

CLASS OF 1976 – 40 years on 2016

SPEECH TO PRETORIA BOYS HIGH SCHOOL

Mr Illsley, Mr Reeler (in his absence) and Mr Schroder (in his absence), teachers, pupils and especially the Class of 1976 and all their partners here today.....

Looking around the school this morning – you can see how things have changed. And looking at some of my former class mates – that's living proof of change!

“Forty years on, growing older and older,

Shorter in wind as in memory long,

Feeble of foot and rheumatic of shoulder,

what will it help you that once you were strong?”

I don't know about the rest of my former schoolmates, but personally I have more wind and less memory, not the other way around.

A lot has happened in the past 4 decades.....

40 years ago:

There were no TV's, no computers, no CD's, no iPod's

No internet or email. No mobile phones. No Wi-Fi. No Whatsapp, Snapchat or Facebook,

Back then:

Hardware was hardware – and Software was a No 2 pencil

Grass was something you mowed

A cell was something you learned about in Biology

Chalkie Sommerville was already an old man

Coke was something you drank

Heroine was considered to be a female hero

And last, but not least (certainly my favourite), getting stoned was considered to be a negative biblical experience!

Do you know that scientists are predicting that people born this century will live to be 130! Can you imagine living that long? What will that mean for job careers, for employment, for medical aids, for retirement planning? People are going to be living longer and will thus have to work longer to secure a comfortable retirement. AND what about the pressure on personal relationships? Guys – imagine - you are going to get married at (say) 30 – knowing that you will stay married to the same person for the next 100 years??!! Frightening thought.

But seriously, times have certainly changed. But some things, I believe, should never change.

What do I say to you today in less than 10 minutes – 2 of which have already passed?

Firstly, I'm honoured here today to talk to you – especially in this magnificent hall - and secondly, I speak on behalf of the Class of 1976 – these elderly people sitting here 😊 When you think of it, we sat here 40 years ago thinking about life after school. Well, we are back! So that you know, we have 83 guys at this reunion. That excludes 21 former masters and 20 spouses whom we are delighted to have join us! That's well over a hundred people from different parts of the world celebrating our reunion over the next 2 days. Unfortunately, there are 17 boys who passed on – they are remembered today and special mention will be made later. It's also interesting to note that most of us represented here today were born in 1958. And we are 58 this year! Some of you boys may be able to say this one day – who knows how many of you will live well into their 90's!

The year we matriculated (1976) was a HUGE year in our history – and that of South Africa. A time of much political awareness. But our political and social landscape has changed dramatically – for the better may I add. But all change is hard. Change causes movement, and movement causes friction. We lived in very interesting times then, and we still do now I suppose. I do not wish to dwell on the past. We can't do anything about the past, but we can influence the future.

So what's my message today? Well, I have 7 things I would like to share with you in the next 7 minutes:

I visited the school 2 years ago – our family donated my dad's SA schools cricket cap to the school which is now proudly displayed at the Mulvenna room. My wife commented on how nice it was to see how well-mannered each boy was. The way they stood up, looked us in the eye and greeted us with a smile. While here, we also took the opportunity of visiting Solomon House. When I arrived, I was greeted in exactly the same way I was taught as a boarder to greet a visitor. This particular boy stood up and greeted me – offering to help. When I told him why I was here and my association with the school and Solomon House, he proudly gave me a tour. A personal tour. That boy is probably in assembly today. I remember you. I don't believe it's important to mention a name, because I know all other boys would have behaved in the same way. Certainly, a Solomon House boy would have done so. I'm not too sure Rissik and School were that well-mannered in those days? 😊

We often used to play soccer on the lawn in front of Solomon House, and whenever “the boss”, another master or parent walked past, we would halt play to allow them to pass. I always remember “the boss” (Mr Abernethy) donning his hat as he continued walking past. We showed respect to him – and he in turn showed us respect.

Having **good manners** is the first point I wanted to make. It is a trait of a boy from Pretoria Boys High. And secondly, showing **mutual respect** to others is also a trait of a boy from Pretoria Boys High. I learned both from this school. I'm sure we all did. It does not matter whether you the smartest guy in class or the most versatile sportsman on the field. Nor

whether you are a school prefect or captain of your team. Hold on to these - they will stand you in great stead for the rest of your life.

Thirdly, I do believe every boy is unique. In this regard, **don't be shy** to be yourself. Don't let others around you in seemingly superior positions dictate your future. Be they school mates or teachers. Don't be intimidated by these people. Some of them do mature, but some of them will always be boys. There is a saying that "A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not on the branch, but on its own wings. Always believe in yourself"

Fourthly, be **proactive** in whatever you do. Nothing ventured – nothing gained. They say "A tortoise never moves forward unless it sticks its neck out!" Don't be scared to try something new. Follow your gut. Make mistakes – and learn from these mistakes. Just don't make the same mistake again.

Fifth, **select your friends** carefully. Your circle of friends are more important than you think. As parents we know this to be true now. And, very importantly, continue making friends. You will find that your closest friends in years to come are, unfortunately, not all from your school days. That's life. So choose carefully. Your *true* friends will stand by you.

Sixth – your **family** is MOST important. It matters not how many family members you have. It's how you interact with them; it's how you laugh with them and how you cry with them. Show them lots of love – they are the only family you will ever have.

Seventh, whether still at school, university or whatever, as you go out in the world, you'll find that people are always quick to define you, to pigeonhole you, to whittle you down to their preconceived notions- which brings me to my last (and probably most important) point: Never let others define you. **Define yourselves.**

On that point, it would be remiss of me if I did not stop here for a moment and give you a steer on your future responsibility as a citizen of South Africa. Let me be clear: This is NOT a political statement – rather it is suggested advice to young people to define themselves as future leaders in our country. Over the past year or so, there has been a lot of noise and media coverage surrounding attacks on various institutions – least of all our Constitution. Allegations of "State Capture" have done the rounds. Principle tactics have included bullying, intimidation, the appointment of compliant individuals and manufacturing allegations of misconduct against individuals – some very senior in government. Whilst this is not an outright attack on the institutions and the Constitution, it does have the same effect. Earlier this week we were again reminded of all of this.

We cannot stand by and allow this systematic raid on our institutions to succeed. As citizens, we collectively own and are the ultimate custodians and guardians of our democracy. It is OUR project. We cannot allow this to happen on OUR watch. As you have probably seen, we as a young democracy are NOT allowing this to happen. November 2nd 2016 may just be a defining moment for us all. But there needs to be a clear metaphorical "line in the sand" that cannot be crossed so that this does not happen on YOUR watch

either. Boys - you also have an opportunity of defining yourselves accordingly. Our generation showed it this past week. Don't you miss this opportunity when it presents itself in the future. Carry the flame forward to university, to your places of employment – understanding the importance of our Constitution, our Courts and the freedom of our Press, to continue to grow our young and vibrant democracy. That way you define yourselves.

My 7 minutes is up. It's been a privilege addressing you today. On behalf of Class of 1976, I would like to thank you for affording us the opportunity of visiting you this weekend. Mr Isley (and Mr Reeler in his absence), we purposely made sure that we would have a healthy cash reserve in our account when planning this event, so please note that we will be depositing whatever cash reserves we have, which will be substantial, into the school's bank account.

Boys - this IS the best school in the country. I know from bitter experience that school can be a drag at times, but you will quickly realize once you leave, what this place means to you and I would encourage you all to try and draw as much as you can from the five, or in some cases six, years that you will spend here.

We were privileged to attend this wonderful school 40 years ago. We are proud to say that we went to Pretoria Boys High! I hope one day you will feel the same way.....

Vertute et Labore

Thank You

- **Vernon Cresswell**