

Thank you very much and good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. It gives me an enormous amount of pleasure to be here this evening, and it is an honour to celebrate with you the many achievements of these students. I would like to offer my personal congratulations to each and every one of you. When I was asked by Mr Hopkins to come back to the school and speak this evening, I knew that wherever I was I would make it happen, as it was a chance to pay something back to this place that did so much for me. I'm very fortunate to work in a profession that takes me to different countries, and I started this morning in Vienna, where I had a performance last night, and will be going onto Belfast, London and New York in the next week. That said, I would imagine that there are many people here who have no idea who I am and why I am here. Unfortunately, I can only answer the first of these questions, but my name is Cameron, I came to Caistor Grammar in September 2004 and left in 2011. I am a classical pianist and singer, and much of my work involves accompanying opera singers in recitals around the world.

But tonight is not about me — far from it. Rather, it is an opportunity for us to celebrate the entire student body, their parents and their teachers, after all, it takes a village. Therefore, I thought carefully about how I could make my attendance here this evening a valuable one, and I realized the best way for me to do that was to share a few anecdotes about things that happened to me in the eight years since I left Caistor, and how they have their roots firmly in my experience of school. Hopefully that may be of some help to the students here tonight.

I was by no means an exceptional student, at least not in the conventional sense, if there is one. In fact, when I was clearing out old papers on a recent trip home, I came across several documents testifying this to an even greater extent than I'd remembered, including a letter from Mrs Nugent to my mother, summoning her to school to discuss why I was practicing the piano instead of going to RE lessons. I was fairly dreadful at maths, far worse at Chemistry and Biology, and I remember signing up for a school trip to Twickenham in year 8 as it was on a Tuesday and that meant I could miss Technology and Art. Don't let that fool you into thinking I was interested in sport: the only things I remember from that trip were the hotdog stand and watching the planes on the Heathrow flight path. When I got to sixth form, we were given Wednesday afternoons as a dedicated time for a school-approved sport, which meant my friend James and I would take the bus into Grimsby, do two lengths at Scartho swimming pool and then spend a couple of hours in the steam room. But I really enjoyed French and German lessons, and I absolutely loved Music. And this is really where my first indebtedness to Caistor

Grammar School came, as everything that has happened to me as a musician I guarantee would not have happened without the extraordinary powerhouse of a teacher that is Frances Thompson. Mrs Thompson told me in year 7 that I was a gifted pianist, and she immediately became a mentor. I remember her teaching me to accompany violinists for the house music competition, and how to sightread by playing for the school musicals, both skills which are fundamental to my career. In fact, I use those sight-reading skills more often than I would normally care to admit.

She is also a world-class singer and continues to be my singing teacher to this day. In sixth form, I also studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London on Saturdays, where Mrs Thompson also studied, and she was a terrific support when I was suddenly confronted with the best young musicians not just in the UK, but who also commuted from France, Italy, Spain and beyond.

With the privilege of retrospect, it seems almost ridiculous that I had always wanted to study French at Oxford University rather than music. I came from a remarkably unmusical family, all of whom worked in the shipping industry, and I had been led to believe that French was by far a more sensible academic path which would result in a career that was, for want of a better phrase, 'strong and stable'. It wasn't until I made my first visit to Oxford in upper sixth, that I realized I didn't particularly like the place, and that the emphasis of the French course was not where I wanted to focus my energies. Returning to school somewhat confused the following Monday, I had a chance conversation with Mrs Osborne, who was at the time Head of Languages. I always appreciated her straightforward manner, and she said to me outright, 'Cameron, how badly do you want to study French at Oxford, because I'm not sure you're good enough. You could go to a very good university, but if Oxbridge is the most important thing to you, then you need to apply for music'. I'm not quite sure how important the idea of going to Oxford or Cambridge was to me, but at that point I knew that it made no sense to do anything other than music. I soon realized that I couldn't possibly imagine a life doing anything else, and by sheer coincidence, Mr Hale invited me on a trip to Cambridge to look at some of the colleges the week before the applications were due. As soon as I stepped through the Great Gate of Trinity College, and I heard the choir rehearsal reverberating about the Great Court, I knew where I was applying. The rest was history.

To relate this back to the students this evening, I learned several lessons from that episode. The first was to always be open to conversations and allow them to go in directions that you don't expect. Never be too proud to process advice from

someone who knows you, but never take advice from someone who doesn't know you. Lesson number two was never to do something or commit to something in anticipation of a result. Always prioritize the process. Music was the thing I loved studying for the sake of studying it, and it sounds obvious, but success is most often the result of a healthy process. I remembered this lesson when it came to the final exams of my undergraduate degree, and instead of cramming for the exams, I decided to just keep learning, reading new articles, and trusting that whatever was interesting would stick. I was awarded the Isaac Newton Scholarship after graduating, to stay and do my Masters at Cambridge, which somewhat foolishly I accepted. I lasted four days. I had viewed my time as an academic undergraduate as preparation for a career in playing, and when I sat down in the library to begin research for my Masters thesis, I knew that I should be sitting down at a piano, not a desk. I called the principal at the Royal Academy of Music, who thankfully I still knew very well from my time at Junior Academy, and told him of the situation. I began there the following Monday, and still maintained my connections with Cambridge as I took up a position on the faculty.

Lesson number three: make mistakes. Mistakes are a crucial part of development. Sometimes it is only by choosing the wrong thing that you know what the right thing is. And as I think of it, one thing which I like to tell my students in New York: failure is not the opposite of success. Failure is central to success.

I'm a strong advocate of international education, and I always planned to finish my studies by moving abroad. It is probably one of the most important things that I would urge students here to consider even for undergraduate degrees. In many countries, France and Germany included, it is far more cost-effective than studying in the UK, and you have the added bonus of learning an additional language by default. It seems more important than ever for young professionals to place themselves within a global community. I chose to go to the Juilliard School in New York, based on a specific teacher I wanted to learn from, so you could say that I didn't need to learn a new language, but you'd be surprised. I learned this when I walked into my auditions, and the chair of the panel said 'Ok Cameron, sit down and lets see whatcha got.' I was also extremely fortunate to receive a Fulbright Award — a scholarship awarded by the US government for overseas students with an emphasis on cultural exchange — which gave me tremendous opportunities to meet other international students. During my first year at Juilliard I received an email asking if I could accompany the voice lessons of a group of dancers, who had to take Broadway-style singing. I did, and the

teacher and I hit it off immediately. Never underestimate the power of a British accent in the states. She asked me if I would be interested in coaching her private students, most of whom sang Broadway and pop songs, which I'd always enjoyed, but the repertoire was a fast learning curve. I agreed, and found that I really enjoyed teaching, and having played for thousands of voice lessons, was quite good at hearing and diagnosing vocal issues. Within a few months I had got my first students into Broadway shows, including Frozen, School of Rock, and the lead in the New York production of Matilda. Since then, the momentum grew and I have a teaching studio in New York and also Los Angeles, where I found myself teaching singing to young actors in Hollywood movies.

If I think to my time at Caistor Grammar, I had no idea I would end up doing this, nor that this type of career even existed. To those who are starting out, never underestimate the power of the universe and its desire to pull you and push you. Everything happens for a reason, and that reason is usually not obvious until much further down the line. Value failure more highly than success, success rarely teaches you half as much. Embrace the unexpected, and above all, have the courage to throw yourself wholeheartedly into what you love and do not be afraid to voice your dreams. As a wise teacher taught me, a goal is a dream that has a deadline and a plan. Thank you very much for listening to me, and once again, congratulations to all those who received awards this evening.