

**Response to Toast to the College, by Director of Learning at St Mark's College,  
Dr Rachel Buxton, at College Final Dinner, Saturday 31 October 2020**

Nic – thank you so much for that. There's so much truth in what you've said.

You started by saying it was a surreal experience for you, standing up here making the toast – well, I have to say that in some ways this is an equally surreal experience for me (in a Back To The Future kind of way) responding to the toast that it was my job to make as College Club President back in 1997, when I was at my own Final Dinner!

When I gave the toast back then, little did I know that some 20 years later I'd be back here, back in the St Mark's fold, which we know – which each one of us here knows – as such a very special community of extraordinary people, a community that we are all utterly privileged to be a part of.

And I have to say, it is so good to be back.

Of course, like all of us I had no idea we'd be hit by a global pandemic just a few weeks into the first term.

But, out of crisis, creativity is born, and – as Nic has said – the College community as a whole has met the challenges of this year with tenacity, enthusiasm, and inventiveness, resulting in what we can all unequivocally celebrate as a year of outstanding successes, right across the board.

For that – and for much more besides – I would like to add my, and the College's, thanks to the thanks that Nic has already given.

There's a quote I love, by a poet I love – Seamus Heaney. He once wrote that:

The way we are living,  
timorous or bold,  
will have been our life.

I'll say that again:

The way we are living,  
timorous or bold,  
will have been our life.

I think that what Heaney is saying here is that our life isn't something that happens to us at some point in the future – it's what we're doing right now.

It's how we choose to spend our time; it's the memories we lay down; it's the attitude we take to what comes our way. All of this will have been our life.

That's quite a challenge.

When we look back on these days, will we be able to say that we have acted with timidity – or with boldness? With mean-spiritedness – or with generosity?

Will we have sought out the opportunities for genuine connection with each other? Will we have been willing to be vulnerable, to be humble, to stand up for what's right, even if it's the tough call?

Will we have been willing to push ourselves intellectually – wrestling with the challenges of our discipline, and coming away changed by, and enriched by, that encounter?

Will we have risen to the challenges of service – service to each other, to the wider community – living lives of purpose and kindness that spills out in love to those around us?

Living here at St Mark's – being part of this community – gives us the opportunity to live our lives with boldness. With love. With authenticity.

It allows us to discover who we are; what matters to us; what kind of person we want to be. And what a gift that is.

So, as I say, I would like – on behalf of the College – to say thank you to you.

Because all of this is only possible because of all of you. This community is nothing – it would not exist – without each one of you.

So, absolutely, I want to say thank you, thank you – a thousand thank yous! – to those of you who have served on the leadership teams this year: to the indefatigable, ever-smiling Committee; to the tireless RAs; to the unstoppable Academic Team; to the Karaoke-fuelled Charitable Foundation – and of course to the magnificent Bronte, and to Chad the fantastic. Thank you.

But more than that, every single one of you – through your smiles, your interactions, your energy, and your love and support for each other – you make this College what it is.

As Nic says, as Sophie says: each of you, whether you know it or not, will leave an indelible mark on this place, as much as it leaves on you.

There is so much that each of you, both leavers and returners, will take away from this year – but there is also so much that every single one of you has given.

And for that I – we – salute you. Thank you.