friend said this – and this was a time where I was desperate to fit in. But now, because of my mental illness – I was told that I would never be accepted.

But now I'm a change maker.

Every single day I get to wake up to the best job in the world – a job that allows me to work with incredible young people like yourselves here in Australia – and overseas with big organisations like the United Nations.

When I go to work. The decisions that I make affects millions of young women and girls around the world...No pressure!

I have the privilege to work in this space because I said a simple word...yes.

I love saying the word yes. I love saying yes to opportunities. I love saying yes to happiness and to creating MY OWN opportunities.

But I didn't always like saying yes.

You see when I was in year 8. I remember sitting in front of the library talking to one of my friends when she yelled at me. She said, 'Gosh Caitlin! Why do you have to be so negative all the time!?'

I was shocked. Now I can't remember what we spoke about, but it must have been bad...because that was the last time we spoke.

What makes matters worse was that afternoon – I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

I remember sitting in the doctor's surgery thinking – okay, I have a mental illness. But what does this mean?

I felt like my life was over. Because I kept on hearing the negative perceptions of popular culture which says people with mental illness were crazy.

And I thought – well, does this mean im crazy? Does that mean I'm flawed?

I started thinking of all the negatives so I created a bubble around myself. I created this bubble to protect me. I felt that if I started saying no to people – no to my family, no to my friends then I would never have to go out. I would never have to prove myself. It was easy.

So I kept saying no. And these no's led me down a really dark path.

Until one day, one of my teachers Ms Gunn came up to me and said – Caitlin, I want you to try something... I want to challenge you for one entire week – I want you to see what it's like to say yes (within reason!)

So I started doing that. For one week I said yes. And at first it was really hard...I didn't like it...my parents thought I was really weird saying yes to them for the first time in years.

But a funny thing happened. Suddenly, my mindset shifted. Instead of being scared about my flaws, of what society calls mental illness...I started embracing them.

I realised that mental illness isn't a flaw, but a stamp of courage.

So I started saying yes more. And every time I said yes, my courage grew...I began to love life again ...until one day I woke up and I was in charge of a youth organisation called World Vision – Vgen ACT.

VGen is a youth movement on a mission to end poverty. I was able to become a Director at 19 by saying yes to someone who gave me an opportunity.

Now the thing is. When I said yes, I had absolutely no leadership skills. Prior to this, I was an elite athlete. Yes, I don't look like it now, but for 2 years, I was playing basketball against Olympians and in foreign countries.

But when this opportunity came up, I decided, that if I didn't know something, I'd fake it until I made it – and if that didn't work, I'd google it! Google became my best friend.

And this is something I'd encourage all of you to do! You see women generally only say yes to opportunities if they're 86% qualified. Whereas men, say yes when they only have 40% of the qualifications.

Maybe saying yes will increase gender equality?

But when this opportunity at world vision came up, everything for me finally clicked. I realised that my purpose in life was to serve – something Merici tried show me for years.

So from that moment on, I decided I'm going to try my hardest to say yes to serving people. So I was saying yes to service, yes to life.

And that led me to the united nations. At 20 years old, I was leading an international team for the UN Secretary General to ensure 62 million girls who are currently out of school due to menstruation and their gender...And I was in charge of building a program which tackled stigma and focused on giving girls access to a quality education.

That led me to the White House. At 21 years old, I was at the White house meeting Michelle Obama which was absolutely crazy because I think she is the most perfect human being on the planet....and suddenly!

She was the one who named me a changemaker!

So again, I thought – huh. Well, if my bestie michelle thinks im a changemaker then I better well be a change maker.

So I started seeing myself differently. I started saying yes more times then I said no.

That led me to be on phone calls with the president of the united states – Barack Obama, not orange haired man. Barack Obama.

To taking over parliament house and stopping the PM from leaving his own court yard until I finished what I had to say.

And that kept leading to more and more and more.

I ended up in places beyond my wildest dreams.

For example – last month I was flown to England to meet The Queen at Buckingham Palace.

Like – it's ridiculous!

There I was sitting in the throne room, they're playing ColdPlay on strings and there is The Queen.

I was so nervous meeting her, when they called my name I felt like I was going to pass out! That's when Meghan Markle – aka, the Duchess of Sussex, locked eyes with me and mouthed "breath – it will be okay!"

So next time you're feeling a little stressed – do what the duchess does and just – BREATH!

Because yes – it will be okay.

I didn't have time to process if it was real or not, so I took a giant breath, curtsied and received an award for changing Australia at 22.

But if that didn't top it, as I was talking to Sir John, another former PM, a palace guard came up and said, "excuse me, The Duchess requests a private audience with you" – That's when sir john straitened his coat and started to walk....before the palace guird said.

Sorry, not you sir – her. He was pointing at me!

I have never seen a leader more shocked in his life!

So I entered this amazing room and Meghan followed by harry came up to me and said, did you see my message....thats when I started freaking out! It was REAL!

But how does that happen. I go from sitting where you guys are now a little under 7 years ago to suddenly being in the room with some of the most powerful people on

the planet???. Affecting change – helping to build the dreams of millions of women and girls.

Well – it started right here. In these halls.

Merici taught me a lot. It was my home - It gave me great friends, it fostered my passions like art – in fact I have two art works in this school that will probably outlive me. It taught me to love life and push boundaries and when I fail – it taught me to always get back up.

I owe a lot to this school, in particular it's amazing teachers who believed in me when I couldn't - like Ms Fraser, Mr Barlow, Ms B, Ms McLeoud and Ms Curren.

So my last piece of advice to you girls is that when people say you have the power and potential to change the world – Believe them! But more importantly – believe in yourself.

And believe in the power of yes!

In my relatively short life – I have struggled with mental illness. I've missed more school than I can count, I was a college drop out and I've failed more times than I can count.

Technically – I should not be standing in front of you now – but if it wasn't for the support of this school, my passion to follow my purpose or by having the courage to say yes – I wouldn't be.

So say yes to help – say yes to opportunities. You don't have to do everything on your own.

Because it's easier to get where you want to go where you get help.

And now I don't view my flaws or my tipsy turvy journey as something to be ashamed of. Because they're what make me – me.

At the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, an organisation I'm an ambassador for – they gave me this word.

They said – anytime you think of yourself as imperfect – don't think of yourself like that.

Because you're not awesome -

You're flawsome!

I believe being flawsome is going to turn the world around. It's knowing that we have the potential to turn our weaknesses into our strengths.

It's allowing ourselves to be imperfect and knowing that we are all destined for greatness but we use what we have around us – our emotions, our friends, our teachers –

And by doing so – we become the people we were born to be – people capable of changing the world.

So my name is Caitlin Figueiredo – and I hope you all say yes to life and I hope that you understand that you're all flawsome amazing individuals. "