



## **Scholarship Dinner at St John's College 5<sup>th</sup> May 2010**

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Ten years ago St John's College was a very different institution to the vibrant place it is today. It was a musty, dark and quite intimidating place, seemingly full of bizarre rituals designed to infantilise its occupants just when they needed to be learn how to engage fully in adult life. Literally and metaphorically, doors have been opened here in the past decade.

In 1999 I had a brief to write a report to the College Council on the advisability of changing the single-sex structure of the College so it became a co-educational residence which admitted female students. Apart from the obvious analytic skills needed for such a project, I had been an academic in the University of Sydney for 25 years and I am very familiar with the challenges facing organizations as they change their structures and modify their attitudes to enable women to participate fully in public and professional life – an men and women to live and work together for mutual benefit.

Ten years ago many of you were just leaving primary school, I expect, or progressing through secondary school. I imagine your interest in the opposite sex was fairly one-dimensional, as appropriate to adolescents in the thrall of hormonal changes. Had you been asked then what you thought about co-ed college life, your answer might have been heavily influenced by that one-dimensional view of the opportunities such an experience might offer.

In 2000 St John's College made infrastructure changes to welcome women as residents in College in 2001. What else was going on in the world in the year 2000? Well we had passed the millennium without the threatening Y2K crash. Remember that? The computers were not going to be able to cope with the switch to a new millennium. The end of the world was nigh! Much like the fear that ran through St John's when word spread that women were going to be allowed in!

In 2000

- China and India were yet to become significant players in the global economy.
- September 11 2001 was ahead of us.
- The European euro was yet to enter the European currency,
- Vladimir Putin was elected president of Russia
- John Paul II delivered a broad papal apology for church errors over last 2,000 years
- Facebook was yet to be invented
- Play Station 2 was launched by Sony in Tokyo
- St John's College was planning to go co-ed

Part of my role as a consultant in 1999 was to interview the current students and other stakeholders to determine attitudes to this projected change. As the interviews progressed I become increasingly concerned about the wisdom of moving the College to a co-ed residence. The young men in College, 'to a man' did not want this change. When I asked them to identify the sources of their resistance, their responses were illogical, heartfelt and sometimes quite concerning. They were cooking up schemes to make the change unworkable and their fear was palpable. Women had no place in a male institution and there were no advantages in letting them in the door. Blokes had their rituals, hierarchies and agendas well in place and the barricades were up.

I recall asking one young man what he would do if female students were admitted to College. He liked that question.

'Well I'll push them off the benches in the dining room, raid their rooms, trash them and throw beer all over them. We can make their lives hell' he assured me confidently.

'And then what?' I asked. He paused for a moment and stared straight ahead.

'Well then...well then...I'll feel like shit'

The College decided to go co-ed. The motives were mixed: the student numbers barely supported a viable institution but also there was a strong enough conviction among the Fellows of Council that it

was a timely and desirable change. To provide university students with an opportunity to develop the social and life skills inherent in living together in a university college was seen as expanding the College's offerings and reflecting important advances which had been made in relationships and alignments between the genders.

There were problems, some inherited, some imported and the challenges of being part of a significant change agenda did not suit all residents or staff. We were fortunate that the day to day (and night) management of the College in those early days of the co-ed experience was in the hands of some very capable men and women. It would be interesting to hear their stories. The good angels must have had the College in their sights because things were often very rocky.

So was it a worthwhile development in the College's evolution? Short of doing a careful financial and sociological analysis we'll have to rely on impressions to address that question. To what extent is this now - thriving community the result of that significant change a decade ago? I don't know because it is difficult to isolate a single factor in an evolutionary process. Importantly, the College is gradually building its reputation as a quality institution and it is fortunate that the College Council, College Executive and Student leadership share a commitment to building the academic and collegial life of St John's. A solid reputation for excellence has to be supported by sound evidence. The College has to be as good as it says it is. In this important process all of you have a very significant stake. It is very much in your interests to play your part.

Why is that so? Because the extent to which it will matter in your professional lives that you were a resident here is directly aligned with the quality of experiences you have had, but even more importantly, with the quality of the reputation this College enjoys.

That reputation has to be recognised within the University of Sydney and the broader community.

Should you be tempted to do anything which brings you or the College into disrepute, you are squandering your significant investment in the reputation of the College, you are damaging your future and that of your friends. Not a clever move.

Whether you feel privileged or not others see you that way. College living is available to a miniscule number of University students – about 10% of the overall population. As you head over to College for a prepared lunch and dinner and engage in a range of readily available tutorials, cultural, social and sporting activities, the young man or woman sitting beside you in lectures is heading off to Redfern station for a crowded, uncertain train ride to Penrith, and back again next morning.

OK, you got lucky and you probably do feel grateful. Enjoy what life has thrown your way and enjoy that fact that you can develop empathy for and understanding of the men and women you are living with. Each generation has its challenges to face. Whether you are a man or a woman you will have to be involved in the further evolution of female-male relationships, especially as they intersect between home and work. There is still much to be done to enable men and women to enjoy a healthy and fulfilling balance between family and professional life. Such issues are unlikely to be keeping you awake right now but they will impact upon you within the next decade. Mutually respectful, deep friendships developed here in College could well develop your empathic attunement to others which will serve you well in your life and your careers.

Alongside the opportunity to develop friendships with a diverse group of students, there is the opportunity to prepare for professional life where you will be expected to make a contribution beyond just your professional expertise. You will be expected to support charitable and community-building projects. You might well be encouraged to think creatively how you could do that.

Central to the values of the Catholic Church and institutions such as St John's is the principle of social justice and there are opportunities within College life for you to familiarize yourself with that value in action. Over the last decade or so, under the influence of Muhammad Yunus (2007), the founder of the Grameen Bank, social entrepreneurship and venture philanthropy have developed as concepts to address poverty and economic sustainability in developing countries and areas of need. You are very likely to encounter these concepts if you take up positions in corporate organizations.

Social entrepreneurship, briefly, is a concept based on micro-lending principles. It endeavours to build the financial and business skills of people in need so that they learn how to become economically self-sufficient. You may have heard of the idea as it was developed in Bangladesh. There, through the Grameen Bank, Muhammad Yunus gave small loans to women to develop small

business enterprises. The loans had to be paid back, no matter how difficult that became, but the borrowers were assisted to develop sustainable businesses and to learn the necessary skills to do so. This model was informed by distinctive beliefs in human potential, the importance of dignity and autonomy and the multiplied benefits of guided entrepreneurship.

There is a symbolic reason too why the work of Dr Yunus should be of interest to this College. Dr Yunus was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize from the University of Sydney in 1998, some time before he and the Grameen Bank shared a Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.

I mention this because leaders in the professions are expected to support the welfare of others and within the College your charitable endeavours might well be developed along the principles of social entrepreneurship – not only because it is an excellent model of social justice in practice, but because there are benefits to you in knowing about it before you enter professional life. Some years ago I was a member of a selection committee in another state for applicants for Sir John Monash Awards, prestigious scholarships which are similar to Rhodes Scholarships. Applicants for both scholarships need to provide evidence of significant contributions to community service. It seems to me that engagement in community service consistent with social entrepreneurship/venture philanthropy would be advantageous. I am happy to follow up with conversations with anyone interested in knowing more.

Tonight we celebrate the outstanding academic achievements of St John's students. Congratulations to those high achievers for their personal success and for their contribution to the reputation of the College as I mentioned earlier. I would like to congratulate also those students who may not have won accolades tonight but who achieved their personal best in academic work and in their contributions to College life.

Ten years ago I might not have welcomed an invitation to address a dinner audience here. Tonight I am delighted to note that the College is a far more inviting, mature and desirable place than it was ten years ago. Both insightful and wise men and women have contributed to that change. Soon you will have to take over the role of becoming leaders in the wider community. Use your time in College to develop the skills and experiences to step out proudly and confidently into full adult life. University and college life is an important stepping stone – a rehearsal for full participation in a civilized society.

### **My three messages**

- Face your fears and seek to understand others
- Participate fully in community life
- Shape the future with your creativity and commitment.

Then you can experience and become standard –bearers for a civilized society. In so doing your life will be rich and fulfilling. May the next ten years for you be very formative and satisfying. Thank you for being such an attentive audience.

### **Reference**

Yunus, M. (2007) *Creating a World without Poverty and the Future of Capitalism*, New York, Public Affairs/Perseus Books.