

Despina's achievements more than just hot air

By CASEY NEILL

DESPINA Karatzias knew not a word of English when she arrived in Australia from Greece at age eight.

The Dandenong North mum last week returned to her former high school, Lyndale Secondary College, to share her path to releasing a book.

Adventures of a Balloon Girl shares and celebrates the lessons she's learnt over the past decade managing a successful hot-air balloon tourism business.

She introduced students to "the young Despina".

"Her name was Despina Papathanasiou," she said.

"Her parents were the hardest-working people she will ever meet, often working around the clock, leaving before she got up for school and getting home after she went to sleep.

"They did not read or write and spoke very little English.

"She never had help with her homework – life sucked when she compared herself to her English speaking parent friends, she felt she was disadvantaged and would always struggle."

But during her studies, she followed the motto "no regrets".

"I didn't care what grade I ended up with, I knew I only had one go at this," she said.

"I knew this would be a ticket to something out there.

"Despite my determination I was an average student academically – so average, in fact, that my TER (tertiary entrance score) was 50."

Ms Karatzias looked at social work, but decided it wasn't for her.

"If you're not that into it, best move



Despina Karatzias speaks to Lyndale students. 119682

Picture: ROB CAREW

on – pursue what you are passionate about," she said.

"Your time is valuable and can never be replaced – don't waste it."

She had great travel aspirations so a career in tourism caught her attention.

Her low TER score meant a path to university through TAFE.

"The road is not always straight. Your score does not define you," she said.

"Whatever it is that you want to do there is always a way – it may not be conventional but if you want it bad enough you will find it."

"Travel represented happiness, freedom and adventure and I have now enjoyed more than 15 years in this industry, with the last decade managing a hot air balloon company called Global Ballooning.

"I loved this job so much I wrote a book about it.

"You need to take ownership in your learning right here, right now.

"Every single one of you has a talent and greatness within you, every single one of you has something you are good at.

"No-one has written your destiny for you because you are responsible for writing your own destiny."