The Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Registrar, Academics, fellow graduands, students and parents, it is a real privilege to be here tonight.

Having never attended anything like this previously, I beg your understanding, and, as I am nervous, your forgiveness for me reading this address.

To the others receiving doctorates, I thank you for your inspiration and congratulate you on your great achievements. To you young students, I would like to express the wish that you apply your learning to the betterment of society and the planet. We are heading into very difficult times with many challenges. For me the most pervasive is climate change, no longer a threat in the distant future, it is here now. You are our future and you have a lot of hard work to do to ensure that our species survives and thrives.

I never received any formal higher education. I did not attend university, and though I do not regret much, I have always felt that a university education would have contributed greatly to my ability to learn, retain information and facts, and may have influenced my life choices and thus experience.

For a long time I was a one woman jive and I do regret that whilst I was immersed in the work of Food & Trees for Africa writing up proposals and reports, running all the communications and fundraising, I failed to sufficiently capture the data on the good work of the organisation in numerical terms - figures that act as proof and are thus vital.

Until fairly recently it was near impossible to interest universities in funding research, recording the impact of thousands of trees in a settlement, the reach and effect of a small school food garden in a village, carbon sequestration data, the economic and social impacts of urban forestry, permaculture or organic farming, the impacts of improved nutrition, and much more. A couple of fires and robberies in our office contributed to the lack of empirical data, however the stories recorded and anecdotal evidence do show transformation.

It is comforting to note that much of what I have spent the last 25 years talking about, to all I meet and see, on radio or TV when invited, through workshops and simple publications, is now becoming mainstream, attracting more attention and, hopefully sooner rather than later, meaningful action. The recent agreement of 195 nations in Paris, to commit, albeit voluntarily, to some carbon reductions and more focus on renewable energy and industry that does not drive us on a downward spiral of destruction, was encouraging.

Back to this honor though, one I never imagined I would receive. When the Vice Chancellor called I wept as he told me that my work was to be acknowledged by this esteemed institution. I am especially gratified knowing that this doctorate honours not only me as the recipient, but raises the profile of all who work towards a healthier environment and more equitable communities, a more sustainable future, where there is enough for all.

My first inspiration was my dad. My father was Mr Universe…..really, in fact three times over 21 years. For those who are not familiar, Mr Universe was the most esteemed title a bodybuilder could earn. From very humble beginnings in a coal mining town of north England my father, Reg Park, built his knowledge of the human body as he honed his own perfectly symmetrical and impressive physique, with no additives. A unique man. He starred as Hercules in several films and was mentor to many, including Arnold Schwarzenegger. Most fantastically, he used what he learned to help thousands around the world to feel better in their bodies, heal after physical injury, or to improve their athletic abilities, through exercise, diet, as well as the power of his positivity and humility. Even now, years after he has passed, his legacy endures and his achievements continue to inspire people from all walks of life.

Reg had too many encouraging wisdoms to share now, but most notably he woke me very early every morning to tell me that I could do anything I wanted and be whoever I could be, if I saw the vision, focused, and worked hard. He gave me confidence and a flair for communications, all the while not using these to promote himself.

I spent my formative years and began my schooling in that polluted, grey northern UK. Later when we settled in Johannesburg, where we came for clear skies and good weather, I was fortunate enough to attend a decent school. I finished, Head Girl, and victrix ludorum, at 16, with a university entrance pass and a potential swimming scholarship to UCLA. But, instead of seizing this opportunity, I saw myself as a flower child. I realized that all of life is interconnected, that we are one, and set out to see the beauty of this planet, explore diversity and meet people from all cultures. I chose the road less travelled, through countries certainly not considered idyllic holiday destinations.

After camping through southern Europe, I took the cheapest buses and trains through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and south east Asia, living with communities in some places, and watching and learning in others, trading, and keeping my needs and my impact on the planet, now known as a carbon footprint, as light as I could.

Some places held me for longer, such as Dharamsala in the Himalayas where I studied at the Tibetan Library for several months. Living at an altitude of 1900m, in a tiny room with few possessions, a window with no glass so the mountain clouds floated in, no electricity nor running water, and sleeping on an earth floor, I was happy.

I landed up for some months in Japan teaching English in a small northern town, where a South African woman was an extremely rare phenomenon, and then journeyed to the United States. In Santa Monica I immediately met and joined people starting one of the first raw food restaurants, organic markets and health food shops on the West Coast. It was here that I met a husband, and my eldest son, who is named after a tree, Tamarac, was born. Later travels took me to the giant redwood forests, the islands, the everglades, the rivers, great plains and mountains of that continent, where again I was overwhelmed with the beauty of this planet.

My dear friend and a mentor, Rose Smuts, who is here tonight, says that while my formal education was not robust, I in fact attended the university of life.

I returned to South Africa for a few years in the ‘80’s but soon had to leave again, unable to live under apartheid.

This time I alighted in Australia, with my then husband and three small children in tow. Having children encouraged me to look more directly at what we are doing on this planet and think about what kind of future we were leaving them to cope with. Green issues were becoming more prominent. A young man I met shared his final year paper on the environment with me. It presented a comprehensive view of the state of the planet and our impact on it, and was a real wake up call.

Living in north Sydney, bordering Garigal National Park, I experienced first hand how the integration of nature, natural systems, and the associated ecosystems services they provide into a city, enhances life, and this too was an inspiration.

I started reading and learning and felt moved to look out and start taking responsibility for more than just my small family. I realized I had great energy, had learned a lot through my life and travels and had developed my communications skills which had been used, until then, in supporting us.

I returned to the land of my birth in 1990, just before the release of a great hero, Nelson Mandela, who confirmed for me that ONE can change the world. I wanted to put down roots and contribute in some small way to the people of this country, which was then full of hope and optimism. I knew that this was the time to work from my passion, towards a dream of a more equitable, greener and healthier society and planet.

Almost as soon as we touched down, and against the advice of many who worried how, as an about to be single mother, I was going to support three children, I started Trees for Africa, later Food & Trees for Africa. It was an idea whose time had come. I quickly found people who believed in my dream, mentors and board members, many of whom stuck with me for 24 years.

I managed to convince some influential people to contribute funds, the new government of the time to include urban forestry and permaculture into their evolving policies, and the disadvantaged communities of the townships and rural areas to plant and care for trees and food gardens. And it has worked!

Millions of trees have been planted across the country where they were needed, and thousands of food gardens established. From the outset I realized that education should underpin all these efforts and so seeds were planted, not only in the earth, but perhaps more importantly, in people’s hearts and minds. Seeds that have manifest in so many regenerative ways.

These programmes grew thanks to the support of many companies who heard my pleas. The numerous people who responded, and continue to communicate with me about how our actions benefitted their lives, have been the river of energy that drove the desire to keep going and do more.

The hundreds of people who worked at Food & Trees for Africa over the years, and who went through training in conservation, permaculture, climate change and environmentalism, were perhaps the most rewarding. For over a decade we did not have money to hire professionals and had to build up and train teams, most of whom have gone on to become effective people, making a difference. I can think of so many great stories like Sylvester Ngwenya, who we found sleeping in the garage across the road from the office, who is now a great community worker and permaculturist. Lawrence and Mookho Tshokogle who had never worked in any of these fields, nor had any training , who met and married at the organisation and now work high up in the Department of Environment Affairs in the Free State, or Sam Mhlungu, who heard me on the radio and such was his passion to improve township environments, instantly left his job to work with us. He became one of the first black landscapers in the country. Others include Joanne Rolt, now managing a successful bush lodge, and Verena Peters, who arrived as a volunteer and today manages an NGO in Mpumalanga…too many inspiring stories to tell. The learning we facilitated, the education and empowerment we gave,were widespread and they are the legacy of which I am most proud.

During this time, I had the good fortune to have a profound relationship with an extraordinary, visionary man, well ahead of his time, who died before he should have. So many people were inspired by Frik Grobbelaar at Rustlers Valley, and together we facilitated the training of hundreds of people in permaculture, many of the country’s first trainers, including two who developed permaculture in the agricultural SETA.

There have also been memorable tree planting events. Organising the planting of a forest in Qunu and planting a tree outside the kitchen for Nelson Mandela and Graça Machel was a highlight. Trees were planted trees with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip at Gallagher Estates, with Whoopi Goldberg in Soweto, with Bishop Tutu, rugby and other sporting heroes, ministers, mayors, rock stars and many others in townships across the land. There have been many awards and acknowledgements, like receiving personal training from Al Gore as the first African Climate Leader, but perhaps the greatest gift has been that the work has been a wondrous way to express my passion and my love.

At the outset, in 1990, I tried to communicate the urgent need to act on climate change. It was an even harder sell then than it is today, yet we are still not acting fast enough, nor with any sense of urgency. The terrible forebodings backed by the world’s greatest science and all National Science Academies, are evident around us now, with extreme weather events and their disastrous outcomes, ever more violent, ever more frequent, and the poor, especially in Africa, suffering most from anthropogenic climate disruption.

We must act. As I have said for decades, IF NOT NOW WHEN?

Now, as a new grandmother, I review a life lived to the full, that has rewarded not only me and my family but many lives and landscapes, and hopefully will for years to come. I am pleased that I have not just been a passenger, but have contributed in a meaningful way to my community.

I hope that these small but significant beginnings will develop into fundamental changes that will benefit our children and theirs. It is a humbling irony that my daughter Jhana, fed up with living in a non-profit household, became a banker. My youngest son, Kaya, still laughs at the memory of living with me continually turning off lights, despite him still being in the shower, how I read all labels, censored their food and covered leftovers with plates instead of using foil and plastic wrap.

I hope to still have the opportunity to share some of the many experiences these past years have afforded me and to continue to inspire others to find, follow and give back to the world via their passion, whatever it may be.

It has been a thrilling, sometimes exhausting and always fulfilling journey. All these years in community development have taught me that we cannot bring about the necessary changes without quality education for all.

Education is a vital beginning in the quest for self-fulfillment and the realisation of our potential.

I thus hope that you young people will use your valuable education well, innovate and create, improve lives, change the world! It begins with ONE and that ONE is you.

I am grateful to be here, in this moment, and would like to dedicate it to the memory of my late father Reg, and my late partner Frik. If here tonight, great men that they were, both would have had tears of pride in their eyes, not only for me, but for all of you who have a dream, a vision of a thriving planet. In honour of those dreams I humbly accept this doctorate.