



Newent Community School and Sixth Form Centre

Striving for Excellence

Newsletter 101

Principal • Mrs Kirsten Harrison

April 2016

Farewell to Kirsten Harrison

“Dangerous, but fascinating,” Mrs. Harrison reminisces about sitting in a firing trench with an SA80, carrying out reconnaissance for the British Army. “You wouldn’t imagine it to look at me now, but I was really super-fit then.” Her five-year stint with the Territorial Army was supposed to be in the Education Corps, but there were suggestions that she would make a good Physical Training Instructor. She had at one time been lined up for a career in management at Marks & Spencer but she really wanted to work for people and not for products. The Territorials’ active lifestyle and opportunity for meaningful public service took her to the brink of a full-time Army career and she had already accepted a VSO placement in the war-ravaged Balkans when she met and fell in love with the man she was to marry, and all the plans changed.

Full time teaching was not without its moments of adrenaline-rush though. “I worked in a school in Oldham. One of my worst moments in teaching was with a colleague who was sat by the teacher’s desk, I was by the door, and between us was a lad with a lump hammer. It was all about how to get that colleague safely out of that room. Every time I start thinking, well, somebody’s been really awful, or somebody’s done something really dreadful, I just put it together with some of the things I have had to manage. I have been squared up to, face to face, by fourteen year old young men who are not in the business of taking instructions from a woman. It was tough, so having taught in Swindon, Leeds and Oldham, when I came to South Gloucestershire and the Katharine, Lady Berkeley’s School – talk about a change of world!”

Mrs. Harrison moved from KLB to Newent eight years ago, to join the Leadership Team. She never set out in teaching to become a Principal, but she recognises how



important it is to her sense of purpose that she gets into positions where she can influence what happens in education to help steer it in a meaningful direction. “I think what is very sad is that, nationally, a child’s value to society and their merit as a human being is judged in the grades they have in a set of public examinations. The failure to recognise the wide diversity of skills and human qualities and abilities is a growing problem. The shift away from valuing vocational skills is regrettable and serious. We are telling fifty percent of the population that what they are good at isn’t valuable. It is a nonsense to shove everybody through the classic subjects regardless of suitability. It is a denial of people’s basic, common humanity.”

The fate of Newent has been very much in the hands of others, recently. But Mrs. Harrison knows that being an Academy and being able to make our own decisions has certainly helped. “We are really sharply focused in Newent on named young people. We don’t talk about *numbers* of people, *lumps* of people: if we talk about groups we are talking about ‘the boys who don’t want to write’ or ‘the girls who lack confidence’. We know our children, and that is fundamental.

Ofsted, of course, has been largely dismantled and re-

constructed over the past two years, this time using experienced practitioners as the inspectors. Indeed, Mrs. Harrison has been recruited as an Ofsted inspector herself. She is also now co-opted onto the Gloucestershire Children's Safeguarding Board where she can have a voice in how schools safeguard individuals, in the same way as she has restructured the 'Inclusion' programme at Newent and appointed our two 'SAFE' officers to make sure that each child gets the chance to flourish.

When Kirsten Harrison said farewell to her staff at tea on Monday, 25th April, the emotional shake in her usually assured voice compelled close attention. She spoke movingly about the sacrifices made by so many people in the difficult three years she has held the Principal role. She singled out with obvious pride her senior team for their individual competence and their collective cohesion; she relished the outstanding pastoral focus of the House Heads. She thanked the administrative and the site staff for their welcoming efficiency and patience. Her tributes to colleagues were all the more moving for the bubbling sense of affection with which Mrs. Harrison celebrated what teaching here at Newent means to those who have that privilege.

"When people walk into this school, they 'feel' it." Mrs. Harrison pointed to the Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations last year as an example of what Newent School means to people who queued in their hundreds to attend the Saturday commemoration. "And I would take somebody to see House Assemblies," she suggested. "That is where you feel the ethos of the School and it is something that cannot be bought. It has to evolve and grow around people. This is why people here go over and above, and at great personal cost, because it matters!"



With Peter Landau at the Fiftieth Anniversary Celebrations, 2015

If you speak with Mrs. Harrison in the course of school business, you will know that she does not talk self-indulgently about the personal rewards of the job or the satisfaction of knowing you make a difference. She talks



Accepting an International Shirt from Alex Cuthbert

"Mrs. Harrison has been committed to ensuring that the students at Newent Community School and Sixth Form Centre have the best possible education and support that can be provided."

"Whilst we are sorry to see Mrs. Harrison leave Newent, the Governing Body wishes her every success in her new role at Chosen Hill School. We would like to thank her for her contribution to the progress and improvement achieved here during her time as Principal."

Karen Elen - Chair of Governors

instead with enthusiasm about others and *their* needs and *their* successes: she seems to expect no kind of reward or accommodation for herself. You are left to infer from the understated hints of her dedication to her family and from the restless physical energy with which she insists on the individual human value of every member of the Newent family, that she is in fact driven by a selfless compassion that is deeply felt.

And this compassion has been needed. Her time as Principal at Newent seems to have stuffed fifteen years of experience into just three. There have been some difficult low points and heart-breaking decisions: fighting off external pressures; coping with the financial implications of falling rolls; and of course the heroic team effort to raise the School out of Special Measures ahead of schedule. The motivation has always been to do the best for the students of Newent School and to make their one chance to pass through the education system as liberating and inspiring as possible. There has been no other goal. The outcomes speak for themselves.