

**Feature Address by Hon. Dr. Jacqui Quinn-Leandro
Minister of Education, Sports, Youth & Gender Affairs
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Your Excellency, Dame Louise Lake-Tack, Governor-General of Antigua and Barbuda, Director of Education, Mrs. Jacintha Pringle, Education Officer with responsibility for Secondary Schools, Mr. Clare Brown, County Manager, LIME Antigua, Mr. Davidson Charles, Manager Corporate Communications, Mrs. Paula Lee, other executives of LIME Antigua, other senior officials in the Ministry of Education, distinguished Awardees, Parents, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen.

In preparation for this address, I sat and thought for a long time, a very long time, ruminating on what lasting message I could give to you students as we celebrate your exhibition of dedication, your commitment to hard work and ultimately your academic success. I pondered what memorable nugget of wisdom I could leave with you as you transition from one phase of your academic career to another.

Every day for the past five years of your Secondary school life, you have been drilled and grilled about the pursuit of excellence. You have been told to “reach for the stars” and “climb every mountain”. You have been cautioned that “all play and no work makes Jack a mere toy.” You have heard cliché after cliché about the importance of studying, burning the midnight oil and the virtues of hard work.

Today, by virtue of the fact that you are here, you have exhibited that you have understood and certainly grasped the true meaning of “academic excellence”. So today is not a day for clichés from me about such matters. As your Minister of Education and Youth I wish to focus on how you as outstanding and exemplary students can now become outstanding and exemplary citizens. My address will therefore focus on “good citizenship.”

We are all aware that a country's worth is in its human resources. No matter how wealthy a country may be in silver and gold; in bauxite or oil; no matter how rich in natural resources; these will remain untapped, under-utilized or poorly channeled, if the human potential is not properly harnessed to those natural resources.

When a people are well educated, well-trained and well informed, they remain marketable and competitive in a work environment where the sheer quantity of employees outnumber job opportunities. I suggest to you that part of the role of a good citizen is to harness all your God-given talents and to channel your creative energies into making yourselves, your community and ultimately your country, a better place. Purpose in your heart that you will be the best citizen of Antigua and Barbuda that you can possibly be. This means giving of your all in whatever task you undertake, be it higher education, employment, or starting a business.

Tell yourself that you will make your contribution to this country and leave your own personal mark, your own legacy on the pages of our history. A good citizen follows rules. A good citizen is helpful to others. A good citizen is proud of his/her country and takes pride in keeping it clean. A good citizen also believes the country is worth keeping strong; understands the importance of citizen involvement in a democracy, and appreciates the impact of a single act and of millions of single acts.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Many people confuse having good character with being a good citizen but they are not the same. It would be similar to saying that having good character is the same as being a good parent or being a good manager. Character relates to the quality of one's actions such as acting in a manner that is honorable, courageous, compassionate and ethical.

Good citizenship relates to the type of one's actions, those actions that remind us of our heritage or involve us in the democratic process. As Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, said "It's not always the same thing to be a good man and a good citizen."

As I look out at your young, beautiful, bright faces, so full of hope and trust and energy, I reflect on all those young people who started out just like you: full of hope and faith in the future; but who because of bad company, the wrong attitudes and poor choices fell by the wayside. Young people who

were unable to pursue their dreams because they got caught up with “friend and company”, who encouraged them to say, think and act in anti-social, counter-productive and deviant ways.

So many bad values are perpetrated on you our young teens every day, so much pressure to fit in with the crowd, so much to distract you from focusing on your high ideals and goals of becoming a good citizen. But guess what young people? We all had temptations and distractions and pressures. (*So too your grandparents and their parents before them.*) But the mettle of a man or woman is that ability to surmount obstacles, to find solutions to problems; to remain focused on a goal and to complete tasks set for him or her.

Distinguished Awardees, **You** are now on the way to great things. I urge you do not let anyone or anything make you lose your focus or steer you from the path that you have chosen of becoming a good citizen. Tell those who want to encourage you in evil, immorality or wrong doing that you have goals and **you-will-not lose-focus**. I want all the awardees to repeat this sentence with me: “I will not lose focus, I will be a good citizen” Again, please “I will not lose focus, I will be a good citizen.” And I want you to not just say it but to mean it in your heart and soul and to make it a daily mantra. (*I will not lose focus, I will become a good citizen!*)

Whenever I have the opportunity to speak to young people I remind them that good citizenship and great things in life cannot be achieved by mediocrity, laziness and a half-hearted approach. Great things are achieved by dint of hard labour, by the sweat of your brows and by relying and trusting on the One who is bigger than you and me. But you know this already, because here we are celebrating you! But it can never be over-emphasized, because this is not the time to rest on your laurels. **This is the time to move from being outstanding students to being outstanding citizens.**

Two of my very favourite scriptures which have guided me through every stage of my life are: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding;” and “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” I urge you today, if you have not done so already, find a place for God in your lives. Being a good citizen means you are conscientious and God-fearing.

We as parents cannot tell you how to think, but we try to train you in such a way that you will think and behave in ways that are exemplary and in ways that will uplift and enhance you. I’m sure you’ve heard the saying, “you can lead a horse to water but you cannot force it to drink”; so too you can lead a child along a path of goodness, honesty and dignity but you cannot force him or her how to think, how to be a good citizen.

Today I suggest to you our young people, embrace what is good and wholesome and uplifting. Set your sights on things that can enrich your lives and make you better persons, good, honest and upright citizens who can give back to our community and build this nation of ours. Embrace high ideals and be strong, be confident, be bold but above all be true to your parents, your teachers and yourselves.

As you move to solidify a new phase in your lives, at the State College, ABIITT, University or work, you are now required to manage your time and to respect time. We have a way of excusing our disrespect for time as saying “Antiguan time.” And we fall into the habit of being poor managers of time. I like to recount to young people that one of my favorite past-times is dancing. I love all genres of music and I love to dance. But when I went to UWI in Jamaica, the mecca of entertainment and dance, I had to determine that for every hour I spent out on weekends at the disco, fetes or dances, I would spend two in studying and keeping on top of my work. My friends always used to be amazed that I was such a party animal, crawling back to campus at 4:00/ 5:00 o’clock in the morning and still being able to pull A’s and B’s. Managing my time well allowed me to graduate from Mona as the

first Antiguan Valedictorian with First Class honours. I have every confidence that you too can manage your time well and replicate the success you now have at the CXC level at College or University.

We witness every day people who rob their employers by perpetual time-wasting, malingering, habitual lateness, and clock watching. We cannot build a nation with patriotic, devoted and highly motivated individuals if we do not commit to patriotism, to working hard zealously and arduously to achieve your goals.

You have in your own hands the power to be a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, a politician, a nurse, an athlete, an artist, not quite an Indian chief, but whatever you decide is your best aptitude, work towards that goal unrelentingly. And I say to you if you work together with your parents and teachers with earnest determination, you can and will make it in this life, *being a good citizen and being whatever it is you want to be!*

Parents, my message to you is simple and is captured in the words of Joseph Joubert: "Children have more need of models than of critics." It is an escapist route and an act of cowardice to simply criticize, undermine and tear down another person, especially if that criticism is not constructive. We hear it on our radio stations every single day: callous remarks, scandalous comments, vitriol, lies, venom and diatribe all aimed at destroying peoples' characters. Our young people need to see good examples of hard work and diligence, positivity, and constructive criticism and enthusiasm for life.

Our children need to see good examples of tolerance and patience and kindness and goodness and generosity of spirit. Our children need to see good examples of patriotism, devotion to and love for community and country. Our children need to see good examples of commitment to a cause and dedication to see a task to its end. If we commit ourselves today to leading exemplary lives, we will indeed be good models for our children.

You know there is a flippant saying which we use sometimes when we are caught in acts of deception; "Do as I say, and not as I do." Today I urge you parents to provide good examples to your children and give them the confidence to **do as you do** and it will be easier to do as you say.

Distinguished awardees, say to yourselves, I am too good to ever become a part of the violence or criminal and illegal activities that now plague Antigua and Barbuda. I know your parents have talked to you about it. I know your teachers have talked to you about it. **You are all smart, bright, aware young people. Be responsible.** Do not get caught up in the unwholesome activities that are now associated with too many of your peers, who succumb to gangs and all the negativity associated with gangsterism. In fact, I daresay this is the best gang for you to be in- a gang that celebrates goodness and excellence.

Young women, I implore you hold yourselves in high esteem. If you are ever approached to be a part of something wrong, simply say NO and mean NO. Choose your friends wisely and remember that it is very easy to get into trouble but very difficult to get out. Young men, it is noble to be a gentleman; to treat women with respect, with deference, with kindness. Don't ever believe that women are inferior to you. Know too, that doing the right thing does not make you any less of a man. You were born a man and nothing can change that. You don't ever have to prove it by being a part of a gang. Reject any association with trouble. Tell them I'm too good for that, man!!!

Don't put to waste all the sacrifices your parents, guardians and teachers have made for you. It is because of them why you are here today being honoured, feted and celebrated. You can show your appreciation to them by being respectful and always doing your best.

As far as higher education goes, you have learned that you should not expect to get out of anything what you have not invested. The last five years of your lives have been preparation for today's recognition. Those of you doing College, I'd like you to be top of your various classes in 2010. I'd like to believe that the Island Scholar is sitting right here before me. The road to success has been paved for you. You have prepared yourselves to this point to be the leaders of tomorrow. I am depending on all of you. Your parents are depending on you. Antigua and Barbuda is depending on you.

When I am not so young anymore; I want to walk into your doctor offices for you to take care of my arthritis. I want to sit in your dentist's chair to have my dentures replaced. In about 15 to 20 years time I want to vote for one of you as my Member of Parliament and I want to address one of you as "Honourable Prime Minister" or "Your Excellency."

I now take leave of you with a story which I told to a group of graduating students but which is apropos and relevant to you:

“Everyday in an African jungle, a lion wakes with the knowledge that he will have to out-run the gazelle or else he will have no supper. Everyday in an African jungle, the gazelle wakes with the knowledge that he will have to out-run the lion or **he will be** supper.”

Choose you this day, whether you will be the gazelle or the lion. Whichever one you choose, you are required **to run the race of life!** I encourage you to run the race well and to be not just good citizens **but model citizens**. On behalf of the Ministry of Education I offer highest commendation to you all. We are proud of you all. Celebrate yourselves!!!! May God continue to bless you.