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### **GUEST SPEAKER'S SPEECH • FOUNDERS DAY**

(Edited and abridged)

Good morning honoured guests and St Stithians family.

Thank you for that kind introduction. It is a great pleasure and a privilege to be the guest of honour at today's Founders' Day. I must say, however, it is also very daunting, and if I had known I would be up here in the year 2000, I would probably have taken notes at some of the speeches I listened to as a pupil. Not having lived in Gauteng for 10 years, I do not get much chance to visit Saints, and it is a joy to see how beautifully the campus continues to grow.

When the Rector phoned to invite me to deliver today's speech, I had at first thought it was an April Fool's joke. But, after remembering that Mr Wylde rarely joked, I wondered, as I am sure many of you still do, why I had been asked. After all, Kermit the Frog once delivered the Commencement Address at an American university why should you have to put up with me?

Firstly, I suppose, I am here today because the Rector's premier choice - Hansie Cronje - was inexplicably not answering his cell phone. But secondly, and more importantly I'd wager, I am here for the simple reason that I am an old Stithian something which qualifies every pupil on the field to be up here in the future - so beware! I matriculated in 1991 a time still rooted in 'the Old South Africa' although the ANC had been unbanned the previous year while my Grade 11 class had been on a Biology trip to Pilanesberg. In 1991, however, our country was already, and thankfully, on track for vast socio-political changes. In the years following my matriculation, I made decisions on where my life would go what I would do, why and how I would do it. I reacted to things happening around me in South Africa, and I made decisions based on my interaction with people and places across the global village, the important point, however, is that what I was doing was not extraordinary. It was something the 170-odd people who matriculated with me were doing as well; it was something my brother and his friends had done as Old Boys a few years before me, and most importantly, it is something every pupil on this field today will also do.

I have decided not to be profound, but to try and answer - from my own limited and still growing experience - whether the 'Saints Way' helped me in becoming the person I am. I would like to direct my comments mainly at the pupils - hoping the fact that I was sitting where you are now - just a few years ago - may result in my speech having some added relevance. After walking around the campus this morning, and having been widely impressed with what I saw, I think I can possibly learn more from you, but nonetheless, I would like to speak about IDENTITY.

Identity is unique to each and every one of us. We all have different qualities - or building blocks - which constitute our identities. And these building blocks are found all around us. What we read, the

films we watch, the people we meet, the websites we surf, the sport we play, our classes, our jobs, our heroes and heroines, -our family and friends - all these things contribute to our identities - to who, and what we are. And that is why when a hero like Hansie Cronje falls from his pedestal- we all feel cheated - OUR identities are affected. When we hear that a character dies in the latest Harry Potter novel, our own world may crumble - having identified with that character.

The list of building blocks will continue to grow in our changing world, a global village in which there is no room for selfishness and conflict. Ten years later this is even more true - global barriers continue to fall and we must be players on a world stage.

Roget's Thesaurus substitutes "authenticity" for "identity" - which is very apt I believe. If we honestly and responsibly build our identities, we'll be authentic people. However, to enable us to celebrate that, we need to actively seek out building blocks. We should not be lazy, passively, and unconsciously absorbing what happens around us. We should actively and consciously, seek out and identify opportunities and building blocks we can use to enhance our identities.

Effective schooling and supportive parenting provide us [with] a responsible foundation, enabling an investigation of all things. If we are comfortable with whom we are, then there is no fear in looking at challenging things, things that are different to what we are used to. And I firmly encourage this - use the strong foundation this school gives you, realise that your unique personality is "OK" - and enhance your identity with all that is around you. With the acceptance and security that you're OK, comes the ability to interact with others, realising that they too are OK, and not threatening.

When I was in the College, Post Matric had just been started, and one of the boys had to pose for a Star newspaper photographer - perched on the edge of a bench - looking askew at ... "a girl". So, it is tremendous to hear the Collegiate Head actively and unashamedly talk about gender equality and the vital global role of women. It means that instead of looking askew at each other, both sexes can interact and share building blocks. Both sexes can expand their identities by being mutually challenging.

A strong emphasis is placed on academics and sport at this school - and pupils are expected to participate. But I don't believe it is merely for the sake of it. We don't have Ms Kamps hammering mathematical equations into us because they will be life changing. In fact, most of us will never use these equations. But, before you get too excited, they do have value. They teach us logic, they teach us discipline, they teach us relationships between seemingly separate things.

In sport, we play because it teaches us the enjoyment of being outdoors, it teaches us to use our bodies - one of the greatest tools we have - it teaches us teamwork, it teaches us responsibility. We learn that sometimes it is good to have a captain; that sometimes teamwork is necessary, that sometimes we need to go it alone. But most importantly, as the 'Sunscreen' song goes - it teaches us

that sometimes we win, and sometimes we lose. But in the end, the game is merely against ourselves, and if we continue to play, we'll come out a winner.

The need for teachers to be of a high quality is vital - and I was very pleased by the Rector plugging the teaching profession - after all, as pupils we often spend more time with teachers than with our parents. And so it is not just good enough for Saints teachers to be strong -academically, it is essential that they have personalities that they continue to construct, it is essential that they have stimuli that they share with pupils.

Vincent van Gogh once said: "I feel enormously remorseful when I think of my work - so little in – accordance with what I would have liked to have done." Here is á man who was being hard on himself - he even cut off his own ear as you know! - but whose work remains an inspiration, joy - and investment - for many. The point being, don't be too hard on yourselves while building your identities. Have goals, never accept "impossibility", but remain flexible.

This school doesn't have sit down lessons on racism and sexism and other forms of prejudice. But we have the opportunities to interact with both sexes, with people from all race groups, people with different sexual orientations and in so doing we realise that we can learn from all these people and they from us. We can take qualities to build identities; we can give qualities to enrich others.

Benjamin Pogrund - a tremendous journalist for the now defunct Rand Daily Mail - showed through his non-sensational reporting of Apartheid's cruellest policies that if people of different races, ideologies and backgrounds can only know the facts of each other, the world would be a better place. When we leave this privileged place, we will, and should, come into contact with people from all walks of life. Unfortunately, some of those people can merely crawl, and the Saints Way, the "school making a difference" should enable us to interact - not patronisingly, not in a self-righteous highhanded moral way but in a sharing way with everyone who crosses our path - realising that even the seemingly "lowest" person has building blocks you can use, and has a need for your identity.

If the Rector asked me to speak today because I am a "typical" Saints Old pupil, this school would have failed, and failed miserably. If parents send their children here, and pupils leave here, wanting to be "typical" Saints pupil, - in fact - if there is a "typical" Saints pupil, we're in trouble. However, if we leave here as multi-faceted, complex individuals ready to savour the world and all her juices, if we leave here accepting our own worth, and that of others, then we're on the road of success. If we leave here with tools to interact with others and to build upon our foundation, then this school will have provided an unsurpassed education.

A sign of maturity is not turning 21 or matriculating - as I found out much to my disgust. It is, I believe, accepting who you are and allowing others to be happy with their identities. In short, it

means not being prejudiced. A friend told me that when Dame Kiri te Kanawa first visited South Africa - as a "person of colour" - she was asked about Apartheid. Her answer, beautiful in its simplicity "I don't see colour, but I do recognise rudeness". In our country we have many examples of people who were prepared to stand up for building their identities - Nelson Mandela naturally springs to mind. But one of my favourite anecdotes is of Helen Suzman, being accosted by a vicious Nat who could not understand why she insisted on visiting friends in a township, Suzman responded that he should do the same, but should go in disguise - as a human being ... Let's remain humane in our interaction, in our sharing of building blocks. Let's build on our religious foundation.

A danger for Saints would be that pupils are educated in an environment where they only come into contact with people who have similar backgrounds and experiences. That is why Penryn College, the Round Square Organisation, the African Teachers' Conference, why all these are vital. Ten years ago, international sport, outings to Botswana International Schools Debating were not possible. Don't pass these up. If you forget, disagree, ignore everything else I say today please remember the greatest gift you can give yourself is to remain open to input from everyone and everything. Make an effort to bridge gaps of geography and lifestyle to keep contact with friends and to meet new people. Always remember that you influence others. I have many stories of teachers, friends, their siblings, parents, and others telling me stuff, and all of you do as well. Not major lessons, but things that do, in fact, influence us. Even if you don't think you're influencing people, know that you do. When you finish your schooling, you'll have opportunities to study here and overseas, to travel around the world, to work in numerous countries, to fall in love with people from Africa, Europe, Asia, wherever - try and remain open to these opportunities. Don't decide now that you MUST be a lawyer or a teacher. Baz Lurhmann's great film adaptation of Romeo and Juliet has a cool track that says "Young minds run free." Keep your identities growing, keep your minds free.

In conclusion, I want to talk about a future for you and me in South Africa. Immigration is something that rears its head often - and having lived overseas for three years, people constantly asked me whether I would settle in South Africa. And it is something all of us should consider. Our country, like Africa as a whole, is ravaged by colonialism, Apartheid and some of the most horrendous things people can do to each other. And as a result, Africans - you and me - often have negative identities. We see ourselves as inferior to "First World" nations. Ignoring the negatives - Aids, poverty, lack of educational opportunities, gender inequality and much more - I am saying we should look at the whole picture. And we should remember that many of Africa's problems are a result of mass oppression - of continuous denial that people have unique identities - that we can learn and should share building blocks with each other.

I don't know if I'll stay here - and I don't think I, or you, need to know - need to have a fully mapped path. I do know, however, that every time one of us leaves permanently, the chances of improving Africa lessens drastically. If South Africans, you and me, actively construct our identities and forge a sense of patriotism, then we may be able to guarantee an exciting future for all. Primo Levi wrote of his experience in Auschwitz: "Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions." Let's use our building blocks to challenge the monsters, to make sure we are not mere functionaries. Will you find a good job here? If you build a strong identity there is no way you won't. Worldwide people are realising that we must qualify as generalists - not specialists in any one area. We must be flexible, adapt to changes and ensure we are able to use a multitude of skills in a variety of situations. With a strong identity, you can and will be all those things.

I finish by paraphrasing Salmon Rushdie. It is men and women, you and me, who have made the world, and we have made it in spite of the gods. The message of the myths is not the one the gods would have us learn - that we should behave ourselves and know our place - but its exact opposite. It is that we must be guided by our identities. Our worst identities can, it's true, be arrogant, venal, corrupt, or selfish; but in our best selves, we can and will be joyous, adventurous, cheeky, creative, inquisitive, demanding, competitive, loving and defiant.

Do not bow your heads. Do not know your place. Defy the gods. You will be astonished how many of them turn out to have feet of clay. Be guided, if possible, by your better identities. Good luck and thank you.

**Mr C. Nolte**