

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to my 22<sup>nd</sup> and final Pershore High School Presentation Evening. May I extend a very warm welcome all of our prize givers, honoured guests, parents and especially our students.

A special welcome to our guest of honour, Lucy Alexander, a very special friend of the school. I would like to assure you all that I would give up all of the wonderful moments of a 38 year career in teaching if I was able to have prevented Felix's death in April of last year. Or indeed if I could do anything to take away the pain of his family and friends. I know that is a hopeless and fruitless quest but I will remain determined to continue to learn from the tragedy and to share my experiences with others so long as there is breath in my body. However, I do so in the knowledge that whatever we have gone through as an institution is a mere speck in the cosmos compared with the suffering of Felix's family.

Lucy would not want me to dwell on this but one of the many positives to have come out of the terrible events of last year is the very close relationship that we have built with Lucy, Ratan and the Alexander family. It was on Monday, 6th February this year that Lucy launched Felix's Campaign for Kindness at a series of school assemblies. Her campaign, run with the charity Place2Be, aims to teach staff and students how to spot the signs of mental health problems. All students at Pershore High School signed up to the pledge, Felix's Charter of Kindness, during the course of the four assemblies that Lucy delivered that week. Positives from a terrible experience I hope.

Although it is not a repeat, please forgive me if one or two of you have heard bits of this when I spoke at Pershore Abbey a few weeks ago – for those who were there, do not be afraid I will not be talking for an hour! Infact, this could be one of my shortest Presentation Evening efforts, or not....

Tonight I would like to deliver a vote of thanks. I would like to thank everyone who has made my time in education and especially my time at Pershore so pleasurable. Of course I never left school really, going straight from A' levels to a History degree and teacher training at Liverpool University before taking up my first post at Haybridge High School in Hagley almost 38 years ago. I made my way to Pershore via Nunnery Wood High School, starting here in January 1996. During my time in schools, I estimate that I have had the joy of working with around 10,000 young people and hundreds of wonderful colleagues. I would like to thank most of them for the enjoyment and stimulation that they brought to my life.

I would like to thank my mum and dad for the support they gave me and for providing me with the chances in life that the roll of the dice denied them. I won't bore you again with my dad's story but will tell you later if you ask me. Theirs may have been homespun philosophy but so true – 'You get out of life what you are prepared to put into it.' My mum and dad told me – 'If you don't have confidence or faith in your abilities then you can't expect other people to.' They also taught me to be humble and never to forget where I came from – 'While you are striving frantically to better yourself, remember that there are those who would give their eye teeth just to be in your position.'

As is so often the case in life, I also had the privilege of being inspired by certain adults at key pivotal points in my life. I would like to thank them. Thanks to my primary school teacher, George Yardley, for showing me that there were no limits to what I could achieve if I gave of my best. Thanks to my cub and scout leader, Mr Chance, who imbued in me the importance of service and community. Particular thanks to Peter Skidmore, my History teacher at grammar school, who made the subject so easy and so accessible that nothing relating to the subject would ever be a chore for me. I never once saw him get angry or lose his patience with anyone. Amongst many other things he taught me was that respect is earned by treating others as you would want to be treated, not through fear or humiliation. I recall him telling me this wonderful story of Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia in the late eighteenth century. Before becoming Empress, she had worked very closely with the French philosopher, Voltaire. Sometime into her leadership, he wrote to criticise her for not putting into practice many of the ideas that they had eagerly discussed. Catherine memorably replied: 'Sire, you work on paper. I work with human skin that is much more ticklish'. Fantastic advice.

The people who have helped me in life genuinely cared about me – young people know when that care is authentic. Michael Marland, the educational guru of my time, wrote about three elements of success in the classroom: "The successful teacher teaches well, the successful teacher manages well, but the successful teacher cares. One will be a sense of caring, of never giving up. This sense of caring is also conveyed clearly to the pupils in the other sense of whether the teacher cares for them." Quite simply, teachers create the climate in their classrooms, leaders create the climate in their schools, politicians create the climate in the national system. We all have the power to create sunshine instead of gloom, both in our classrooms and schools, and in life generally.

I would also like to thank most of my headteachers, people who most of you will never know – David Hobson at Haybridge, Alan Brodrick at Nunnery, and Michael Krier here. I was so fortunate to work so closely for my first six years at Pershore with Michael as his sole deputy. His legacy to the school must never be underestimated. He was truly Pershore's first leader to challenge the old secondary modern mentality, to develop Sixth Form provision and have the vision to see the opportunities of Technology College status and bring on board local businesses and organisations, including Pershore Rotary Club and Round Table. I had the good fortune to be able to put into practice Michael's vision and add a little to it. Thank you Michael.

Thank you to the staff of Pershore, past and present, thank you to the governors, thank you to parents and students.

Do I have any magical pieces of advice to offer you on success at school and success in life generally? Not really, I have been lucky. But in particular, things are not quite as complicated as people make out – things are very very simple. You know I am no great intellect – I have got away with it for 38 years through trying hard and trying to be human. The education system is all about targets and not enough about people. I am sorry but targets do not stretch, they stress and inhibit. They are externally imposed and random. Just read the views of Stephen Gorard.

Stephen Gorard is Professor of Education and Public Policy at Durham University. Gorard argues from a deep statistical understanding that, overall, the school effectiveness field “simply ignores ... quite elementary logical problems, while devising more and more complex models comprehended by fewer and fewer people”. He continues by relating the statistical problem to a critique of current models for school effectiveness: "School effectiveness is associated with a narrow understanding of what education is for. It encourages, unwittingly, an emphasis on assessment and test scores - and teaching to the test - because over time we tend to get the system we measure for and so privilege." But Gorard's key conclusion, 'now largely unremarked by academics, and unused by policy-makers' is 'that pupil prior attainment and background explain the vast majority of variation in school outcomes.'

I would suggest that your one and only target should be to do your best at all times. Success in life is earned not handed on a plate, as Angela Lee Duckworth writes, through grit, passion, perseverance. Good education therefore is about challenge. From a very young age I looked at the canals in my local area – we are too poor to have real rivers in the Black Country – and to challenge myself as to whether or not I could jump over it. It's quite similar to the game we played as kids of trying to run to the next lamppost before the car got there.

Good education is also about inspiration and perspiration. I urge incitement first though. Coming from the latin incitare – to rouse. Although it has come to mean goading, inflaming, it is about encouraging, exciting, inflaming, stimulating. I love words and their origins – inspire – from the latin inspirare – to breathe or to blow life into. Penelope Betjeman reminded her granddaughter: 'One of the most creative things you can do in life is to keep asking questions, to keep making friends with people of all ages and of all denominations, to keep being interested. Never, ever lose your will to learn and then you will never be bored or unhappy.'

Life is risky but life is joyous if we remove the fear of failure. In this health and safety dominated world when will we realise that we never learn a thing by getting things right first time? Indeed, for this very reason last year, Professor Guy Claxton advocated banning erasers in schools. Fear of failure is stultifying but we only learn through messing up. Sweden has recently opened a Museum of Failures in Helsingborg. Stephen Pile – 'The book of heroic failures'.

We are given such a kicking by the powers that be – things are better in schools than they have ever been and it's not because of DFEs, RSCs and OFSTEDs – it's because of you! The 1980s were very different times in education. Pupils were still slippered, as the euphemistic term ran, and recalcitrant boys might occasionally have collisions with lockers in the PE corridor. Come June, free periods were used to play tennis or to follow Test matches or Wimbledon on TV. There was the famous occasion during the last day of the Headingley test in 1981 when Bob Willis' demolition of the Australians brought educational activities at our school to a grinding halt.

In spite of his West Bromwich Albion affliction I have remained in touch with a famous ex-Haybridge student, Adrian Chiles, and he has always been very helpful and gracious. However, when he was guest of honour a few years at Pershore's

Presentation Evening, he began his talk with the following: 'When Hilary, my PA, told me that Clive Corbett had been in touch, I thought, blimey is he still alive!?'

A minority of my colleagues at that time were not as professional as they might have been, but one of them really stands out for the wrong reasons. I cannot name names but he was a large bearded Scottish gentleman with a fondness for special strength lager. Another but ultimately more prestigious Economics teacher at Haybridge was none other than past Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith who was Head of Department. Some of the antics of her teacher were outrageous and on a few occasions as his union rep I found myself being asked to defend the indefensible. There was an occasion when he organised a school football tour in his homeland and took out a long part of one day to use the school minibus to help his mother move house. As a Business and Economics teacher it seems that much of his time was spent on his latest investments and organising visits to the Pamplona bull running festival each July. Overindulgence also caused him to fall asleep, quite noisily, in full view of the assembled masses on stage at one school prize giving. This was the incident that proved to be the final straw and led to him being persuaded to disappear into the private sector. However, my favourite incident involving this teacher related to Adrian Chiles' younger brother, Neville. Neville was in this teacher's Economics A' level group and at the end of what was then known as the Lower Sixth, his parents were in utter despair at Neville's lack of progress due to poor teaching. So they duly put Neville on to a summer school cramming course. He sat in the lecture theatre at a local university, eagerly awaiting enlightenment, and who walked in? You've got it!

So, moving on, a little bit of negativity perhaps – what do I want for the future of our school and our students? Although I know that is in excellent hands in the shape of Phil Hanson and his leadership team, there are challenges that sadly were there at the turn of the century.

A few months ago I was looking through some old scrapbooks and found a Worcester Evening News article from 2003. In relation to both school funding and educational principles there are depressing similarities between it and a letter that I wrote to MPs this February. It also goes to prove that I am not being political since the first was written under a Labour government, the other Conservative. Fourteen years ago I wrote: 'In the current educational climate it would be the easiest thing in the world to dwell upon the negatives – policy overload, ongoing inadequacies in funding, staff who feel unappreciated and worn out, and young people whose value is weighed by testing at seemingly every turn.'

The government is properly unrelenting in its demands that standards continue to rise, but testing and other pressures can only be justified within their proper place as measurements of progress to inform future learning.' I went on: 'If we are to move genuinely forward then central government of whatever political persuasion must give schools the confidence to shake off the competitive attitudes that have bedevilled education since the mid-1980s and to concentrate instead upon developing their particular strengths for the benefit of their local communities. The future for schools therefore lies in closer involvement with its local communities. Local people should be attracted to school sites that offer top class ICT, Technology, sporting and other facilities that make them centres of out of hours and lifelong learning.'

If schools are to move forward, especially in Worcestershire, we must have a level funding playing field where all schools are funded on basic need. Under the proposed National Funding Formula, Worcestershire schools will remain disadvantaged. In Pershore alone this would mean a loss of income per pupil in 2018 of £111.72 and £126.68 at Key Stages 3 and 4 respectively. This is a catastrophic proposition when each of those numbers is multiplied by 500 children. These shortcomings in basic funding are being faced at a time of rising costs and when it is proposed that monies will be found for other national schemes, including: £320 million for 140 new free schools. In the current financial year alone, my school is paying 116 thousand pounds more on National Insurance than last year on a smaller net salary bill - £94,000 less. Quite simply, the national emphasis has to be upon properly funding the basic requirements of existing schools before embarking on lavishing icing on a non-existent cake.

To compound things this funding crisis is coming at a time when an increasing number of children in this country are living in poverty, Barnardo's offers the following statistics on child poverty in the UK. There are currently 3.7 million children living in poverty in the UK, over a quarter of all children. 1.7 million of these children are living in severe poverty. In the UK 63% of children living in poverty are in a family where someone works. How does this affect the education and health of our children, and the day-to-day lives of families?

You may well know that we are soon to form a Multi Academy Trust with Cherry Orchard, Inkberrow and Norton schools. You might be surprised to learn that I am not necessarily a great fan of the MAT idea. However, we are a MAT with a difference because all schools in our MAT share the same ethos and vision:

*'The MAT is a family of schools working collaboratively, and forging links with parents and the community, to encourage and promote respect, responsibility and a life-long love of learning within caring, compassionate and stimulating environments. By inspiring our pupils through an engaging and exciting curriculum they will be well prepared for all stages of their education, from age 3 through to 19, achieving their full potential to become positive, confident and active members of the local community and global society.'*

To really change our world, and that's what we must be determined to do, we must also remove political interference from our education system. Let's not pretend it isn't there, it is endemic. With apologies to John Lennon - 'You may call me a dreamer but I'm not the only one'. But what about an independent body to oversee education in this country? I contest that only then will we even out the peaks and troughs of policy overload and punitive accountability. We have an education system based on quick fixes.

This is the real problem with our current world – unwittingly or deliberately we present young people with the strange notion that success is measured in money, celebrity or in superficial appearance.

Our ambition should be to see educational policy making that is genuinely evidence based – this will lead to progress, not change for change sake – not what has been described as the 'tsunami' of educational change that we are all drowning under. No

wonder there is a crisis in teacher recruitment, no wonder there is a problem with the well-being of young people. Why not start with an agency for well-being? Why don't we attack views on fixed intelligence? Why do we not teach character education? Why do we not bottle the thirst for learning that I see in most of our youngsters in Pershore and certainly saw in Zambia where education is not taken for granted but seen as the way out of poverty?

Why don't we concentrate on educating the whole person, for the future not just worry about hitting targets? Watch the You Tube video, 'Fish can't climb a tree', in which an American gentleman takes the education system to court, sues the system: "Albert Einstein once said, 'Everybody's a genius.' But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid. Modern day schooling not only does he make them climb trees but also makes them climb down and do a ten mile run. School system are you proud of what you have done – turning millions of people into robots but you find that fun?" We don't need no education – we don't need no thought control! Let's kick some bricks out of the wall.

It is for this reason that Pershore High School is a member of an organisation called Schools of Tomorrow. SoTo is built upon four principles that are found in its quadrant. These quadrants are the cornerstone of becoming an outstanding school of tomorrow. Through:

- seeking to achieve the highest levels of achievement for all;
- supporting the well-being of all staff and students;
- enabling the full involvement of all members of our community through highly effective family and community engagement; and
- preparing youngsters for the future in every way.

Pershore High School is a community where we expect all to be treated fairly and with respect. We want young people to look out for each other, feel safe and be able to thrive in a supportive and stimulating environment. We want students to enjoy their school lives and aim to become the best that they can be. We therefore seek to secure the holistic development of youngsters with character, courage and confidence, who are kind, considerate, optimistic, responsible and resilient. We are convinced that these values are entirely complementary to those outlined in the Schools of Tomorrow quadrant.

What we want for our young people is well summed up on page 5 of the CBI's 2013 report – 'Leading the Way', John Cridland listed the characteristics, values and habits that last a lifetime – skills not content:

Finish tasks started and understand the value of work; Ask and answer questions to deepen understanding; Actively participate and show enthusiasm;  
Work independently and be solutions focused;  
Be aware of pressing global issues, and contribute to leading society internationally;  
Demonstrate respect for the feelings of others;  
Know when and how to include others;

Learn to take positives from failures experienced.

As for me - I guess that I first realised that the writing was on the wall when I received a phone call from a very nice lady from the School of Education in Liverpool University from which I graduated back in 1979. In my final year at Pershore, I thought that it might be both amusing and informative for my staff if I was able to lay my hands on some ancient footage of me teaching an unfortunate group of children from Netherley comp in Liverpool. These poor children had been wheeled into the training room, either for ritual humiliation of me or to punish them for some imaginary misdemeanour I don't know. My intention was to use it on a staff training Baker day, you know the thing that was forced on us in the 1980s and killed all the good will. The call back from Liverpool was disappointing though; 'Mr Corbett I am so sorry but for obvious reasons we destroyed all copies long ago. Anyway I don't suppose such a video format would be supported on modern devices.' Hobble off stage right educational dinosaur.

In spite of everything, when I reflect upon the last 21 years at Pershore High School there have been very few lows and oh so many highs. Pershore High School has grown in size, has become an academy and we have been fortunate to have attracted over £10 million for building and sporting improvements. There is still much to be done in all of these areas but I really hope that I have made some difference to the youngsters and our community over this time. It has been a particular joy to work with Chris Parsons, Ann Dobbins and the Town Council to introduce a Pershore Youth Council; with Pershore Rotary to introduce an Interact group; to have been able to support the Riverside Youth Centre as a trustee; and to develop an excellent working relationship with churches together. Above all, I hope, to have made the school a place of which the area is proud. I also know that my baby is in extremely safe hands and that Phil will take the school forward into the next exciting phase of its development.

As I head for the beach, what do I pray for? I want to see humanity and enjoyment returned to our classrooms, not children viewed as mere statistics and teachers feeling burdened by targets. The lesson of other countries is clear – remove punitive accountability, provide more support and things improve. I want you as young people not only to be happy and fulfilled but to achieve that through always being curious – remember Sarah Alexander's 'hoover in our brains', urging us to Hoover the brain of everyone that we meet; and Barack Obama's advice; 'We learn most from those who don't think like us.' A few weeks after my dad's death we came across a little note, a crumpled piece of paper offering advice to his children and grandchildren: 'Life is one long and enjoyable voyage of learning. If it is not then we waste our lives. Be like sponges my children. Absorb anything and everything that comes your way, then go out looking for more.'

Thank you for having me – "It really has all been rather lovely."