

**24th June 2023**

**Upper School Prize Day Speech**

Good morning and welcome to you all. It’s wonderful to see everyone here today.

Firstly, I would like to start by thanking the Year 6 Choir. Your voices, as always, uplifted not only me but the whole congregation. Over the course of the year, we have been so lucky to have you as our Choir and I know that Miss McManus has really enjoyed working with you. The way you have worked together to learn new songs is a true reflection of how you have grown together as a year group. You have continuously supported and celebrated each other and truly lived the St Mary’s Way.

I would like to reflect on the past year and our shared achievements. As I have said on many occasions, life at St Mary’s is always very busy and is filled with rich and vibrant possibilities for all of our girls. A St Mary’s girl is resilient, reflective, and above all, risk-taking. She is a girl who will make the most of all the opportunities she is given and this has been fully demonstrated this year.

Year 6, as a collective group, you have shown such kindness and generosity of spirit. Your compassion for others was demonstrated back in February, when on a very cold Saturday afternoon, you organised our Spring Fair. You convinced Mr Otter and Mr Hassoun to be drenched in the stocks, taught me what bubble tea was and gave us all a taste of edible water bottles, amongst many other stalls. You raised an incredible £4,686.14 for those affected by the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. This kindness for others was not just seen at this event. Earlier in the year, you packed and carried our food donations to West Hampstead Food Bank and took the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be charitable and Jesus’ commandment to love one another.

Music and Drama have always been an integral part of life at St Mary’s and I cannot wait to watch the Year 6 performance of Shrek the Musical later this term. I have enjoyed attending our Cake Concerts, and am always in awe at the talent of those who perform. Your hard work and dedication across the years have truly paid off and I have no doubt we have the next generation of brilliant musicians with us today. My huge thanks to Miss McManus for the support you give to all the girls in their musical endeavours.

This year has been an unprecedented success for St Mary’s with our sporting achievements. Our netball team qualified for the national finals for the first time and is ranked 10th in the country. And, our football and athletics teams have also qualified for the national finals. This week alone, our Year 6 athletics relay team came 7th in the country and our football squad ranked 9th in the country. Our hockey and rugby teams also enjoyed competing at a national level and we have had a number of individual successes across various sports.

In the Upper School, we have a national gymnastics champion, cross-country national qualifiers and high jump and relay champions. Locally, we have dominated in the Hampstead netball leagues, winning the Year 4 and 5 competitions and coming 2nd in the Year 6 one. We won football competitions in Year 5 and organised an inaugural cricket competition for local schools two weeks ago…which we also won! Finally, our Interhouse competitions continue to grow in stature each year giving every girl the chance to compete in a fun and competitive environment with her peers. We look forward to building on our amazing successes further next year. My huge thanks to Mr Halsall, Mr Richardson and Mrs Thompson for everything you do.

As ever, I have been amazed by the inspiring artwork that the children produce. This year Ms Fehmi has built on the links with STEAM subjects, working alongside Miss Warren to create an extremely forward-thinking and innovative Art curriculum. I would like to thank Ms Fehmi and Mrs Yeoh for all of their hard work and dedication across the year groups.

Over the year, the girls have experienced so many different learning environments through their trips, visits and whole school event days. These can be very powerful teaching aids that reinforce academic skills, as well as the fundamental qualities of teamwork, friendship and leadership. From making pizzas in Reception to exploring the French Alps in Year 6, and all the many events in-between, I would like to thank all the staff, parents and volunteers who have helped make these experiences so exciting and valuable for the children.

This year I witnessed 8 girls make their First Holy Communion and I am so pleased for them and their families. As ever, it was a very moving experience and my huge thanks to Mrs Sciacaluga and Father Chris who helped to prepare the girls. I was very honoured to be part of their special day.

I am often asked what makes St. Mary’s a unique school. I believe this is because we are a true community school where all members always support each other and come together to raise money and awareness for our school charity. I would especially like to thank the PTA for organising so many events, such as the Christmas Fair and Quiz Night, as well as producing our termly PTA newsletter. I am delighted we have raised much-needed funds for Greenhouse Sports.

Every week, I read the girls a story in assembly. At the beginning of the year, I chose a book that would support their journey over the year ahead. This year I chose a book called “Be You”, written by Peter Reynolds, advises young children and adults about how they should be. I would like to read some of that advice found in the book.

It starts with: *“You were born to be so many things. My wish for you, no matter where your journey leads, is for you to always be you. Be ready. Be curious. Be adventurous. Be connected. Be persistent. Be different. Be kind. Be understanding. Be your own thinker. Be ok being alone. Be patient. Be ok reaching out for help.”* It ends by saying, *“As you voyage into the world, remember, you will always be loved. You are ready, so go ahead. Be you, be very, very you”.*

I believe that this year, all the girls at St. Mary’s have been themselves and have been ready for all of the challenges they have taken on. In their learning, they have been curious. Out on the sports pitch and on their trips, they have been adventurous. The girls have been brave when tackling new experiences. They have been their own thinkers. They have been persistent and resilient, never stopping. They have been connected and kind to those around them with their friendships. The girls have made their local community a better place and transformed the lives of those around us. This has included supporting Age UK Camden by donating a plethora of gifts from our Giving Tree. They contributed to Jeans for Genes by raising £408, and raised over £700 by taking part in Brighten Up Day for CAFOD. And, as I have already said, over £4,500 for the Turkey-Syria Earthquake Appeal.

At St Mary’s, we celebrate the unique and different qualities that all the children possess. I believe that kindness and compassion are as important, if not more, than academic intelligence. This, in turn, is as important as sports, artistic and musical talents. Here at St Mary’s, we believe all children are created in God’s image and should therefore be celebrated, loved and cherished. During our half-termly Celebration Assemblies, we rejoice in the unique achievements of every child and we also reward children who have earned golden tickets for living the St Mary’s Way.

I believe that all achievements warrant as much pride as any other, and this is what makes a St. Mary’s girl so unique and special. We celebrate academic effort, but also celebrate being kind and compassionate to others. I sincerely wish that all girls will take these important life lessons with them and remember them long after they leave here. This ceremony also affords me time to reflect on the wonderful children and community we have here, one which I shall treasure as my time here comes to an end.

Now, I move on to the Year 6 girls. I was so delighted back in February when the girls all gained places at a fantastic selection of senior schools. These schools will help you continue to thrive, flourish and grow into remarkable young ladies.

However, before you start your next stage, I would like to take some time to reflect on your journey at St Mary’s. A journey that may have started when you were three years old, or just as recently as Year 6. During your time at St Mary’s, I have thoroughly enjoyed watching you learn so many skills both in and out of the classroom.

You have learnt to have a desire to read, a passion to solve mathematical problems and have displayed a natural curiosity for our world. More importantly, I am so proud of how kind you are and confident when sharing your thoughts and ideas with others. You have come from being learners to teachers, helping the younger children in the school. You have taken your roles as Monitors so professionally, encouraging those around you so that they too can make progress. These valuable skills that you have mastered will be taken forward into your senior schools, universities and your future careers.

You have contributed to the St Mary’s family in so many ways. On the sporting field, by winning medals in football, cross country, netball and dodgeball. By getting grades in music exams or performing on the stage. By creating magnificent pieces of artwork, coding and printing 3D images. And, by displaying great acts of kindness and taking a role in the Catholic life of the School.

Each and every one of you is unique and you possess so many wonderful gifts to share. You will be missed very much. But, it is time to start the next stage of your journey. Remember that every step forward makes you the person you are. Enjoy the journey and every so often, reflect on how far you’ve come.

All there is left for me to say is, go ahead, be yourself and be the best version of you. Each day is a new chance to be more you.

Congratulations Year 6!