

# Poet subverts traditional graduation speech



You can always count on a poet to do things a little differently.

And Dr Michele Leggott is no exception.

As soon as the Associate Professor of English and New Zealand's inaugural Poet Laureate 2008-09 stood up to address Faculty of Arts graduates, it was clear the audience was going to get something other than a traditional graduation speech.

Proudly holding an intricately carved tokotoko or talking stick, Michele, who is partially sighted, spoke directly to the crowd.

"I am a poet, a writer and a teacher, and very soon I will need a white stick to help me through the day. But today, I have not a white stick but a tokotoko to assist me, and it embodies the mana of poetry and of those who read, write and listen to poetry."

Michele told the crowd that Hawke's Bay Māori carver Jacob Scott had made two tokotoko: one, which honours the laureateship in general, travelled from its home at Wellington's National Library to attend the graduation ceremony; and a second talking stick, awash in blue, white and silver designed for Michele personally as a reflection of

her own life stories and treasures and named by the poet as: "Te Kikorangi" or "The Blue Sky".

Michele told graduands she had consulted her tokotoko before deciding what to say at graduation. Te Kikorangi replied immediately: "Write them a poem, what else!"

With that, Michele stood in front of the speaker's lectern on the Town Hall stage and performed "Taking it seriously" — a poem written specially for Faculty of Arts graduates.

At once funny and insightful, the six-minute rhythmic, spoken word performance was backed by Tim Page on a bluesy acoustic guitar. It ended with an A to Z, highlighting the components of a truly heavenly potluck graduation feast (organised by Te Kikorangi) from "arms full of bags bowls bottles" to "drums and diplomas... figs fire and frangipani . . . yoghurt zucchini . . . and crayfish in coconut cream!"

As the applause died down it is possible the audience took a moment to reflect. Perhaps, just as that treasured crustacean delicacy is to be savoured and enjoyed, so too is a university degree to be relished in all its multitudes of adventure

and achievement.

Michele was one of 13 distinguished speakers at Autumn Graduation. Others included renowned photographer Marti Friedlander, the Hon Justice Tony Randerson, Chief Judge of the High Court of New Zealand and Dr Pita Sharples, the member of Parliament for Tamaki Makaurau, who urged graduands to stay in New Zealand, have families — "you know, breed" — and help strengthen our communities. Dr Sharples said he found it "abominable that my generation who had a free education have loaded their progeny with student loans.

"You've shown the tenacity to get a degree with a student loan," he told Education graduands, "so now we need you to stay here and become leaders."

You can read Michele Leggott's graduation poem online at: <http://nzpoetlaureate.natlib.govt.nz/>