

Graduation 2013

Oration for Honorary Graduand Annie Lennox
Orator: Dr Pam Cox

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Annie Lennox

Why can the world deliver Coca Cola to almost every spot on the planet but not basic medicines? Why does AIDS kill so many people in poor countries – when the virus that causes it – HIV – has become a survivable infection in the rich world?

Are these questions worth asking? Are they worth answering?

They are for Annie Lennox – and not just in the abstract. Her work on HIV AIDS has made vital, practical, difference – above all in South Africa, where her work with the Treatment Action Campaign among others has helped force a change in attitudes and policy bringing life-saving medicines to millions.

Her own “SING” campaign works to prevent the transmission of the virus from mother to child. It was inspired by her work with Nelson Mandela, whom himself once attended one of these graduations ceremonies to honour his wife Graça Machel. It raises money, and fittingly for today, uses education in some wonderful grassroots projects. It makes a stand for human dignity – above all. And that is a principle, that this University, with its pioneering research on health, economic and social challenges through its Human Rights Centre, is proud to endorse.

Annie is also here because she is a singer-songwriter.

It's almost exactly 30 years since ‘Sweet Dreams Are Made of This’ reached number one in the American Billboard chart. It's hard now to imagine the shock that that song and its androgynous singer could cause. But back in 1983 it was real, vital and liberating.

Through the words and music of Eurythmics, Annie helped a generation define itself. Her picture was on my bedroom wall – and her voice on my cassette player. (Parents, you might have to tell your children what a cassette player was.) It was more than music; it was an attitude – epitomized in her duet with Aretha Franklin – ‘Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves’.

Now women make up half the students at this university and that was not the case back in 1983. Some may say that feminism has achieved its task. But outside this haven, there is a world in which life chances are profoundly unequal, where you need the spirit of an Annie Lennox in order to flourish.

Annie's own journey took her from home in a two-room tenement opposite a textile factory in Aberdeen, through music lessons – that she struggled with, to a High School – that she hated, to the Royal Academy of Music – from which she dropped out. If nothing else, her story tells us that education is a foundation for success – even if that not always clear to us at the time.

It also tells us that success is about making the most of our opportunities – turning a waitressing job into a meeting with the other half of Eurythmics, Dave Stewart, and then selling tens of millions of records, for example. To date, she has sold over 80 million records during her career with Eurythmics and as a solo artist. We may not have Annie's voice but we have other talents. They mustn't be wasted; we must seize the moments as they arise.

But our talents are not just our own; they have been nurtured by families, friends, social networks and institutions like this one. We should be ready, in our turn, to nurture others; to see ourselves as part of a unity, part of a connected world.

This is what Annie has done. Moved by the strength and the fragility of the human condition, she has joined in solidarity with the excluded and the oppressed around the world. From Burma, to Tibet, to Palestine, to Southern Africa, she has made a personal stand in favour of freedom and justice.

A long-standing supporter of Amnesty International, Global Ambassador of UN AIDS and Oxfam and special envoy for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Scotland Branch, she was also honoured with an OBE in 2011 in recognition of her humanitarian work.

Annie has brought up two daughters, won eight BRIT awards (the most for any female artist), four Grammys and an Oscar – to list just a few of her achievements. And she continues to write, record and perform music and sell it in truckloads and downloads.

For her talent, her perseverance, her dedication and her commitment we're very pleased, and very proud to be able to award her an honorary degree today.

Chancellor, I present to you Annie Lennox.