

Alex Hems: Speech Day Address 2021

Mr Wylie, members of Council, colleagues, parents and Leavers of 2021 it is my great privilege and pleasure to speak to you today, to report on this year at school and to say some words about our Upper Sixth as they prepare to leave our school and launch themselves into the next stage of their lives.

We all wish that we could have welcomed your proud families to be with us this afternoon, and I am sure that you would have wished for that yourselves.

To your parents at home, may I say a huge thank you all for your support for the school and for your daughters throughout their time with us. We are so sorry not to be able to welcome families into school at all at the moment. I am so glad, however, that we are at least able to have you all together to celebrate your achievements in person, in what I hope will be a memorable and fitting end to your school careers. We are here to celebrate the contribution that every one of you has made to this school. For some, achievements are public and easily recognisable in a public context; for many others the achievements of this year have been personal and maybe less quantifiable. What truly matters is that we know that every one of you has set high standards for yourselves and has striven to meet them. Any school year brings with it unexpected joys and challenges. This has been no exception, but there is no question that the challenges have been greater than usual. We returned in August, after exactly five months out of school, to an environment that was both familiar and strange. One way systems, hand-sanitiser stations and Perspex screens quickly became the norm. We were all cautiously hopeful, I think at that stage, that we were on our way out of the situation.

Over the time that it has been in place, many of you have taken up the opportunity to enter our Old Girls' Association Award, submitting diverse, creative pieces of work which illustrate your spirit of inquiry, willingness to undertake a challenge and to embrace hard work. The contributions that came from your year group at the start of this year were exciting, beautiful, inspiring and creative. We saw and rejoiced in this same spirit when we heard you performing in the Young Musician, and the Young Singer of St George's competitions in the autumn. Like so many other aspects of school life, these events were adapted versions of those we would usually run, and competitors had to adjust to perform without an audience, and in the knowledge that they were being recorded. Thank you to all of you who took part and shared so much of your love of music and performance with us. One of the annual highlights is of course the Carol Service, which is always such a moving event, and such a special way to end the Autumn term. Traditionally Upper 6 musicians have contributed a great deal to this event. Creativity and a dauntless St George's spirit prevailed, however, and we were able to capture something of the essence of this lovely occasion, by recording you both here and at the cathedral, and I hope that you found that memorable in its own way. Thank all of you who have contributed to the musical life of the school over many years.

The online Carol Service was just one of many adaptations that this year has required and inspired. Burns Supper is another fixture in the school calendar which we all look forward to with great pleasure. I was delighted that you had the idea of putting together an online version, and so proud of the way in which you managed this. You were as witty, graceful and eloquent as ever, and although we could not share in the fellowship of the evening in the usual way, you created something very special between yourselves.

Adaptability, resilience and creativity are among the attributes that we all know are at the top of employers' lists of desirable qualities in their recruits. This year has certainly been one which has fostered these characteristics in us all.

We look to the Upper Sixth to be leaders across the school, embodying the concept of the 'servant leader' and I am very grateful to this year's prefects and student leadership team for their hard work and energy in carrying out their roles. None of these could happen in the way that we would usually wish, and I know that was disappointing. I was so impressed, however, by the resourcefulness that you showed in finding ways to continue to work in your leadership roles, despite year group bubbles etc.

The Form Prefects have worked exceptionally hard this session to keep in contact with their classes both during the lockdown, in class and in the Junior School playground. They have created quizzes, class Bake-Offs, poster making and many more creative projects to keep the younger students engaged and with the help of the Deputy Head Girl and Senior Prefect organised a Junior School Scavenger Hunt! One of the roles that we usually call upon your year group to carry out is that of giving tours to visiting families. Thank you very much to our PR prefects who recorded a tour of the Sixth Form suite, met with prospective students on Teams and have written pieces for the Newsletter to celebrate key areas of school life.

'Be You' was a fantastic initiative, which united the school just at the time when we were feeling most distant from one another, and reinforced powerful wellbeing messages at the same time. Who will forget the whole school Bake Off? As you can see, our leavers have taken their responsibilities very seriously and carried out their roles with energy and commitment.

Members of the Upper Sixth will be moving on from the Combined Cadet Force this term. They have all shown a huge amount of commitment to CCF over the years and have been an asset to the contingent. They really have gone above and beyond this year, under such unusual circumstances. Their enthusiasm and resilience shone through, and they embodied all the qualities of a CCF cadet. They planned and led online sessions and galvanised a real team spirit amongst the contingent. We thank them for their commitment and passion; I know that it has been an absolute joy to work with them during their years in CCF. Earlier this month some of you set off for your Gold Dof E practice expedition, and will undertake your final expedition over the summer. I know that you have had to deal with postponements and re-works for the award and have found creative ways to carry out your volunteering through creating podcasts and youtube videos to help others. Although you will not achieve their awards before they leave school, Mrs Mushat is looking forward to signing them off in the near future and to seeing you receive your Awards at the Holyrood Presentations when they resume. Over the last two years, our Space Design team has progressed to the UK finals; led by four of our Upper 6, this club has been an outstanding addition to our co-curricular programme. Thank you to you all for your leadership and for establishing a tradition that I am sure will continue to flourish at St George's.

On Thursday we celebrated the contributions of your year group to Sport, and the achievements, both individual and in your teams, that have brought us so much pride, and the spirit in which you have participated which will bring you such joy in your lives.

While leading in so many areas of school life, the Upper Sixth have also been led, with grace, good humour and apparently indefatigable energy by the Big Four. We thank you all your willingness to take on so much and for the high standards that you have set for yourselves throughout. It has been a pleasure to work with you all.

That our leavers have achieved so much in their time here, and will doubtless go on to achieve more in their adult lives, is in no small measure a tribute to the hard work and dedication of their teachers. I am sure you will all agree that the period since March 2020 has seen your teachers adapt and excel, no less than you have yourselves. I have been immensely proud of the way that they have risen to the challenges that this past year had created for us all, and have been inspired by their determination, as I have by yours. Every year we say

farewell to some of our staff. Those of you who were in the Junior School will remember Mrs Hay of course, who retires after ten years as Head of Junior School, and 27 years at St George's in total.

Mrs Robertson, who will have played a key part in the lives of anyone who came through Lower School, retires after 25 years at the school, having been Deputy Head of Lower School since 2013. Mrs Stenhouse, who has led Business and Enterprise since 2003, retires after 23 years at St George's in total. Mrs McNally, who has taught mathematics to so many of you, joined the school in April 2000 and is also taking retirement this year. Mr Lamont, Curriculum Leader in Design and Technology, retires after 18 years' service to this school. Mrs Porteous first came to St George's in 1985 and worked here until 1994. She returned in August 2007, and since 2019 she has been joint Curriculum Leader in Modern Foreign Languages; she too is retiring. Mrs Latimer, who has been Head of Mathematics since 2014 moves on to take up the post of Deputy Head at St Margaret's School in Aberdeen. Miss Ashkanani, teacher of Modern Studies, and Head of Year since 2019, moves on to teach Modern Studies at Dunbar Grammar School. Miss King, Graduate Boarding Assistant in Houldsworth since October, leaves to take up a post as Resident Tutor at Wycombe Abbey. Miss Monczko, who has worked in our Nursery since January is also moving on. It would be wrong not to mention Mrs Sloan at this point as well, whose warm welcome and care shaped the experiences of all those of you who were in Lower School; she retires after 14 years.

You showed the warmth, affection and high regard in which you hold your teachers through the moving message that you recorded as a thank you; which I know we all appreciated hugely.

Leavers of 2021, I know that in so many ways, this has not been the year that you would have hoped for, or, until relatively recently, would ever have envisaged. I know that it has brought heightened anxiety, uncertainty and of course disappointments for you all, both individually and collectively. The events which usually mark your journey through your final year, Burns Supper, the Ball, your last day of lessons, none of these has been quite the same as usual, and we share your disappointment at that. We feel, however, that, despite, or possibly even because of these things, we have seen the very best of you this year. We have seen determination not to let circumstances overcome the things that matter; we have seen how very much you care about one another. Only yesterday the school raised funds for the eating disorders charity Beat, as a result of the energy and commitment of a member of your year group. We have seen how strong the bonds of friendship are between you— who will forget that ceilidh on the astroturf on Friday evening?

And of course, you have worked very hard indeed, and coped with internal assessments instead of the exams that you had been envisaging. Throughout this period, you have, however, carried yourselves with composure and remarkable maturity. Your affectionate, witty and very resourceful Revue, was entirely in keeping with the spirit with which you have met all of these challenges.

You have heard me say so often that none of us is defined by what happens to us in life, but by how we respond to these events. This was a message summed up beautifully by Melanie Woods who spoke at the Sports Presentation evening last week. I hope you will take that to heart - it will make so much difference to your future happiness and ability to withstand the ups and downs of life if you do. Earlier in the week at our Sixth Form Conference our guests shared their experiences and perspectives, drawn from lives lived with energy, commitment and belief. They spoke of how important it is to stay true to your values in the work you choose to do. Your lives will be so much richer if you can know that you are making a difference in the world with the work that you do. 'Speak up, although your voice is shaking' was one of the most powerful lines that I heard on Monday. I hope that your time here has given you a strong sense of your own voice, and how to use it most effectively.

Dr Labake Fankunle asked us to think about who else we are lifting up with our stories. As you go out into the world, think about that – make sure that in your successes you are raising others with you. If you do that, they will be there for you when you fall short too. Finally, Claire Nelson, CEO of Netball Scotland reminded us to be kind, to ourselves and to others on our journeys.

You are ready to leave us. The achievements that I have referred to are only an outline – the publicly visible face of what you do. Underlying this impressive array of activity is the hard work and personal growth that mean that you are now ready to take your places in the world. Proud as we certainly are of your achievements, it is first and foremost as a warm, funny, loyal, sparky group of young women that we will remember you. Many of you met with me in the summer term of 2018, when you were in Lower 5, and told me of your aspirations and in some cases of your anxieties too. In the Autumn of 2020 we met one-to-one again, this time to talk about your plans for the next stage – whether for university, gap year or college. And now, as we come together at the end of the year, those plans are about to become reality. These meetings are always a joy and a privilege. It is wonderful to hear from you about what St George's has meant to you, and the pride and affection with which you speak about your school.

You speak to me of feeling as though you have been part of a family here, and of this being a place where you have been able to be yourselves. As you prepare to leave, I hope that you will take St George's with you. Take that sense of being yourself – you will change and grow of course, but be true to yourselves and to what you know to be right. Take the spirit of adventure, and the warmth and sense of fun. You will be part of a network for life now, through the Old Girls' Association and our Foundation Office. You have all heard me say before how important it is that women are there for one another in their working lives. St George's will be here for you, as I hope that you will be for each other, to rejoice with you when you succeed and to pick you up and set you on your way again if you fall.

Remember too the **'Trouthe & Honour, Freedom & Curteisye'** that should shape your dealings with others. We are proud of you and wish you all much happiness and success in the lives that lie ahead of you. I am going to finish with some words from Jennifer Palmieri's book, 'Dear Madam President,' a letter addressed to a putative future female president of the USA.

'You already hold all the wisdom, strength and confidence you need to accomplish whatever it is you want to do. What has held us back before is merely our collective inability to imagine what is possible for us to do. The talent and ability have always been there.'