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« [Alliance of Girls' Schools National Conference, Melbourne Women and National Security Conference: Amplifying Women's Leadership in the National Security Debate](#) »

[Risking Failure to Succeed](#)

At one of my final speaking engagements in Australia, I asked the 10th-year girls of St. Aidan's in Brisbane what was holding them back from taking leadership on issues they cared about. A girl raised her hand but didn't directly answer the question. She spoke instead of wanting to raise and donate money to important causes. Finally, after my probing about why she didn't just do it, she said, "What if I fail?"

A collective murmur of agreement became a roar of "YES!" when I asked the 200 girls if that would be true of them as well. I then asked these sports-minded girls if they walked off a field when they missed a goal. Of course, they said no. Failure as part of a team is one thing, I came to realize, but personal failure for these girls is quite another.

I told them about a mentor of mine who said, "People who don't want to fail shouldn't get up in the morning." I talked of the many failures hidden behind each success we achieve. A vice principal chimed in, and we both agreed that we had learned more through our failures than through our successes. The girls, I fear, came away unconvinced. They are high achievers, and they are heavily invested in success.

Interestingly, at the Alliance of Girls' Schools conference dinner, amid the relics of Australian history at the Melbourne Museum, the guest speaker touched on just this issue with girls, wrought from her own experience in girls' schools. There was a young Cambodian woman with us, Alice Pung, who had written a book called "Unpolished Gem," a story of her struggle for success and the role played in it by failure. She is now a solicitor (lawyer), and she gave a brilliant and moving speech about her struggles in an immigrant family and her struggles with difference in her schools – her isolation and depression, the pressures of family and academics, and finally her breakdown.

This young woman speaks widely now, talking to schools about failure because she understands intimately how it is an unaddressed issue for girls. Sadly, at one school, a principal upbraided her for "encouraging failure" by talking about it. She told the principal that failure needed no help from her.

The courage of this young solicitor, to speak frankly and often, and to encourage young girls to take risks because she is the embodiment of failure and survival, was quite moving. Everywhere I spoke, I discussed encouragement and the courage embodied in that word, but I hadn't realized how failure lives so close to the surface in our boldest and smartest girls. Their schools, their privilege and their families prepare them

for success, but their resilience has not been tested — they may avoid taking the hardest courses, they may not persist through adversity, and they may not be pushed to prove they can fail, survive and even thrive.

The last of my 21 presentations – to hundreds of girls, faculty and parents throughout Australia – was to a group of staff and parents at Our Lady of Mercy College (a high school) in Parramatta, which is a suburb of Sydney. I spoke to them of risk, fear and failure, thanks in large part to what I learned in Brisbane and backed up by the young solicitor’s speech. If I had it to do over again, I would speak of this everywhere, and first.

I have learned so much from the girls of Australia, not the least of which is that The White House Project message and mission are the right ones in this world. It spoke to them deeply, as it has to young women in America. Females, young and old, foreign or domestic, are truly trying to live by the old English definition of courage: “To speak your mind by telling all your heart.” If we listen, we will get all the encouragement we need.

This entry was posted by Marie Wilson on Wednesday, June 20th, 2007 at 9:40 am and is filed under [2007](#).

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#394 Sandy P Says:

Naples, FL [June 22nd, 2007 at 5:27 pm](#) |

I’ve enjoyed your postings from Australia. I’m glad you got the girls to admit to their fear of failure. Now what can The White House Project do to begin to address this? I’ll be interested to know.

#399 Tina Liebling Says:

Rochester, Minnesota [June 28th, 2007 at 11:38 pm](#) |

Thank you for bringing this out. Fear of failure is a powerful force in life. I believe that one way to address it is to consciously redefine success. For example, when we run for office we run to win, of course. But we can’t think of success as only what happens on election day. It has to be about the process—raising issues, connecting with voters, educating and inspiring others.

Thanks for your blogging and for the inspiring work that you do.

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The White House Project, a national, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization, aims to advance women's leadership in all communities and sectors, up to the U.S. presidency. By filling the leadership pipeline with a richly diverse, critical mass of women, we make American institutions, businesses and government truly representative. Through multi-platform programs, The White House Project creates a culture where America's most valuable untapped resource—women—can succeed in all realms.

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