

## **Speech Day Address June 2008**

Sir Patrick, Mr Chairman, Governors, parents, grandparents, friends and pupils, a very warm welcome to our Annual Prize giving. This has been a very busy, exciting, productive and indeed rewarding year in the history of the school.

This is a very challenging time for education in Northern Ireland. There is confusion and frustration as to the future of the grammar schools, the challenges of the revised curriculum and the introduction of the new Education and Skills Authority which will replace the Education and Library Boards. In the light of this uncertainty an increasing number of parents have opted for an independent education at Rockport and I am very pleased to report that over 60 new pupils will be joining the school in September.

I would like to begin this afternoon by sharing a story with you. This story may sound fantastical but I give you my word of honour that it is true. I wonder if any of you have heard of the Darwin Awards? These are given by the Darwin Society to those people who are so stupid that they do the human gene pool a favour by removing themselves from it as a result of their unwise actions. In other words Darwin awards are usually presented posthumously.

However, in 1997, an American called Larry Walters received a special Distinction from the aforesaid Darwin Society, He is one of a very few who contend for these awards and yet live to tell the tale. Now Larry had a

boyhood ambition, as do many small boys. His was, however, very ambitious because what he wanted more than anything else in life was to fly. Poor Larry had such poor eyesight that being a pilot was never going to be achievable for him. Larry used to spend his weekends in his backyard in Los Angeles, just south of the international airport, drinking beer and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. There he would lie, in his favourite deckchair, watching the planes that flew overhead. Not a very exciting life you may think. One thing you will learn about life, as you get older is that you never know what is around the corner; it really is full of surprises and unfortunately there are not all pleasant!

One day the boredom factor jolted Larry into action. He trotted off to the local Army and Navy store and bought 42 big weather balloons, a tank of helium gas and some rope. He decided that he would fill the balloons with helium, tie them to the deck chair and go floating effortlessly around the neighbourhood. He too would be able to fly. He estimated that he would float no higher than 40 feet but just in case things started to get out of hand he took with him a loaded pellet gun. His altitude could be adjusted by judicious shooting of selected balloons.

His cunning plan in place he set to work. Firstly he secured his deck chair by rope to his jeep, then he filled the balloons with 33 cubic feet of helium each. One by one he tied them to the deck chair. Before lift off he went into his house and collected a six pack of Corrs light - heavy beer not being conducive to flight - some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and not forgetting the pellet

gun. He set himself in the deck chair and instructed the neighbours to cut the ropes. 'Let's go!' Larry shouted and the deck chair began to rise into the air.

But instead of rising 40 feet the deckchair flew up into the air as if catapulted from a cannon, straight into the landing pattern and approach corridor of the International Airport. Larry was first spotted by an American Airlines pilot who radioed to the control tower to say that he had just spotted a man in a deck chair drinking beer and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and brandishing a pellet gun! Indeed the radar confirmed an unidentified object flying at 11000 feet.

Larry was of course absolutely terrified! The pellet gun was totally useless and he did not dare use it for fear of destabilising the deck chair.

A helicopter was immediately scrambled to investigate. It only made things worse as the down draught from the rotor blades pushed Larry out over the open sea. As night fell the situation was becoming desperate and it was decided to drop a rope down from immediately above Larry and drag him to safety. When he was finally returned to terra firma, surrounded by TV cameras, the police, fire crews and rescue squads as well as hundreds of incredulous on lookers, he was handcuffed and led away.

One of the reporters shouted after him, 'What made you do it Larry?'

Larry thought for a moment, turned to the waiting crowd and said,

'Well, a man can't just sit around!'

Ladies and gentleman we are very pleased to be able to tell you that though we haven't made deck chairs fly, we haven't received any Darwin awards, we haven't come up with too many hair-brained schemes but we sure as eggs are eggs we have not just been sitting around.

We have certainly produced some high flyers on the academic front. The year began on a successful note with some excellent examination results. Our year 12 pupils achieved upwards of 81% of their grades at C or above and a third of these being at A and A\*. This success was echoed at 11 plus with all of our students being awarded their first choice grammar school. We are very proud of them all. There was success too at Common Entrance and congratulations to Elizabeth Dobbs and Flora Kinnaird who have places at Tudor Hall and to Alice Dixon who has a place at Sherborne School for Girls

We have been subjected to no less than four inspections this year - two for the early years, one for boarding and a registration inspection from the education board. I am very pleased to be able to tell you that we came through these with flying colours. The inspectors highlighted the strong sense of community in the school, the strong support of parents and governors and to quote,

'the articulate, courteous and well-behaved children who are polite and welcoming to visitors'

Well done to all the pupils. We are very proud of you.

The Boarding Department is going from strength to strength and thanks to all the resident staff who help to make the department a home from home.

Nor have we had our heads in the clouds musically. There have also been strings of successes in the Hollywood and Carrick fergus festivals with many of our children winning prizes. Nearly half of Rockport pupils are have instrumental or singing lessons and we look forward to enjoying their performances at our summer concert on the 25th June. This evening will also feature a guest performance by last year's R12 rock band. We can't wait!

The prep and senior choirs also took part in the Young Voices competition at the Odyssey Arena in December. Rockport pupils have again been successful in the Young Aspects Writing Competition in Bangor.

The Arts Faculty have been flying high all year with visiting theatre groups, an Arts Faculty evening in December and of course the splendid production of Oklahoma which we all enjoyed hugely. Thank you to Mr Mckeown and his team for all their hard work on this. Thanks also to Mr Reid and Miss Carr for the wonderfully amusing JDS production. Pre prep has also produced some fabulous class assemblies and Declamations and Party Pieces demonstrated a wide range of talents.

Nor did our sportsmen and women need rescuing. The high spot for the netball team was their victory in the Belfast League. The defeat of Methody was a real triumph. Each girl really pulled out all the stops. Their victory was very well deserved. Tennis has been popular this summer with five teams in the Ulster Schools Tennis League. There have been tours to Scotland and to England for the netballers and footballers again this year and the seniors very much enjoyed the sports tour to Spain in the autumn term.

Tameron Drake in year 11 reached the finals of the North Down Young Sports personality. Tameron is also Northern Ireland Junior Ladies Champion at figure skating.

There has been a great deal of activity in the Mourne Mountains this term. As well as the year 11 pupils doing their Duke of Edinburgh expedition and the river study for Geography years 5 to 10 have been taken hill walking with Mr Vance. Thanks to the energetic parents who accompanied the party. A splendid time was had by all. Fresh air and exercise are very important to a young person's education and here at Rockport there are plenty of opportunities to engage with the natural world. Northern Ireland has so much to offer in the great outdoors and the wonderful spring weather has meant we have been able to take full advantage of what is on our doorstep.

And so on to the departure lounge. There are very few goodbyes this summer. Rockport is such a great place to work who would want to leave?

We are very grateful to Oscar Carrasco and Miguel Carabano Cid who have been helping out in boarding and assisting with classroom work right across the age range. We have very much enjoyed having them with us. We hope our Spanish has improved as much as their English. We wish them well in the future.

In the arrivals hall as a result of increased numbers, we will be taking on extra teaching staff for September. We are welcoming gap students from England and Australia who will be helping out in boarding and with sport and the Arts.

We are also pleased to welcome Paul Lutton who will be joining the Arts Faculty as an English Teacher. Paul will also be living in and helping with the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. We wish him many happy and productive years here at Rockport.

The PTA has been full steam ahead with a spectacular variety of fun things to do beginning with the ambitious idea of hiring a steam train. This was tremendous family fun with a journey from Seahill to Larne. They even picked up some German tourists on the way. We have enjoyed a Salsa evening - the reluctant fathers seemed to perk up very quickly when a female contingent arrived from the sixth form at Rugby School! We have had cookery demonstrations, the resurrection of the Ladies' Lunch, the innovation of the so-called Gentleman's lunch, a fantastic Hallowe'en walk which was seriously scary and of course we are hoping to see you all at the camping tomorrow

evening. Huge thanks to Keith Gouk, Sam Varma and a very energetic and innovative committee. They have worked very hard and we have all had a lot of fun.

We have been busy improving the school environment. Work continues in the Boarding department and we have relocated and refurbished the supper and housemother's rooms and created two new dorms for the boys. Over the summer we are planning further upgrading of the common room and will be creating another en-suite room for resident staff.

The old art room has been given a make-over and from September will be the new staff Common Room and work room. Mrs Calvert, the housekeeper will move the uniform shop to the old staff room.

Here at Rockport we would encourage our children to be very aware of those who are less fortunate than themselves and our charitable work is a very important part of what goes on in school. Thanks to Mrs McCartney for organising the harvest goods for Age Concern which were delivered by the children and also the collection of presents for the NSPCC at Christmas time. It was gratifying to see so many gifts under the tree. A total of 300 toys were delivered to needy children as a result of the generosity of Rockport Parents. The parents have been very generous at both the Ladies and Gentleman's lunches to support worthy causes. Thank you also for sending in the many bags of unwanted clothes, which also went to needy causes and raised money for school funds. We hope to see as many of you as possible at our

sponsored walk tomorrow. Two of our children lost their mothers to cancer recently and the money raised from the walk is for Marie Curie.

At this point in the proceedings I would like to thank the cabin crew without whom nothing would ever get off the ground. The staff that have worked tremendously hard this year and really pulled together. Special thanks must go to the Steering Committee Miss Holland, Mr McKeown, Mrs Palmer and Mr Reid have gone above and beyond the call of duty and have given me tremendous support. I have very much enjoyed working with them. Thanks also to Mrs Stewart who has done tremendous work in pre prep. Thank you too to Mrs Ross, Mrs Oliver and Mrs Arneill who really are at the front line. Also to Harry Porter for all his hard work around the site. It has been a very busy year for them all. Thank you also to Mrs Calvert who works tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure everything goes smoothly. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to my Vice Principal, George Vance. I really cannot imagine how I managed without him. Thank you for his hard work and unfailing good humour and for the ride in the MG convertible!

And now to turn to the flight deck: to the governors whom have all given so much to the school. Special thanks to Susan Crowe and Tim Lewis for all their support. Finally I know that you will all wish to join me in a huge thank you to our outgoing chairman, Howard Hastings for his tremendous hard work, generosity, dedication and commitment to the school. We could not have achieved half of what we have without his support. Howard Rockport will be

eternally in your debt . Thank you for everything. Declan Morgan has a hard act to follow!

And so to bring us down to earth. As another school year draws to a close may I take this opportunity to thank you all for your support and commitment to the school and wish you a wonderful summer with your family. As you are lying in your deck chair think of Larry and watch out for helium balloons.

I will leave you with this thought from that wonderful raconteur and wit, Bob Hope,

'I love flying. I've been to almost as many places as my luggage,

Thank you.

