**Welcoming Speech by Tayla Faulmann – 21 February 2016**

Thank you so much for that introduction. I feel like you made me sound far more accomplished than I think I might be, because to be entirely honest, it could be anyone up on this stage telling their story. But I'd like to thank the SRC for giving me the opportunity to share my memoirs of my time as a Matie. Even though it was quite a few years back, I remember sitting in those very seats, trying to figure out how on Earth it was possible to survive when you felt like your insides were on fire. I remember being excited, nervous and really really scared, much like I am right now. It was my first time living away from home, I knew a handful of people and more than anything else, I wanted to make a good impression. For me, the idea of being at University was somewhat of a miracle. I came from a family that it was never expected of, in fact I was the first in my household to go on to do any form of higher education. So me sitting on those seats was so immense and even more so because I was the epitome of "it takes a village to raise a child". I was the product of an abundance of support from so many different people who played a role in my life. I was put through an exceptional school courtesy of my mother's boss who simply believed that I deserved that. I was raised by parents who with nothing to their name worked to give me everything in the world, but simply did not have the resources; and the harsh truth was that there would be no chance of me attending university if I did not acquire a bursary. The truth was that I had no other option other than attaining excellence. The truth was that I would only have one chance. And I was one of the lucky ones that made it here; that made it through the system. But most people do not have fortune on their side the way I did. The system crushes them before they get their chance. And as all of us here today have fortune on our side, we should never forget that it is our job to share that fortune.

Looking back, I wish I knew the significance of me simply being there. There I was, an eager and anxious 18 year old who wanted it all. I so badly wanted to prove my worth in my new environment and I desperately sought the validation of my soon to be peers. But Stellenbosch 6 years ago was vastly different to the University you are all walking in to today. The Stellenbosch that embraced me 6 years ago was still rife with exclusivity and a lack of empathy for those who perhaps did not fit the mould of a then "Matie". I looked different, I spoke different and I dressed different, from what felt like every single person I met. For some reason I just felt... Wrong. I wasn't the person that others willingly chose to engage with at social events. And for someone who had never struggled with socialising or making friends – for the first time in my life I felt unwanted. I was not a dame van Metanoia. I was not a Matie. I was just me. And for some reason, that wasn't quite good enough. I wasn't good enough. When acceptance is something you desire so powerfully, yet you fail to obtain it, you begin to question yourself rather than your environment. When your surroundings do not cater to you as an individual, but rather to a homogenous group, you are told to challenge your own shortfalls. What was wrong with me? Why did they not choose me? I found myself spending so much time and energy on trying to understand my inadequacies and where I could be better. It's exhausting and sad when I realise how long it took me to find the answer to that question. Why did they not choose me? Because they chose not to see that I was exceptional.

Oh how I wish I knew that then. Perhaps then I wouldn't have spent years pandering to the interests of others, to what was expected of me. Frantically assimilating in the hopes of gaining approval that I was never going to get. I wish I knew that I owed it to myself to be nothing other than the person I wanted to be. There are others out there who think and act just as you do and you will never find them by living a life that does not indulge your true identity. Feeling alone when you're surrounded by people is something that some of you here might be experiencing at this moment and my heart aches at the very thought. So if no one else tells you, YOU are exceptional. And each of you can make the decision to actively seek the brilliance within one another. As a community, we need to seriously start challenging the ideals we set for what it means to "be a Matie". We can choose to admire the values of a person over superficial traits. What would a Matie stand for? What should a Matie stand for? If I can gift you with any piece of advice for making the most of your time here it would be to simply engage. Engage with a spectrum of people, with people you would perhaps not normally be drawn to and I promise you, you will reap the rewards. It took me so many years to come to that realization on my own. What I did not realise 6 years ago, was that I was never going to meet the people who have now gone on to shape my life in the most spectacular way possible if I carried on seeking the validation of those who chose not to see me.

This country is changing. This University is changing. We are changing. It is our generation that will be responsible for no longer being complacent in our stagnation as a society. It is our generation that will take us forward. We are not content with mediocrity or a false sense of security that we may have been fed in the past. This is where our leaders are being bred. And while this institution is nowhere near where we yearn for it to be in terms of encompassing a truly inclusive African University; masses of students have come before you and fought tirelessly for your wellbeing and success and that of those still to come. We will not let our brothers and sisters endure the same struggles that we faced, because no one should have to carry the burdens that we and those who have gone before us have. We fight for you, so that each and every one of you can sit in that seat and feel that you belong, that you are valued and that you have worth. And there are a number of incredible people who dedicate their time here to ensuring that you are able to feel that way. For the first time in what feels like forever (or at least for me), we have an SRC that endeavours to be truly representative of its students. This is Your SRC.The wonderful Monica Du Toit who oversees the Transformation Office has done an unbelievable amount of work in creating safe spaces for students and continues to be a driving force in achieving this. And most recently, the University has come together to setup the Anti-discrimination Centre to offer support and a platform for any student to bring attention to any instances of discrimination.

The Stellenbosch student of today is taking control of changing the narrative of this university. We want to be responsible for decisions made that affect us and we want to effect the change that is so very needed. And you as first years have an extraordinary opportunity to be a part of this changing narrative. This is your university now and we need you. We need you to contribute to shaping this institution into what we envision as a university that serves all of its students. The Stellenbosch student of today is the author of their own story. And just know that many have toiled and struggled for you to bear the fruits of their labour, so that you may have the freedom and platform to tell your story. Just know that we are listening.