

# Principal's Remarks

On the Occasion of the  
**Cheltenham Girls' High**  
2015 School Annual Presentation Day  
Sydney Opera House, Concert Hall,  
Friday 11th December

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Thank you Kimberley and thank you as well to Ms Widmer, Ms Harriman and Ms. Grisdale for such a great introduction to my speech! I'd like to especially congratulate our soloist for the Les Mis medley, Sophie Hancock of Year 10. What a beautiful voice!

Welcome ladies and gentlemen: honoured guests, parents, colleagues past, and present, and all of our esteemed Cheltenham Old Girls present today. A special welcome to those families and staff members here today for whom this is their first - or indeed their last - experience of our fabulous and unique Presentation Day. Welcome too, to our many friends and family .....

And always, and most importantly: welcome to the students of Cheltenham Girls' High School for it is your day more than anyone else's.

In preparing for today's speech I often review the major events of the year and try to choose an issue which will have the most resonance with you, the students of the school.

And so I began by looking to the events of January this year, in particular the Charlie Hebdo terrorist event in Paris. Subsequent to that horror came the further horrors in Paris of the 13th November. Hmm, religious intolerance, the fear that makes us mistrust each other, our whole school singing focused on the resilience of the French revolutionaries... yes ... that was definitely a possibility.

Or perhaps the execution of two Australians in Bali in April this year, almost ten years after their arrest for drug smuggling would be more compelling? The sanctity of human life, the moral repugnance that the death penalty inspires, perhaps this would be a good theme for my speech?

But no, both of those themes seem too far removed from day to day life in a comprehensive girls' school.

Well ... what about the subject of Australian women in sport in 2015? The Australian women's cricket team, the Southern Stars, won the Ashes, the Australian women's soccer team, the Matildas, beat one of the world's strongest Soccer nations, Brazil, and who could forget the first woman in Australian history to ride a Melbourne Cup winner, Michelle Payne? And in the moment of winning called out against the sexism and discrimination she had faced just in order to ride to that win? She also was wearing the colours of the suffragette movement: purple, green and white.

Now surely here was a theme closer to the hearts and minds of our students here today?

But no, after all things considered, I have chosen today to speak to you on a subject I am convinced will be of the greatest interest and relevance to you all ..... boys.

Because, you see, I just can't get out of my head the words of a 14 year old school girl written for an online petition in April of this year which quickly garnered more than 103,000 supporters<sup>1</sup>.

This young girl started a chain reaction which will result in changes in secondary classrooms all over NSW from Term 1 next year. Her name is Rachel and she wrote the following in that online petition:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/nsw-government-educate-children-about-domestic-violence-and-how-to-seek-help>

*I am 14 years old and I have been a victim of domestic violence. I didn't know that what happened in my home was different to any other family home, as a child how could I have known any better?*

*... I wanted help, but didn't know how to get it. Maybe if I had known better, my family would have been safe and a lot happier than what we were.*

She goes on to describe her helplessness in the face of on-going violence and her personal battle with mental health issues. Movingly, she describes her family as '*silent sufferers of never-ending sadness*'.

But then, the truly heart wrenching statement:

*My mum ....killed herself four weeks ago, she was the only person I ever needed in my life, and I miss her so much.*

And she went on to say: *If domestic violence was addressed within the public schools educational criteria, I could have had help and maybe saved my mum. We need the NSW education system to teach students about domestic violence; nobody deserves to go through what I have been through.*

How was this possible? How was it that a 14 year old girl had not been taught in her school to recognise domestic violence and to know that not only is it wrong but that to suffer in silence as she and her family did was also wrong?

But, you know, she was right. We don't talk about it much at school; we don't talk about it much in the home. Domestic violence embarrasses us, makes us feel uncomfortable. Surely what happens in the family home is no one's business but the family's?

But when 78 women so far this year, and the year is not yet over, have been murdered by those who have said they loved them, then that is the public's business. It is a public problem with a personal solution.

According to the recently released report from the State Government, Women in NSW 2015<sup>2</sup>, the majority of violence against girls and women occurs in their homes, at the hands of men they know. Rates of domestic violence related assaults are twice as high for female victims as it is for males. In 2014, the most recent year for available statistics, 87.5% of female homicide victims were killed by someone with whom they were in a domestic relationship.

Women are 4.5 times more likely to be a victim of sexual assault than men, making up 81.6 % of victims in NSW in 2014. Females are also more likely than males to be victims of indecent assault, harassment and threatening behaviour.

Through the publicity and hard work of the Australian of the Year, Rosie Batty, we have seen a breakthrough in public consciousness and a growing public awareness that this problem is a problem for all of us and cannot just be addressed by campaigns and programs only for boys and men but must include women and girls just like you here today.

And it cannot be left to schools alone to educate and develop a healthier, safer society. The role and support and awareness of families in this endeavour is critical.

And to do this requires some re-thinking about the way we bring up our girls.

How often have you heard a girl in the playground or at home say 'sorry'? We hear it so often that it barely registers. Hit a ball too hard in tennis? Then say 'sorry'. Bump into someone? Apologise again.

Too often we train girls to be docile, compliant and obedient at all costs.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.women.nsw.gov.au/womens\\_data](https://www.women.nsw.gov.au/womens_data)

In my life I have never experienced domestic violence but once, on a public street, I was the victim of an assault. Bear with me as I recount what happened and how it made me feel.

It was just after I had completed my HSC and I had found a job working in a record store. I know you have no idea what kind of store that might be, you who download music or, perhaps occasionally buy a CD, but once upon a time people went and bought music on vinyl, big, round black things you needed a special 'record player' to hear.

One day I was hurrying to do some Christmas shopping. The shop I worked in was in the heart of the city and lunchtime crowds made the pavement heave with humanity. Suddenly the back of my shoe was kicked. Alarmed, I turned and, of course, I apologised. "Sorry", I said and resumed my journey.

The man who had kicked my shoe began to yell obscenities at me. Around me it seemed a bubble had suddenly been created. The people still moved hurriedly on, fixated on whatever goal was in their minds, but now their eyes were averted. I felt very alone.

'Sorry', I said, again and again. My face scarlet with fear and somehow shame. Again I turned and went to continue with my journey. Suddenly I felt my head yanked back. He had reached for my ponytail and pulled as hard as he could.

By now crying uncontrollably I sought refuge in the closest shop I could find. The man walked on.

Quickly I returned to the shop where I worked, the incident playing over and over in my mind. What had I done to provoke him? How could I have resolved his problem? I was convinced that somehow I had been responsible.

Think on the many ways we condition girls to have this kind of belief. That somehow a problem is not only ours to remedy but also our

fault in the first place. We constantly reward girls for 'good' behaviour, we reward girls for 'doing what they are told', we reward girls for not answering back, for not rocking the family boat. We encourage dependence not independence.

A couple of weeks ago I went to see the musical, 'Matilda'. To many of you it is a familiar and inspirational story: a little girl born into an unloving family who seeks a better, brighter world through the world of books. The principal of her school is a huge frightening bully who tortures and torments her students – so clearly this is a work of fantasy!

But Matilda is a girl with extraordinary powers and perception and most of all a great belief in herself, what we might call an indomitable spirit.

In the finale of the show she sings a particularly inspirational song. It is called 'Sometimes You Have to be a Little Bit Naughty'<sup>3</sup> and here are some particularly powerful words from that song:

*We're told we have to do as we're told but surely*

*Sometimes you have to be a little bit naughty.*

*Just because you find that life's not fair it*

*Doesn't mean that you just have to grin and bear it*

*If you always take it on the chin and wear it*

*Nothing will change.*

*Even if you're little, you can do a lot, you*

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<sup>3</sup> <http://au.matildathemusical.com/> Playwright Denis Kelly, Lyricist Tim Minchin

*Mustn't let a little thing like, 'little' stop you  
If you sit around and let them get on top, you  
Might as well be saying  
You think that it's ok*

*And that's not right!  
And if it's not right!  
You have to put it right!*

So girls, it is time to begin making things 'right'. So, let's start by talking about boyfriends.

And let's start with what should be obvious: if someone hits you, they don't like you. And guess what? They certainly don't love you. No excuses. No second chances.<sup>4</sup>

When you say to your girlfriends, 'Oh lucky me, my boyfriend is so possessive', that's a danger signal not a reason to rejoice. If he is controlling now: what friends you have, what clothes you wear, where you go and who you go with, then that's not right and it's not going to get any better.

When he asks for that 'special' photo, just so he can treasure it privately, then that's not right.

If you devote yourself to pleasing him in the hope of being a 'good girl', then that's not right.

We must stop raising boys and men to believe they are entitled to women's bodies and teach them to accept rejection. But we must also teach our girls to believe in themselves and to define themselves

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Stokes SMH <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/you-think-the-hsc-was-hard-try-being-an-adult-20151102-gkp2w7>

not by their boyfriends or their husbands but by their own self-worth and dignity.

We must challenge the darkness that lies in the hearts of some men and boys and we need to teach young women to take control of their own lives. It is never possible to truly control other people, but by developing our own strength of character, knowledge and insight we can build invincibility.

The Sydney Morning Herald has been conducting a media campaign all year called 'shine a light'<sup>5</sup>. This campaign has as its aim to shine a light into that darkness that is domestic violence. As well as bringing a much needed spotlight on the violent deaths of women in their homes, the campaign also aims to educate us all about what we can actually do to help overcome this cancer in our society.

Amongst some of the suggestions are: Becoming familiar with the signs of Family Violence and intimate partner violence, and referring victims on to appropriate services.

It's important to remember that the cycle of abuse is not straightforward, and simply demanding that someone leaves is not only unhelpful but also dangerous. Women are most at-risk of homicide in the period immediately post separation from a violent partner.

Another way we can act is to intervene when you're witness to suspect verbal behaviour, even if it's as 'harmless' as sexist jokes.

When someone is sexist publicly and people laugh about it, they are essentially condoning a behaviour that promotes violence against women and allows it to happen. This might seem a little excessive. How can a joke lead to violence?

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<sup>5</sup> Daily Life <http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/take-action>



Violence occurs on a continuum. On the one end of it, we have thoughtless micro-aggressions like sexist jokes, dismissive quips and small acts of power. On the other end, we have things like rape and murder. While the two seem entirely unrelated, they're actually connected because they both operate on the assumption that women are essentially inferior.

This isn't to say that every man who laughs at a sexist joke is consciously condoning violence or is at risk or perpetrating it; but what those things do succeed in doing is to help sustain the culture that allows for violence against women to continue.

So don't be afraid to intervene when someone's using language or 'humour' to disparage women. Chances are, you're not the only one who feels uncomfortable - and the more people speak, the more that behaviour will become intolerable.

We must also keep in mind that violence crosses all economic and cultural barriers - there is no typical victim so don't stereotype. A good education won't protect you, a good income won't protect you, a good house in a good suburb is no protection either.

Never make the mistake of thinking that domestic violence doesn't happen to people you know - or is perpetrated by them. Violence still occurs in wealthy suburbs; it just happens behind higher fences. Trust women when they confide in you, believe them, and offer them your unqualified support.

I want to end by taking you back to that online petition, started by that 14 year old girl. Her petition to have domestic violence explicitly addressed in the school curriculum did find more than 103,000 online supporters and resulted just two weeks ago in the launch of a new teaching resource for PDHPE teachers. So from next year there will be no more excuses in schools, no more 'silent sufferers of

never-ending sadness', domestic violence, its indicators, its causes and its solutions will be part of what we teach.

So who says a 14 year old girl can't make a stand, can't start a revolution, can't 'let a little thing like 'little' stop you'?

Because as Matilda says at the end of her song:

*Every day starts with the tick of a clock*

*All escapes start with the click of a lock.....*

*...nobody else is going to put it right for me!*

*Nobody but me is going to change my story!*

*Sometimes you have to be a little bit naughty!*

Thank you.