

Junior School Speech – Mr Ross Comfort, Head of Junior School

Chairman, Mr O'Connor, ladies, gentlemen, staff and pupils – a very warm welcome to the Junior School Prize giving 2023.

On a drizzly day back in December 2012 I received a phone call from a man named Mike Brewer. Mike was the Head of Boarding at the time and, having heard from my uncle that his nephew was soon to be a newly qualified English teacher, Mike called in the hope he might persuade me to move into the Baker flat at the eleventh hour. I was toured around the school and we didn't even get a chance to look at the accommodation but something about the place spoke to me and I signed on the dotted line there and then.

I arrived in the Christmas holiday with a handful of mismatched furniture collected throughout my university days and remember feeling a little daunted at the prospect of being a houseparent to a group of sixth form boys who I was not much older than myself!

Never in my wildest dreams would I have then thought that, over a decade on, I would be stood in front of you all this evening as the Head of the Junior School and it is my absolute pleasure and privilege to do so.

When preparing for this evening (which took me back to that daunting feeling I felt in the Baker flat all those years ago!), Mr O'Connor's sage advice about my speech was to open with a joke at the expense of the bursar – no pun intended! However, I like to think that I am a quick learner and poking fun at the person holding the purse strings doesn't seem too sensible. So all I shall say is that he does a great job. But, having stood in front of him during the Mark De Lisser choir workshop this week the same can't really be said for his singing!

Not that I am really in a position to comment being as tone deaf as I am but, fortunately for us all here tonight, we do have some fantastically gifted individuals who will soon showcase their talents.

And this is what this school does so well.

We believe in individuals and, as cliché as it may sound, we push every individual to be the best they can be. Be that in their creative arts, academia, sport or even being pushed out of their comfort-zones in different contexts, we strive for every person to achieve as highly as possible.

We do this in many different and varied ways but all are underpinned by our values.

Unfortunately, I do not have the time tonight to list every single individual behind me and to list their own individual achievements – as much as I would like to! Be it Niyam, Jack and Sonny with their footballing successes, Beau with his incredible guitar playing (thanks for the lessons!), Ben and Morgan with their leadership and success in Hockey, Vlad with his app building, Alice and Emma and their fencing, Oliver and his creative writing, Josie with her swimming, Imogen with her rhythmic gymnastics or Alfie with his tetrathlon and so many more – every individual has the ability to succeed and it is up to us to open those doors...

Of course the inspection was a great success and I'd like to take this opportunity to formally thank the entire staff team, both teaching and business services, as well as our outstanding pupils for showcasing the school so brilliantly.

It was apt that one of the most successful inspections the school has had came when we were inspected as one school, Pre-Prep, Junior and Senior, united by our common values. And, I do admit to getting a little emotional when we were told of the outcome!

Excellence is demonstrated in a plethora of ways at St Edmund's and one mainstay of excellence is of course our Music provision.

The Junior School Concert is a highlight of the year and one piece performed resonated given the emotion that it was played with and I am delighted we are able to once again hear this piece tonight.

As a Whole School we were once again treated to the Gala Concert in the Cathedral where our boy choristers demonstrate their excellence on a daily basis – I often tell parents that these remarkable boys are the hardest working people, pupils or staff, in the entire school – and their excellence is the result of a mixture of raw talent and unbelievable dedication.

Those who have visited the school would have seen our Corridor of Curiosity, aimed at inspiring a childlike curiosity in us all that I would like to think never really leaves us...

Scarlett performed this at the much loved pupil cabaret as part of the St Edmund's Festival which in itself is a tsunami of creativity. The Oracle (or Mrs King as she's sometimes known) put it best when she said the standard of performances from everyone is unbelievable for a school and I couldn't agree more. From Leila's fantastic art work and the wooden Bison which will soon be pride of place in school, to the outstanding Junior School play, expertly directed by Mr Sykes and Mr Lorentzen and professionally delivered by pupils from Form 3-8, we could not wish to have had witnessed a higher standard and I hope those involved feel rightly proud of their efforts.

From art and drama to dance where this year saw the inaugural Dance Showcase take place where pupils from Pre-Prep, Junior School and Senior School dazzled us with their moves. With our new drama scholarships beginning in September I am sure this area of the school will continue to grow and shine

On the academic front, we have seen several competitions take place from Maths Olympiads to Spelling Bees with several events helping to inspire our young learners; a very successful Science week and several visiting authors to name but two.

I now hand over to two of our Form 8 Academic Scholars, Eddie and Juliette, to tell us a little bit more about their intellectual pursuits this year.

Earlier this year I attended a marketing conference with our super admissions and marketing team and when we were there we were asked to decide on our school's USP. Many other schools went with what you might expect; great facilities, small class sizes, fantastic opportunities. We of course offer all of these (as do many schools so one might question the 'uniqueness' of these!) but we settled on one word: Relationships.

The emphasis on valuing each other does, I feel, truly embody the uniqueness of St Edmund's. Be that relationships between peers, parents, governors, staff or, most importantly, the relationships between adults and children, these child-centred relationships are of the utmost importance to us all.

Building those relationships, no matter who you are or where you are from, is a vital part of our inclusive culture; be it our pupils from the Ukraine, Haru and Kano from Japan who delivered some fantastic presentations to their classmates and now run a Japanese culture club, or our fantastic boarders.

Thank you all – I know Miss Masters and the boarding team and Mrs Donnelly will miss you dearly.

Our relationships even go beyond that of humans, with the now well-established 'Bunny Group' treating our resident rabbits like royalty!

Which leads me nicely into our fifth and final value; social responsibility. Instilling this responsibility into our pupils is vital for their future and, be it modelling how we treat others (including animals!) or our annual Big Litter Pick to help our local community, it is imperative we all contribute to the betterment of society.

We have had some incredible fundraising take place this year; Evelina donated her flowing locks to the Little Princess Trust, Logan sold his homemade lemonade for the Kent wildlife trust, Comic Relief and of course through our House system, where Chaucer, Becket, Marlowe and Roper run events to raise money for their chosen charities (as well as having some healthy competition along the way!) I know we are

all looking forward to Mr McKean's final assembly tomorrow where we shall find out who has won the House Cup! My sincere thanks go to our Heads of Houses, Mrs Norton, Mrs Bradley, Mr Lound and Miss Woodard and their teams of house and sports captains for their tireless efforts this year – a round of applause please!

We say goodbye to Mr Gulino this year after a short time with us as he returns to London to continue his career. Adriano has breathed new life into the delivery of languages across all three schools and has been a wonderful form tutor – immediately embracing the child-centred ethos of the school and adding to that considerably. Merci beacoup Monsoir Gulino and we wish you all the very best for the future.

Whilst the spotlight is on staff, I must take this opportunity to wholeheartedly thank every member of the team. Mrs Ward, Mrs French, Mrs Swatman, Mr Bodle and Mr McKean have been a fantastic SLT and every single member of staff have been incredible – I am truly humbled to be able to lead here and you all make my job very easy indeed so thank you all.

Now, to our leavers, Form 8.

I have had the privilege of watching all of you grow into fine young men and women over the last few years and I have no doubt that you are all now ready for your next adventure and challenge. Have you all been perfect? No. But who amongst us is? What has impressed me most is your mind set - to embrace and welcome failure and to learn from it to grow. Please do not lose that valuable gift as you now move into the Senior School. You are all remarkable individuals in your own right and I look forward to witnessing from afar how you continue to grow and fulfil your potential.

As we head into the well-deserved Summer break, and as I say every Friday; Be kind, stay positive and work hard.