

Dr Suzanne Le Mire

Guest of Honour

Speech Day, 4 November 2016

Rector, Father Davoren, Chair of Council, Father Paul Mullins, Head of Senior School, Mr Peter Coffey, Head of Junior school, Mr Shaun Fitzpatrick, Members of Council, Distinguished guests, family and friends, staff and students.

When I was asked to speak to you today reference was made to the fact that I was a pioneer woman in the sense I had arrived at the College when it was coeducational only for the final two years, year 11 and 12. This year is, of course, the 20th anniversary of the year when girls were welcomed throughout the whole school. I was somewhat startled by the juxtaposition of myself with the term pioneer. I certainly was a pioneer in the sense I knew little about what to expect when I commenced my time at Saint Ignatius. I had come from a convent school, which, while coeducational, had many girls and few boys, and a largely female staff. I was faced with a place that was quite the opposite. Predominantly students and staff that were male. I remember arriving on the bus on the first day to a sea of khaki uniforms. I was also aware, having observed my brothers' piles of homework, that the academic demands that I was facing would not be quite as modest as those I had experienced hitherto. I was perhaps pioneering in the sense that I was wandering—as with many times in my life—off into the unknown.

Having decided that pioneering was too grand a term for my experience, I was then daunted by the need to draw lessons from my time at Saint Ignatius, perhaps something to guide the future lives of so many young, vibrant perhaps even impressionable, minds including those of my lovely nephews and nieces, Maddison, Jessica, Oliver, Piper and Myles. Lessons that would make them ready to face the challenges life will clearly throw at them. And so I consulted my children, Emily, Jonathon, Lucy and Charlotte, now all old scholars and whose perspectives I knew would be incredibly helpful. Their suggestions were—tell them God is everywhere or alternatively tell them I have an open bar tab next door. I thought deeply about these options and decided that the former was evidently true and too obvious and the latter both potentially expensive and likely to cause a scandal.

So I read all the yearbooks from my time and my children's time at the College. I read the life of Saint Ignatius. I called my father, who had given a Speech Day address in the 1980s, and asked if he had retained a copy, thinking that recycling is a universal good in these days of concern about climate change—disappointingly he assured me he had not. And so I ate some cake. I considered anew my life as a 'pioneer' woman of Saint Ignatius. I grew concerned about the extent to which being a pioneer made me at least 102 years old, and

possibly meant I had to wear a rabbit skin hat and learn how to crack a whip and lasso a calf. I ate more cake. I practised whip cracking with my computer cord. I ate still more cake. I considered how amenable my three backyard chickens might be to being lassoed. I reflected anew. Sadly, after all these profound efforts, I had only my lesson repeated to all my children--choose carefully with whom you go to the year 11 dance—you might end up, as I did, marrying them (I might add as an aside that this worked out very well for me). Familiar as this counsel is to my longsuffering children, I felt it was a slim peg upon which to hang this speech. So I propose instead to tell you three stories. Then, possibly with a judicious application of smoke and mirrors, I will pull all the stories together and I hope, with something of a flourish, provide the life lesson we are all looking for. So here we go...

Our first story is about a woman who meets some rats. On the evening we meet her she is sleeping for the first time in a large disused building in colonial Sydney. It is 1841. Our woman's husband is in the army and has been posted overseas, and she has sent her three young sons to Windsor, a settlement outside Sydney on the Hawkesbury River, to keep them away from the unsanitary conditions then prevailing in Sydney. The wooden building is known as the Immigrant Barracks and she has taken possession of it because she has managed to persuade Governor Gipps to allow her to use the barracks to house single migrant women and families who arrive in NSW—it is now the first night of possession and she is there to prepare for the next ship which she will meet, and offer the new arrivals, no doubt exhausted from their long journey, accommodation while she helps them find employment.

So, I hear you say, where do the rats come in? We are getting to that. It has been a very long day and the woman is tired, she is also somewhat indignant about the resistance she has had to overcome to get even this poor unsanitary, disused building for her project. She blows out her candle and settles into bed. Minutes later she hears a commotion so loud that she relights the candle to see the floor heaving with rats. She grabs her cloak--intending to flee-- when she realizes that doing so will only provide fuel for those who have criticized her project and her character. So instead she draws her feet up on the bed, lights another candle and settles in for the night. This plan too she discards when three rats descend from the ceiling onto her shoulders. But as she is both ingenious and determined, she moves to plan C—she slices up the bread set aside for her breakfast and places it in the middle of the room with a dish of water to provide an unexpected feast for the rats. We will leave her there reading her book, with her feet tucked under her cloak, as the rats feed just at the edge of the pool of candlelight.

The second story is about a small boy, perhaps three or four years old, who has been hung by his overalls from the branch of a tree in upper Minnesota. It is 1932. The boy is crying, as the branch from which he has been hung is high and he cannot get down. Those of you with an eye for detail will see he has a brace on his left foot. He has been born with a twisted

foot such that he cannot walk and has been placed in the tree by his father, frustrated by having a child with a disability at a time when disability is seen as a moral failing. We will leave him there (for the soft hearted among you he is rescued by his older brother) and rejoin him some years later when he is 12 and immobilized while enduring a series of operations, which would ultimately correct his foot so that he is able to walk normally. His mother, now on her own, as his father has withdrawn from his family, purchases from a door-to-door salesman, with \$25 earned by taking in laundry, a set of 25 red-cloth bound volumes that contain works of authors from Robert Louis Stevenson to Shakespeare. The boy opens the first volume and is transported. He now leaves us, pulled into the world of literature.

Around the same time the little boy is placed in the tree, but half a world away, a young student at the University of Adelaide Law School is turned away from the Law Students Society. She is refused membership not because of any flaw in character or poor record of scholarship. Indeed, she is an exceptional student, ultimately graduating with a prize for the most outstanding student of her year. Nor is she undeserving, having been the child who ran full pelt to the front door to meet her father first at the end of his working day, she lost her beloved father in the First World War and made it to university only due to the generosity of the Sisters of Mercy who provided her with a free education. Nor is she flighty, this student has seen family members work in the law and has been, according to one source, from age six, committed to a career in the law. She is, however, faced with considerable challenges. She is refused membership of the Law Students Society purely because of her gender. While remarkably 6 of the 30 students in her year at law school are women, they make their way through the degree without the benefit of tutorials, as tutorials are only available at the residential colleges and these are only open to men whose families can pay the fees. Undaunted, she founds the Adelaide Women's Law Student Society, a society that was a feature of my time at the Law School some 50 years later. We will again shift our focus, leaving this young woman to meet adversity with courage, imagination and ingenuity.

For each of these characters, faith and values provided the foundation upon which their lives were built, their imagination and their education helped them to see alternate worlds, then their determination and courage helped them overcome barriers to realize their goals. For each, education is a key part of their story and their education fed their imagination. As Saint Ignatius himself realized, when he overturned his initial reluctance to tie down the men within his order by starting up schools, education is the primary mechanism in our world by which we can change lives and bring the imagined into reality. In each case these characters faced adversity and failures. But they created their own journeys and roadblocks and disappointments were overcome with courage and determination. In the words of Robert Frost:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the road less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

The first woman is a genuine pioneer. She is Caroline Chisholm, a woman whose courage and imagination led her to change the way immigration to the Australian colonies worked. She recognized that populating the new colony predominantly with men would inhibit its growth, undermine the family values that the colony dearly needed and lead to a transient population. As the number of women immigrants climbed she became a familiar figure in Sydney harbour meeting each new ship and riding her white horse Captain alongside bullock carts full of new arrivals on the make-shift roads to the areas, largely outside Sydney, where the labour shortages, and hence the opportunities for employment, existed. Converting to Catholicism at the time of her marriage, she was an early advocate for migration regardless of religious affiliation, at that time opposing those who sought to exclude Irish Catholic migrants from the new colony. Her words, “any attempt to conduct emigration on a sectarian basis ... would only tend to create discord and strife”, written in 1846, seem curiously relevant to our contemporary politics. She is one of the few women whose name has been given to a building at the College –perhaps indicating that her pioneering role continues. And it is particularly appropriate that we remember her conviction that making space and supporting female participation in the workplace is critical for a productive and healthy society as we mark the anniversary of the moment when girls were welcomed in all years of the College.

The little boy became the first in his family to go to University. He studies literature at university, obtains a PhD, moves half way across the world for love, takes up an academic post and, with the 25 volumes set, still on his bookshelf, becomes a professor of English Literature. This story is personal. He is my father and sits amongst you today.

Our third story is that of Dame Roma Mitchell—whose statue on North Tce many of you would have passed on the way here: Supreme Court Judge, Chancellor of the University of Adelaide, Governor, a law reformer, a graduate of the University of Adelaide Law School, who, once she stepped down from the bench, delivered Meals-on-Wheels to disadvantaged people at Adelaide boarding houses. Throughout her life, she faced adversity and saw in this an opportunity to forge a new path. While her story is in many ways one of triumph, she would undoubtedly be disappointed to hear that the battle for equal pay for women, a cause for which she advocated as early as the 1960s, is, as yet, not won. Recent figures for my own profession in South Australia, the legal profession reveal that lawyers in South Australia 8-13 years from graduation earn roughly 2/3 of the pay of their male counterparts.

Now to life lessons:

For the staff of Saint Ignatius: I remember key moments when my teachers changed the way I thought about the world and myself: when Mr Petkovic taught me how to balance a chemical equation and when Mr Flynn cast me in the musical; when my year 11 English teacher taught me Macbeth so well I can still provide great slabs on request—or more commonly without the request bit; when Brother Cahill pointed out the error of my ways in running on the oval in school shoes; when Dr Heatley read my essay to the class; but also when the moment when a Jesuit who shall remain nameless, Father Mullins, told me to pull my socks up; when Father Overberg played Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No 6 in class, closing his eyes to better appreciate the beauty of the music and then unexpectedly emerging from his contemplative state to find I was passing notes and give me penal. As Aristotle said, “the roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet”.

The role of a teacher is life changing and I’m sure I speak for all in thanking you for your generous and thoughtful contributions to the lives of the students at Saint Ignatius College.

For the Family and Friends here today: a theme of these stories is the great gift that is given by family and friends. The husband who on his return from the army, proudly supports his wife’s work. The little boy who is given the 25-volume collection, the law student who is supported by her mother and a scholarship after her father dies in the World War 1. I’m sure many of the students here appreciate the endless driving, the feverish searching for the white sports top five minutes after the time when we were supposed to leave for Saturday morning sport (or is that just me?), the hot chocolates provided by family and friends, as well as the comfort when everything seemed bleak or great times as they share success. It is these gifts given with love for which we are all deeply thankful.

For the students of Saint Ignatius: Over the course of your schooling, you have and you will learn a great deal, not only about your subjects and Mr Coffey’s view of having your top button undone, but also about yourselves. Not just about the pleasures of House performance, and the intricacies of setting up your computer to print with Citrix. But also the key values of the Jesuits. These define you—just as your preference for science or sport or both defines you—and the community that you have built together with all the others in this room and across the 400 Jesuit institutions across the world, so these values and this community are now part of you as well—*it is now who you are, just as it became part of me.*

That our faith is central to the way we live our lives; *that is who we are.* That trying and failing is an opportunity for growth, just as success should be celebrated; *that is who we are.* That education has the power to change lives; *that is who we are.* That inclusion of the other, whomever that might be, makes our own world richer; *that is who we are.* That standing when a teacher walks into the room is the right thing to do; *that is who we are.* That being men and women for others is a lifelong goal; *that is who we are.* That a page looks better with AMDG at the top; *that is who we are.* That opportunity is to be grasped;

that is who we are. That when you meet an old scholar you meet on common ground; *that is who we are.* That each of us has the power and indeed the responsibility to go and set the world alight; *that is who we are.*

These values, the values of Saint Ignatius and this college, are the hidden freight that accompanies your schooling and it is these that give you the ability and the motivation to change the world. I was recently reminded of this when my colleague and friend at the Law School, Alexander Reilly, College Captain in 1985, received a University award for championing a new scholarship program devoted to refugee students. It is a thread by which we are all drawn together—it is the shared life lesson for us all.

Finally, and most especially, I turn to the Class of 2016: You are now at the edge of opportunity. I wish you all the best for the final chapter of your story at Saint Ignatius. And then your transition from school to whatever comes next is a grand opportunity. And your responses to your future adversities and opportunities, wherever you go, will be your grandest achievements yet. May your faith and values guide and support you throughout your lives. May your onward journey be as surprising, challenging and ultimately fruitful as that of the three characters in our stories. May your adversities become your opportunities. May you take the road less travelled and find it wonderful. *Because that is who you are.*

And so, I return to where I started, ‘be careful about the year 11 dance’, and I wish you all the very best.