

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

**Vision Youth Leadership 2004
Graduation Gala**

Feb. 15, 2004

Toronto, Ontario

Parents, graduates, honoured guests and friends:

You notice that I have addressed the parents first because I want you to know how important you are in the lives of the graduates here tonight. In many ways, we, as parents, have great influence on the next generation. Your children are graduating tonight from the Vision Youth programme, and I want to congratulate you.

Coming from a similar background as most of you, I feel I understand your perspective on Canadian society. When I think back to 1959 when I came as a visa student, I didn't feel any link to Canada at all, except that this was the place where I was getting a university education, and I was expected to return to Hong Kong eventually. What happened was that I married a Canadian, and I have been here ever since.

So, how did I evolve into such an active participant in Canadian society? Well, it wasn't simply that when you make a decision to stay in a country, you become part of it. For those of us from Hong Kong, before July 1, 1997, there was a different meaning, and I will explain.

Many of us here are old enough to know that, as ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong, whether we had British passports or Hong Kong passports, we didn't have a country. Have you ever thought of that? As a child in Hong Kong, I had often wondered what nationality I had. I certainly was not a citizen of China or of Britain. When I got married in 1962, all of a sudden, I had a country. I became a Canadian citizen. It was nice to know that you belong. So, that's where my loyalty lies. And Canada is where I want to build a future for my family.

I was recently asked by a young Chinese Canadian woman how I manage to do all the things I do. And so this evening, I will share a few of my secrets with you because I do believe you will find them useful.

I think the most important one is, as I mentioned at this event last year, keep smiling. I remember one summer day, when I was 18, I was feeling totally miserable. I decided that, from that day forward, I would refuse to allow misery to take over my life, and that no matter what, I would keep smiling. That turned out to be a very smart decision, if I may say so. Because when you smile, others smile with you, and you create a happy aura around you. Smiling affects your psyche, and can give you a positive and healthy outlook on life.

Another very important element in my life is being proud of my heritage and knowing who I am. When I first came to Canada, few people I had contact with knew what, or where, Hong Kong was. I remember so well that I often had to define Hong Kong and where it was located on the world map. There were very few Chinese students at McGill then, and I was one of a dozen girls. So, at that time, having confidence in myself really helped.

The situation is certainly different now in most major cities in Canada, because diversity is celebrated. But, fitting into Canadian society can still be a challenge. It may not be an uncommon occurrence when someone makes fun of how you look, the smell of your food, the colour of your skin, where you come from, or any disability that you may have, (and we all have them). Just remember that the problem is theirs, not yours. This is how I have built confidence in myself. I just stay focused on what I believe in and what I want to achieve, and I gain the respect of those around me.

All the graduates today have the opportunity to learn and practice public speaking. I never had that opportunity as a young person. It was something I learnt much later on in life, so you are way ahead of me. As a young person growing up in Hong Kong, we were to be seen and not heard. There wasn't any public speaking for students in my day, so you are all very fortunate. So speak up whenever you have the opportunity, not only in public gatherings, but also in family gatherings where you can practice your skills among family members. We know in Chinese families, we have huge family gatherings once in a while. Being able to express yourselves publicly will help you a great deal in your work and in public life in the future. None of us can afford to be shy anymore in this day and age.

Another important element for success in Canada is the ability to make friends from every background and every culture. If you cultivate the qualities I just mentioned, you will have no inhibitions with people. I believe that is one of my greatest strengths. My husband and I have good friends from every background, every level of education, and from many different parts of the world.

When I speak of making friends, I don't just mean people you work with - I mean people you can share confidences with - friends whose company you enjoy, and that you like to invite to your homes, and they like inviting you to theirs.

So, now I have come to my most important message this evening, for all the graduates as well as the organizers of the Vision Youth Leadership Program. This is something I have already discussed with your organizers.

I believe the program should be open to young people from all cultures. The reason I say this is that I noticed last year, as well as this year, that everyone in the program is ethnic Chinese. It has been pointed out to me that Chinese language among the participants of the Program is discouraged. It is a step in the right direction, but social skills to thrive in a multicultural society cannot be developed in groups from the same ethnic background.

I do believe the Vision Youth Program can help to accelerate the strength of our youth in Canadian society. Having the right skills is one thing, but knowing how to live together in friendship with youths from different cultures is much more important. I was fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to live with young girls from all over the world in my teens. The experience had the greatest influence in my life, or I wouldn't be where I am today. If the Vision Youth Program welcomes youth from all cultures, its importance could be immense.

You may say that youth from other cultures and ethnic backgrounds may not want to be part of the Program anyway since it is now known to be dominated by ethnic Chinese. So what you need to do is to advertise the fact that it welcomes diversity. You just may be amazed by the result.

Now I will end by wishing all our graduates great success in their future endeavours.

Thank you.