

Sue Hart – Founders’ Day speech to Junior School

Good morning Mrs Whitaker, The Reverend Dr Willsher, staff, Grammarians and students.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this special Founder’s Day Assembly today. It is an honour to be asked to do this.

I have to say I am not the brightest or best student to have gone through Canberra Girls Grammar School, but I am probably one of its greatest supporters over many years.

My family moved to Canberra when I was going into Year 11 – not the best time to change schools, but as a family we had moved around the country since I was seven so it wasn’t really a big deal. I had been at an all-girls school in Melbourne for the previous three years and it was not a terribly positive experience. As a result, I had focussed a lot more on all the sport I could play than on the academic classes I should have paid attention to.

It was decided that I would move to Canberra rather than remain as a boarder in Melbourne and fortunately Canberra Girls offered me a place and managed to find enough subjects that I could tackle and away I went.

It was particularly fortunate that the school swimming carnival was held in Term 1. I had done a lot of competitive swimming up till then and did quite well in the carnival which meant that I became known fairly widely through the school very early on. This was really helpful when the student leadership elections were held during the last term of that year and I was elected School Vice-Captain for the following year - mainly because people knew who I was!

Coming from where I had been, I found this pretty amazing. And even more amazing, my academic results improved out of sight despite, or perhaps because, of being a school leader.

It became clear to me pretty early on that CCEGGS, as it was then called, was a welcoming community and indeed that community was at the heart of all that the school did. And it seems to me that this has only strengthened over the life of the school since its opening as St Gabriel’s School in 1926 with 10 pupils in a building in the sheep paddocks, with Parliament House being built at the end of the paddock.

I cannot imagine what the Anglican Community of the Sisters of the Church under the leadership of Sister Emily Ayckbowm must have thought when they arrived in the small community designated as the new Federal capital to set up a school to educate girls and young women in Canberra.

Think about it – the Sisters had come from a crowded England to a vast country with hardly any people at all, and specifically to an artificially created city. The population when they arrived in Canberra would have been tiny and consisted largely of those involved in building the city and a few brave public servants and their families. Fancy having the foresight to see the potential in store.

Did the Sisters envisage the hardships of the school and the city in the early years? Would they have been bold and forward-thinking enough to envisage the successes the school and its students have lived over those 93 years? Whatever they thought, they saw the opportunity and the potential and all of us who have come through the school since then, and all those who will come through in the future, will benefit from that legacy.

I have done a lot of things since leaving school. I have worked in both the old and the new Parliament Houses and at the Australian Sports Commission, moved to Sydney and to England where

I learned to be a chef and even cooked for the Queen on a couple of occasions. Through all these jobs I learned to look for opportunities and challenges and to try things that were new and different.

I had not been back to CGGS since the day I finished Year 12 until I moved back from England and my two daughters started here – one in Year 4 and one in Year 9.

It was a great surprise to see all the changes and particularly here in the Junior School which was first opened when I was in Year 12. I remember how excited we all were at the opening and how fabulous and modern we thought it was. Of course it has changed and grown a lot since then, but it continues to be a fabulous place to be at school. I especially love the big yellow slide at the ELC - how many other schools have that?

This school was particularly supportive of my girls and me in lots of ways at a bit of a difficult time of life and it has been important to me to recognise this and give something back where I could. My girls find it very funny that I only spent two years here as a student but have now spent more than 20 years actively participating in the life of the school in a number of ways.

And in my family we have now come full circle. One of my grand-daughters, Juliet, started in the ELC this year and the other two, Eleanor and Catherine, will join the Junior School next year.

You girls follow in the footsteps of a group of brave women who believed in the value of educating girls and young women and set about delivering on that belief. This is the history you have inherited as a Grammarian, and it is a legacy for you to continue.

You are part of a community that will support you into the future and provide you with opportunities to support members of this community who will come after you.

My advice to you as you go through school and beyond school is to be kind to yourself, to your community and the wider environment; be brave and daring and in so doing live the example of Emily Ayckbowm and the Sisters of the Church. Aim high and dream high and live a life well lived; put back as much or more than you take out; be prepared to change your world, even though that might be scary at times.

Thank you and I hope you enjoy the rest of Founders' Day, and particularly the currant buns!