

# **Speech Day Speech – 26 June 2010**

## **Welcome:**

Ladies and Gentlemen

I should like to add my welcome to Dr Buchanan's.

It is a pleasure to see so many of you gathered here for our Speech Day. This is, of course, a very special day for all of us - a day when the whole School community comes together to celebrate the achievements of our girls. But I think it is particularly special for two specific groups – those of you who are experiencing your first Speech Day and those of you for whom this is your last PHC Speech Day.

The years that lie between the two are years of critical importance and I look at those of you who are leaving us I know we have done our job well. But this shouldn't be a surprise - PHC has been educating girls for nearly two centuries so we should know what we're doing by now.

## **History of the School:**

The history of Princess Helena College fascinates me and, as you know, 2010 is a particularly special year for us as we are celebrating our 190<sup>th</sup> birthday - almost to the day.

A question I am often asked, most recently by a group of Buddhist monks whilst on a school trip, is 'Who was Princess Helena?' Princess Helena was the third daughter of Queen Victoria and in 1868 she joined the governing body of the Adult Orphan Institution. In 1879, following the opening of women's colleges at the universities, the Adult Orphan Institution

changed its character and became a public school for girls under the title of The Princess Helena College.

In 1928 the college acquired its own coat of arms – and we remain one of the few girls' schools to have a coat of arms. It was in 1931 that it was decided that it was time for the college to move out of Ealing. After a search lasting 18 months and including an inspection of some 50 properties within a radius of 100 miles of London the estate of Temple Dinsley was purchased and the college moved here in 1935.

### **This year:**

But to the more recent past ...we have reached the end of another school year. It has certainly been a year of drama and change in the political world. For some of us the year has been wonderful, for some it has been tough. But for all of us, one thing is sure, it is coming to an end.

Since September, with a few weeks off to draw breath we have been busy with work, play, drama, art, music, sport, weekend activities, trips and expeditions and now we find ourselves here, a little older and wiser than we were when the school year began – and that is how it should be.

I certainly feel a little changed from September. I may have been the be the youngest Headmistress in the country when I was appointed a couple of years ago but I notice that I now spend increasing amounts of money on anti-wrinkle face creams and read articles on Botox with genuine interest.

Time means that I can only touch on the some of the many achievements of the girls this year but I have chosen some highlights:

## **Academic:**

We began the year celebrating with last year's leavers as they achieved very pleasing A Level results and headed off to start the next chapter of their lives. For some that meant a gap year, other girls headed off to universities including Oxford, Bristol, Royal College of Music, Dundee, Leeds, Bangor and Hong Kong.

PHC has always been a broad church academically and I believe that it is important to look at the whole child when selecting girls for the school – not just their academic grades. However, I am delighted that girls are trying harder and aiming higher than ever before and in doing so they are being supported by the staff here. Each girl in the Sixth Form now has an Academic Tutor who meets with her individually on a weekly basis to discuss her work and progress and help with any problems she may be experiencing and this will be extended to Year 11 next year.

Mrs Miskelly has been working with lower school girls and parents in her new role as Head of Creative and Critical Thinking. She has hosted several very successful evenings for parents this year and girls have been encouraged to really think about their approach to learning.

We are currently developing our Careers programme and the new Seminar Supper evenings have proved to be a great success with girls from Years 10-13 enjoying a formal meal, brief presentations and the opportunity to chat informally with individuals from a range of professions and career areas. Recent Seminar Suppers have focussed on law, medicine, business, art, languages and media. Questions have been asked, contacts made and work experience arranged as a

result of these events and we look forward to more successful evenings next year.

Boarding continues to develop and, as a boarding school, PHC offers a range of activities which is difficult to achieve in a day school. I believe that young people learn as much outside the classroom as inside and the extended day, clear structure, focussed attention of adults and expectation that girls will play their part in the boarding community all work to ensure that those who board here experience the very best of what this school has to offer.

For full boarders, there have been trips every weekend including visits to the theatre, Oxford, Windsor and London.

There have been many other curriculum trips and workshops including a music technology at the LSO, RS visits to Bhaktivedanta Manor and Westminster Cathedral, English excursions to the Globe theatre and a medieval history day here at school. A number of girls participated in the Model United Nations Competition, debating global issues at a conference with 650 student delegates from around the world. Trips abroad have included Berlin and Paris - Next year a French Exchange, a Lacrosse tour in Malta and a trip to India are all planned. In addition, girls have been involved in Maths Challenges, Science Week, Dragon's Den, World Book Day, Modern Languages Balloon debate, CCF, D of E and survival weekends.

And all this in an age when we are supposed to wrap our students in cotton wool and eliminate risks from their lives. Of course we do all our thorough risk assessments but we don't lose sight of the fact that it is our duty to prepare our pupils for the outside world, to teach them to distinguish between risks that are worth taking and those which aren't. Of course self-

esteem can be helped with praise and encouragement but it is by taking on things that are a little scary, that take us out of our comfort zone that we truly develop our skills and our characters.

But it is reassuring to know that we are not the only ones weighed down by legislation; a health and safety executive recently took a look at the Bible and realised that if legislation had existed in those days, most of it would not have happened. A preliminary risk assessment would have wiped out walking on water unless the participant had been wearing a safety harness and trained life guards had been present. Turning water into wine would have been a breach of customs and excise rules on home fermentation and dividing fives loaves and two fish, that should have taken place in a sterile, ventilated and supervised kitchen by fully trained and certified staff.

## **Sport, Drama, Music, Art**

In sport we have had a terrific year. PHC won the District Small Schools Athletics Championships, the Senior District Netball Plate, Year 9 District Netball Plate Trophy, Year 10 District Netball Trophy and League Championship and the Senior District Athletics Championships.

In lacrosse, Frances and Eleanor Giles have been selected for the Hertfordshire and East of England Lacrosse Squads and Ellie has been selected for the Welsh Lacrosse Squad. Annabel Reid and Natasha Haesaerts have been nominated for regional centres and Fleur Lancaster's achievements in athletics have been noteworthy. The Gym and Dance Display in February was a spectacular sight which I know many of you enjoyed. Throughout the year a number of school records have been broken and personal bests achieved. I offer my congratulations to Deb Keenleyside and her team as well as to all the girls for their hard work, dedication and achievements this year.

In Drama there has also been much to celebrate from the top-tapping fun of our school musical Grease in the Autumn term to the superb GCSE and A level performances a few weeks ago in 'Find Me', 'Be My Baby' and 'Our Country's Good'. Many girls participate in LAMDA examinations and our recent results have been outstanding. I believe that the skills your daughters learn in these classes are some of the most important in preparing them for life. Once again girls have been selected for the Extras drama production at St Columba's College and we look forward to the Shakespeare in Schools festival in the Autumn term. There will be some drama performances this afternoon and details can be found in your programme.

Congratulations also go to Dr Hooper, not only for achieving his PhD during the course of this year, but for leading the public speaking teams to success in the Rotary Public Speaking Competition with their very amusing talk entitled 'Redheads'.

And many, many primary school children have benefited from the Science Department's Eureka Scheme and special thanks must go to Jackie Dean for her work in that area.

## Music

The Music department has enjoyed a successful year with a number of enjoyable concerts. 38 pupils have taken music examinations this year with considerable success at every level. A list of all girls' achievements can be found in your programme and some awards will be given out today. Special congratulations must go to Rachel Fok who took her piano diploma exam in December and passed with distinction. We wish her every success as she takes up her place at the Royal Northern College of Music in the Autumn.

## Art

There is much imaginative and creative work going on in the art department and girls have enjoyed Art Club and life drawing classes throughout the year. I hope that you will take the opportunity to visit the exhibition of Art work in the department this afternoon.

## **Others**

And while all this has been going on in academic departments, let us remember the work of the other departments who support the school have been putting huge energy and initiatives into improvements – the administrative and accounts staff, The House staff, the medical staff, the cleaners and maintenance team and the catering team. Without them things would quickly grind to a halt.

## **Snow**

It seems that since my arrival at PHC we have experienced fairly extreme weather conditions. I think we have all come to expect at least one week of disruption in the early spring term due to snow. Perhaps we can take heart from the school year of 1946-47 – the school magazine records the following:

‘The school year will be associated in most of our minds with extremes such as we do not often experience in this country – the most severe winter we remember followed by an unusually dry and warm summer ...

Apparently, the girls ‘had to fetch letters, milk and bread by sledge from the village as the drives were impassable.’

At least we were able to keep you up to date via the website and work was sent home via email.

And from snow to Ash – whilst I was stuck in Spain following the grounding off all aircraft after the Icelandic volcano eruption, the Bursar was faced with the task of getting 24 PHC girls and staff along with a number of Habs boys, back from their athletics training trip in Lanzarote.

## **New Bursar**

And speaking of the Bursar, we said good bye to Mr Chris Marley in April after 11 years of dedicated service and welcomed Dr James Bentall to PHC. He has settled in and quickly become part of our community

## **New Developments**

We are constantly striving to improve the physical environment for our students and to provide them with the very best resources and you will have noticed our smart new drive and recently erected assault course which was purchased by the Old Girls Association in memory of Miss Wooldridge.

But we are not just improving the physical environment but we are seeking to extend and deepen the education we give to every single pupil who is educated here. Since my arrival I have addressed the aim and clarified the values of the school with the Governors and the staff and they are found on the website and printed on the inside of the termly calendar.

The education we provide at PHC is about growing people not just passing exams. In the words of Edwin Markham:

We are all blind until we see  
That in the human plan  
Nothing is worth the making, if  
It does not make the man

Why build these cities glorious  
If a man unbuilded goes  
In vain we build the world unless  
The builder also grows.

## **Thanks to staff, Governors, Parents, PFRC, pupils and Upper Sixth**

Part of reflecting on the year is thinking about the huge amount of work that others put into the school.

I am fortunate to be surrounded by an impressive group of people – we have an extraordinary team and the school would be nothing without them.

First, I'd like to thank the governing body, led by Dr Buchanan, they give many, many hours of their time to the school and their support, advice, knowledge and wisdom has been invaluable throughout the past year.

I'd also like to thank my SMT, for your hard work, support and good humour.

And to the staff

I was reading a magazine recently which told the story of a young graduate in the US who had decided to apply for a place on a teacher training course. The application form asked them to state two reasons why they wanted to enter the teaching profession. The applicant wrote:

July and August

Now, I know that the teaching staff are looking forward to the summer holidays but their work throughout the year is tireless and I am grateful for all that you do.

We have missed our deputy head, Camilla Wilson, this term but I am pleased to report that she is recovering well and hopes to be back with us in September. In her absence, Bella Scott, former Head of Art at PHC has worked behind the scenes on all of the recent events. She has been a fantastic support and I am grateful that she has been able to give us her time and energy.

I'd like to thank you, parents, for your support and, in particular, the PFRC for their work in raising funds for the school through a wide range of events throughout the year. I know many of you have attended the events they have organised and have thoroughly enjoyed them.

I'd also like to thank the Old Girls Association; we are developing an ever closer relationship with our Old Girls and I look forward to this continuing into the future.

Last, but never least, I'd like to thank the pupils. Being your Headmistress is, without doubt, quite a responsibility but it is also a privilege and a pleasure. My special thanks go to Rachel Prosser, Head Girl. Your reliability and consistency has been a great help to me, you have been an excellent role-model for the school and I am grateful for your support.

And finally, inevitably, goodbyes: For some PHC staff their time here has come to an end and we wish them well as they leave us to move on to new things.

Today we say goodbye to:

Mrs Georgina Milan who leaves us after nearly 2 years teaching Latin and classics. Georgina has been a calm, unflappable colleague and, being French, she possesses an innate (and enviable) sense of style

Mr Martin Theis, leaves us after teaching Spanish in the Modern Languages Department for the past 2 terms, covering for Mrs Perez Lewis' maternity leave. Martin is an excellent teacher and many girls have benefited from his lessons in the short time he has been with us.

Miss Carolin Kircher leaves us after her stint here as a language assistant – we have enjoyed having you with us at PHC, both in the classroom and in the boarding house and we wish you well in your future and hope that you will come back to visit us.

Miss Lisa Hill has been an excellent assistant housemistress throughout the past academic year. We wish her well as she sets off travelling and we hope that she will rejoin the pastoral team when she returns.

And to the girls who are leaving us today?

When I talk to prospective parents I tell them to look for a school which has the same hopes and aspirations for its pupils that they have for their daughters as parents. I tell them what our hopes are and in doing so I talk of this day, I suppose even of this moment.

I tell the prospective parents that by the time their daughters are leaving us I want them to have achieved their very best academic results, I want them to have had a wide range of opportunities outside the classroom and to have developed skills which will be useful in the world of work.

But, more important than those things, I tell them that I am deeply interested in the kind of person that girls are when they leave us. I hope that, in the words of the prospectus, as you leave us it is with respect for yourself and others, real inner confidence and the courage to do what is right when faced with difficult choices.

And I can tell you this – many prospective parents have commented to me over the past two years what a credit you are to PHC.

And when I talk to year 6 girls, I tell them not to be afraid to make mistakes, to have a go to get involved even when things seem a little scary.

So I leave you with a final thought – not my own words but those of Theodore Roosevelt:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

I finish by offering my congratulations to the prize-winners and I hope you have a wonderful afternoon.

