

Eunice 140 Banquet Speech

Before I commence I need to address a serious misrepresentation which has upset a well-known section of our local community. During our old girls' speeches at the Birthday Service yesterday reference was made to Grey boys this and Grey boys that, to Grey boys here and Grey boys there. Both high and primary Grey principals were present. But so were some key members of a clearly offended Saint Andrew's community. So, before we continue, I ask all old girls present to please raise their hands if they, at any time, dated, kissed, danced with, held hands with or even just winked at a Saints boy. Happy now?

It's a little strange to be history after three decades of helping to create a climate within which Eunice girls can go on to make history. Each one of us has our own story rooted in some way in this Green place which binds us together in terms of a shared experience. But our stories are so richly different, uniquely personal and filled with life's twists and turns. Mine has been a life story. This weekend is a celebration. We celebrate our school, life, friendship, privilege, dedication and passion.

I spent this morning with the 1965 matric class on a tour of Bloemfontein. It was clear to see that when old girls visit their old school in the company of old friends they see places and hear stories which touch chords of recognition and awaken memories and flashbacks which connect us in spirit, in experience and in belonging. I take my hat off to the organiser of that reunion. You made it all possible.

The distinguished author, William Maxwell, once warned that, in talking about the past, we lie with every breath we draw!

Imagine if I called some of you up to share with us your most frightening school moment. What would it be? Sneaking out some place, squeezing into some car, smoking behind some wall, taking out the midnight goodies. My most frightening school moment was early in Sub A, Grade One at Pinelands Primary – the Blue school, in Cape Town. I'd rushed to the bathroom in serious need of stress relief and just didn't make it. I crapped in my pants. Good and not so solid. So what do you do now? Well, just then a Gr 7 boy walked in. 12 years ago I told this story to Pieter Dirk Uys because he had just told me that he went to Pinelands Primary and he was in Grade Seven that year. I said maybe it was you. Maybe you were in drag. That's why I crapped in my pants. His bright solution was let me

take you to the office. So I took off. I ran. Out the bathroom. Out the quad. Passed the office. Out the gate and all the way home. And I didn't go back till Monday.

I had the privilege last month of being invited by my daughter, Kerry, to do a motivational workshop with her team of thirteen pharmacists and medical aid administrators. I called my presentation "The Ramblings of a Retired Principal: Things I've Learned" and I thoroughly enjoyed sharing ten simple issues such as reflection, respect, humour and happiness. The single most striking thing one learns in working with 800 families year after year is that each and every one has its turn to be in crisis – (sic) happens – as I explained, and that resilience, the ability to bounce back, is a teenage life's most defining difference. Developing resilience in both disadvantaged and advantaged settings is the stuff of education and it's so rooted in balance and emotional stability.

It may be a ridiculous thought but from an early age I believed that school was a place where you could help people, where you could care and share and make a difference. I've always loved the vibe of a school. It's what drew me to teaching. And what drew me to being a principal was the idea that I could lead and drive and influence that vibe and give it personality and direction.

School is very much part of Life. It's well over 25% of your life when you're 40. That's massive. And great teachers and great schools make a huge difference to those 40 years. And South Africa so badly needs great teachers and great schools.

But, ladies and gentlemen, you're here because you know what it is that makes schools like Eunice great. It's that rich sense of belonging, that natural openness, warmth and positive energy, that Free State brand of cheerful hospitality, that salt of the earth humanity, that uncomplicated spontaneity, that relatively safe more care-free small town learning and boarding environment, that built in, deeply rooted culture of respect, of greeting, of smiling and laughing and of making school fun. That's what the Eunice spirit means to me. You lived it. You know it.

My overseas colleagues notice that ethos within moments of experiencing that Green culture. Ethos in many schools is a word in the prospectus. At Eunice it's something I used to feel every single day and I share the feeling these days with old girls who shared Eunice with me.

When I think of ethos I think of Miss Vos. When I came to Eunice I discovered she had forbidden the wearing of jeans even in the hostel. “Jeans”, she said, “lead to smoking, drinking, bunking and boys”. I love the lead up to the worst evil. When the parabats helped to move the school at the end of 1982 she thanked them with a dance at Tempe. The girls were delivered in a bus carrying one half of a magazine page. They had to find the lucky parabat who had been given the other half of the page. Nadine de Bruin married her parabat! May not be traditional ethos but it’s certainly Miss Vos’s spirit and style.

On Monday Runa Edeling spoke to the girls about the Mrs Adele de Jager with such respect and not a little fear. Even Norine van Arkel says she was scared of Mrs de Jager. And I was scared of Norine! I remember Les de Jager, Jimmy’s late wife, telling me, “Imagine your Headmistress becoming your Mother-in-Law!”

But, outside South Africa, this headmaster is always explaining what “Eunice” means and why it’s pronounced “Eunice”. It’s “**Eunike**”. It’s from the Greek word 'nike' meaning 'victory'; 'eunike' meaning 'happy victory'. Nike was the goddess of victory. She's the inspiration behind Nike sportswear. She's also the silver lady or if you like the grey lady on the bonnet of the Rolls Royce. I like that. I especially like why Rolls Royce and Eunice have the same connection to the goddess of victory. They wanted a flying lady who would convey three things: firstly speed with silence - that's what all schools strive for at the change of classes – secondly the harnessing of great energy and, thirdly, a beautiful living organism of superb grace. What a description. One that highlights what our school stands for – a girls’ school – the harnessing of energy and a beautiful living organism of superb grace.

The most beautiful part of any school is the rich individuality of its students and their knowledge that they're known, that someone cares, that their happiness, their progress and their dreams are important to their school, that they're encouraged to have high expectations of themselves and their teachers and their schools.

During the course of my privileged career in educational leadership I've visited some of the best schools in the world. Yes, I was often envious of ultramodern facilities, creatively designed learning spaces, remarkable pupil-teacher ratios and timetables which facilitated teacher collaboration and active school research, personalized curricula, one-on-one devices with unlimited wifi access, paperless environments and even 3D printing.

Schools specialise in deeper and extended and blended and project-based learning, digital platforms, flipped classrooms. The innovations are endless and exciting. But only the most high fee-paying schools in SA can match these cutting edge initiatives and even then only the very best teachers adapt their pedagogy to make professional sense of all the bells and whistles.

I go out of my way to visit schools and I spent time two weeks ago at Christel House in Ottery in Cape Town. Established by Christel DeHaan, who founded RCI and sold it in 1996, Christel House serves the poorest of the poor. If your Crossroads shack has a TV you don't qualify. All 829 students are transported to and from school, attend free of charge, receive free uniform and medical care and are fed twice a day. By targeting the poorest of the poor they aim to break the cycle of poverty by caring and sharing and making a multipiyable difference. That's where I borrowed the phrase. It's so sad that it's so difficult to transform all schools into such caring, committed places.

Each year in my speeches I used to share that year's special moments and I'm sure many of years have come to mind today. Just a few random ones:

I remember when the now infamous Steve Hofmeyer came to speak to girls. He told them that his first girlfriend was a Eunice girl. The hall went into a quiet disapproving murmur. "But she dumped me after three months!" Up went a gigantic roar. Yay.

Or when the Grey Lady, whom you all remember so well became a problem. I sneaked into the hostel one night ten years ago to experience it for myself. With any form of initiation banned, she had become an excuse for that sort of behaviour. There were 32 Grey Ladies that night. We have Grade Ones in the hostel so I banned her. I had a determined Grade 11 boarder delegation in protest telling me that tradition was not bannable. So I said, "Listen Ladies. Let's do a deal. Grey Lady goes and I'll put electricity in your rooms for your matric year." "Done deal", they said. So, until she can return in an acceptable way, like me, she's history.

Or when the matrices won the 5FM SWAG competition by creating a winning video promoting the 5FM logo and Eunice's swag as a school. They won R200 000 for their Dance!

Or when the Durban Reunie, last year, presented me with a beautiful album with a personal message from all 28 headgirls.

Or when my daughter, Kerry-Louise, who in her matric year, guided me to the other end of the Midmar Dam for the fourth time.

On my retirement I was asked to single out 40 old girls for a Eunice Hall of Fame, but I declined because greatness happens in many more settings than money and medals, careers and community service. It is always enriching meeting old girls whether at the Mall, the Astro, the airport or, most likely, on line. I regularly exposed our girls to a wide range of old girl speakers. But just to make the point that we have some amazing alumni I posed myself the question. If you could choose one Eunice guest speaker who, on behalf of all old girls, could make the most significant impact on the girls' thinking in terms of their school and their country? Is there a name on your lips?

I would chooseProfessor Linda Richter. She was a boarder from Welkom who matriculated in 1967. She's one of that very small group of South African A rated scientists, an honorary prof in paediatrics at Wits, in psychology at KZN and a research associate at Oxford. She's written 150 journal articles, 4 books, 108 book chapters, 69 reports and she's presented 104 papers at international conferences and 121 locally. I refer you to her book: Mandela's Children : Growing Up In Post Apartheid South Africa. There are many others like her in business, in medicine, in mining and engineering, in loving homes and in sport.

When formally addressing old girls I sometimes highlight our four London Olympians or our two Glasgow Commonwealth medallists. I sometimes highlight those who have authored books like Marina Petropolous and her ever popular baby and child care books; Faye Lewis Levine with her beautiful cookbooks; Tosi de Beer Venter's unique cookbook comes to mind; athlete Loraine Lotsoff Abrahamson's My Race, which refers to both her Jewishness and her running; Elsje Neethling's (Ryk's sister) account of her battle with cancer, Sharon Sorour-Morris's Something on my Mind which brilliantly looks at UCT Business School Head, Kate Jowell, and her struggle with Alzheimer's; and I cannot but include the sexologist, Dr Eve, Marlene Burger. Many others, like Mariane Kast, have detailed memoirs and proud family histories.

I want to share with you my last Eunice day. It wasn't that final farewell assembly, or the last exam or staff meeting but the final day of Eunice's choir tour to Europe. Checking 48 girls out of Prague's Hotel Olympik and accompanying them to Dubai certainly constitutes an unlikely end to 28 years of headmastering but it was truly memorable for me. I was able to spend the day in the company of Eunice girls and to experience what has excited me every day : positive energy, the lifeblood of quality education. A group of four Afrikaans girls invited me to an uninviting breakfast in a packed dining-room. A little tired and homesick after two weeks of competitions and performances in sublime settings, their company was testimony to what I'll miss most : watching them grow in confidence as they commit to opportunity, embrace challenge and change and respond with enthusiasm and camaraderie. I just love the way Eunice girls are encouraged to be themselves, to question, to contribute and to do so with sincerity, spirit and style.

It was Tony Bennett, the Labour politician, who said he was retiring from parliament to spend more time on politics. I feel I'm retiring from Eunice to spend more time on education.

My first few months of retirement have been dominated by administration, queues and long waits at pension, medical aid and SARS offices. I handed in a certified copy of my ID (about the fifth time) on Monday and the lady said, "Who's this?" So I took out my ID book and said, "Have I changed so much since then?" "You can say that again", she said. "You can't say that to people!" "No", she replied, "All I meant was that you were a dish back then". The only dishes in my house are the ones I wash and watch and the Eunice wife who shares my life!

Uppermost in my mind is a deep sense of gratitude to you, the wider Eunice community, for the strong measure of acceptance afforded me over the years. I thank those closest to me who worked hard to minimise my glaring weaknesses. Their loyalty inspired me to lead from the front in the best way I know how - by being part of the action with positive energy, with my decidedly Mediterranean personality and, despite the heat of the challenge, with the best smile I could muster. It's not trophies and medals

I'll remember, but happy faces.

It was with sadness, pride and pleasure that I relinquished the custody of a truly great school both in the knowledge that she is in good shape and that I did my best, and that she is in good hands in the hands of a she. I got an sms from a Grade 10 girl, "Sir, the new principal's a SHE".

I think it's useful to be a she leading a girls' school. Shelley Frayne, Head of DSG in Grahamstown, tells me that whenever teachers start whinging and whining as teachers sometimes do, she says, "Listen Ladies, it's time to put on those big girl panties!" Not the sort of thing I could say to my Ladies, but nice to be able to tell you.

Zinnette, I've passed on to you not a school or an office or a name on the board, but that Eunice front row seat. It's an image that means the world to me. Eunice has welcomed you warmly, generously and with total support. It's a hot seat, but you're in the front row and, as Miss Vos told me, "You'll love it!"

Paul Cassar

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