

2018 Prizegiving speech by guest speaker  
**Guy Haddleton** (Parnell, 1968-72):



**KING'S**  
COLLEGE

## From Average to Extraordinary – Anybody can do it!

It is an honour to be here today. When I was invited to speak to you, I had to ponder the delicious irony of it all.

45 years ago, I was 17 years old sitting in this audience as you are, and I certainly wasn't going to receive any prizes that day.

I was Mr Average; average academically, average in sports - certainly **NOT** in the 1st XV nor the 1st XI, nor 1st of anything for that matter - I smoked too much and partied a lot! That said, I was naturally interested in numbers and particularly accounting.

This was my 7th year of boarding school and frankly I was over it. I couldn't wait to leave yet had no real idea where my life might lead.

Indeed, had it been asked I would have been voted one of the **LEAST likely to succeed in life**.

Today, I'm going to share with you a couple of my life experiences that helped shape my future and lead my wife, Susie and I to co-found two global software companies.

After leaving school, my father sent me to Outward Bound in the Marlborough Sounds - this is a 21 day program of gruelling outdoor activities. He was hopeful that I might have some experiences to shape my thinking about life. And by gosh he was right.

Outward Bound was the catalyst for developing my love for the outdoors. As we traversed 301,000m peaks in three days, or spent 48 hours alone in the bush, or sailed the Marlborough Sounds in whalers, I discovered a level of self-sufficiency that I never knew I had. Indeed, as adversity struck us on occasion, I found a level of endurance and grit that set me apart from others. For the first time in my life, I found a real love or passion for being outdoors which enabled me to endure adversity better than some of the others. If you do what you love, adversity and challenges are so much easier to overcome.

After Outward Bound, I attended Auckland University signing up for commerce and law. My parents' dream, not mine. Like some of you here today, I had little idea of what I wanted out of life - although I felt I would one day be an entrepreneur.

One day I read an article in the NZ Herald about the NZSAS (this is New Zealand's Special Forces) holding their first selection test for civilians. I knew that selection would be incredibly challenging; and as I quietly researched it, I developed a vision. I would join the SAS. I never saw myself as an accountant and I was ready to drop out of university.

I started to secretly train for the SAS selection course, initially with five mile runs, then up to 20miles with a 20kg pack. For the first time in my life, I enjoyed experiencing the joys, struggles and discipline of becoming super fit.

The day of my selection course arrived - 120 civilians descended upon Papakura Military Camp and during the next four days each of us experienced our own personal hell.

The objective of selection is for the candidate to finish. Conversely the objective of the supervising staff is to encourage the candidate to voluntarily withdraw - **it is the ultimate mind over matter challenge**.

At all times you carry a 20kg pack, a 6kg webbing belt, a rifle and over the course of three nights and four days you are exhausted - physically, emotionally and mentally. During that period, you may have one meal, three hours sleep and are always on the move at speed.

After the first 24 hours 50% had withdrawn. After 36 hours we were down to 15 people. I had never experienced such tiredness, hunger or cold in my life. Ultimately two finished. I was one of them and went straight off to hospital with little skin left on my feet. I was 19 years old, the youngest at that time to make it through selection. A year later I became a fully-fledged member of the unit as a trooper and then after attending Officer Cadet School in Australia I returned as a captain of my own troop.

Looking back at that time, the SAS was an extraordinary place to grow up. My confidence, belief in my capabilities and leadership skills grew remarkably. But what really surprised me was the soldiers. They came from all walks of life with a singular belief and determination that they were going to be the best. With this mindset, their natural talent was nurtured and transformed into extraordinary skillsets which were subsequently moulded into teams capable of holding their own anywhere in the world.

Now I'm going to surprise you. Anyone of you, male or female, could pass the SAS selection course if you have that supreme commitment, the self-discipline and an unwavering passion to succeed. And I would suggest these qualities are essential for great success anywhere - be it in sport, business or the professions.

I left the military after seven years, as I now knew that I wanted to be an entrepreneur. Without a first degree, I managed to persuade the University of Otago to admit me to their MBA program based on my military leadership experience.

At the time the spreadsheet had just arrived - so I chose my MBA thesis to be the management of currency risk on spreadsheets - and as you will see, probably the luckiest decision I've ever made. I spent three months learning the intricacies of spreadsheet template building.

After my MBA I migrated to England to seek my fortune. I thought it would be easy getting a corporate job - but it wasn't - it took me a year and a 1,000+ application letters before being appointed a strategic planning officer in a large corporation. During the next four years I moved to general management then became a managing director of a start-up. This highlighted to me that entrepreneurship was my future. I had this yearning to build my own business, to be my own master - and it was by now a deeply rooted passion.

I had no money, no car, mortgage payments to fund and no idea what type of business to build. I took stock of what I was naturally good at and assembled the following list:

- **Accounting:** the basics had been well drilled into me here at school
- **Spreadsheets:** I could build complex applications
- **Marketing:** I was good at constructing simple messages
- **Leadership:** I was experienced at recruiting outstanding talent, sharing the vision and letting them fly.

During this period, I saw a gap in the market for financial templates on spreadsheets. Businesses everywhere were building profit and loss, balance sheet and cash flow applications on spreadsheets - why not automate this process. And I could build the first product myself.

I knew I needed a business partner - somebody to run the sales and marketing - so I telephoned my first girlfriend (we dated when we were 15) who was then working in New York as a general manager, managing 20 branches of a large corporate.

"Hi Susie" - I said - "Guy here. Do you have any money?". She said: "No Guy! And how are you!".

"Never mind, here's my idea and I need you to come and run sales and marketing."

Let me introduce you to my wife and business partner...

We placed an advert costing £49 (about \$100) in the classified section of the Financial Times one Saturday in August 1990 - we called the product MBA Business Plan as I thought everybody wanted an MBA - and waited for the responses. Nothing Saturday, nor Sunday but by Monday I received 49 orders and I hadn't written the product!

Over the next two years we secured 10,000 customers and subsequently developed our own enterprise spreadsheet product for large corporations. We relocated the business to Minneapolis where we grew to 350 employees and then we sold it in 2003 to IBM Cognos.

In 2008 we decided we had unfinished business; our vision of connecting all the planning process of the enterprise was now achievable with cloud technology - Susie, Michael (our CTO from our first business) and I got together to rebuild the enterprise spreadsheet platform, this time in the cloud. It took five years of development before we secured our first customer; now this company is one of the fastest growing enterprise software companies in the US - six weeks ago we went public on the New York Stock Exchange with 1200 employees.

My life has been an extraordinary journey - with some detours along the way - but if I, Mr Average in early life, can do it then so can you.

Anyone can be extraordinary - if only you will allow yourself to be so. And it's simple. Firstly:

- Discover what you are passionate about and align your natural talents to it
- Do your 10,000 hours building your skillset
- Develop a Vision for applying your skillset
- Surround yourself with like-minded people to execute your Vision

Before I conclude I would like to say thank you King's for introducing a love of accounting and a life of very long friendships that still matter. As you scatter across the globe, remember where you came from and one day, as I am today, recall your past and be thankful for it.

To conclude I leave you with the SAS motto in mind:  
**Who Dares Wins.**

Thank you.

**Guy Haddleton** (Parnell, 1968-72)