



Dr Aitken's Tribute

Address by Kim Lyons on 17 April 2021

Thank you, Flo. What an honour and privilege it is to have been asked to pay tribute to Dr Aitken on this special occasion and to offer some reflections, as a former student, on her inspirational 18 years as Principal of The Women's College.

I was blessed to be one of Dr Aitken's girls for five years, from 2001 to 2005, including serving as a Resident Assistant then Senior Resident Assistant in my later years. It was through these leadership roles that I came to know Dr A, as she was fondly known, on a more personal level while also gaining greater insight into the many and varied hats she wore as Principal. After graduation, I had the pleasure of continuing to work with Dr Aitken as a member of The Chislehurst Society's Executive Committee. Over the years, through sharing many a College Birthday Party, Standing Committee Luncheon, Academic and Valedictory Dinner and even my own wedding, a very special connection formed, and Dr A became a treasured friend.

It would indeed be easy to speak for hours, if not days, about Dr A's many and significant contributions to the College, admirable personal qualities, and stories of day-to-day happenings during her time as Principal. Today, I have chosen to focus on providing an insight, from a student's perspective, into Dr Aitken as an outstanding leader, role model and mother-figure.

A LEADER

Dr Aitken was a well-respected, admired and much-loved Principal of The Women's College. She fostered academic excellence, a belief in each girl's leadership potential, the value of friendship and encouraged involvement in the full breadth of College activities.

From her very first interaction with a prospective student, Dr A showed genuine interest in their life and ambitions. To this day, I still recall answering a phone call from Dr A on my landline home telephone in the January after completing Year 12, to congratulate me on gaining acceptance to the College. On our arrival for Orientation Week, she met us with a warm smile and called each of us by name – this made us feel so incredibly welcome. It was such special 'personal' touches which paved the way for the creation of our 'home away from home'.

Dr Aitken's memory of names and faces of women who resided in College under her care was extraordinary, right up until her passing. It was as though her mind comprised a multitude of filing cabinets, each filled with snippets about 'her women', collected over the years – where they were from, what they had studied, what they



had gone on to do after leaving College and so much more. She maintained a keen interest in the day-to-day happenings of College up until the end of her life and would get a great thrill from receiving an email, phone call or letter from one of her girls.

Dr Aitken's door was always open to any resident, even if just for a little chat. She always had time for others. She possessed the admirable gift of knowing just what one needed at any particular point in time – be it a listening ear, a word of gentle encouragement or a touch of considered wisdom. For those who struggled, she showed compassion and provided comfort and for those who may have stepped over the line or even out of line, she offered guidance. In this way, she was approachable, a wonderful listener and true believer in the value of openness and honesty.

As Principal, she supported the development of an extraordinary annual calendar of activities and events designed to produce mature, successful, socially-aware young women - from sports competitions to debating, from formal dinners to the annual College ball, from Bandfest to charity fundraisers. To see her girls participating, supporting, succeeding, growing and having fun, filled her with immense pride. She was a constant and committed presence, rarely missing an opportunity to show her support and loyalty.

She was consistent in her enforcement of College rules, clear in her expectations of what constituted acceptable and indeed expected behaviour, and fair in her handling of 'challenging' behaviours or attempts to push the boundaries of new-found adult independence.

Operationally, College was a very different place then, to what it is today. In her role as Principal, Dr Aitken assumed responsibility for many of the portfolios now overseen by full-time staff members – one could say she wore many hats! I believe that it is also the things which may not have been seen that also showed how much Dr Aitken gave of herself to ensure the smooth running of the College. She dealt with break-ins, helped in diffusing the wars brought about by the stealing of College mascots, ordered the replacement, several times, of the letters W and O from the front of College sign to prevent us from being known as the Omens or Men's College and arose at all hours of the night and early morning when alarms of the emergency fire doors set off by mischievous guests echoed through the corridors. Flo would no doubt attest that the work of a College Principal is never done and apart from parenthood, it is one of the only other 24 hour a day jobs of which I am aware.

A ROLE MODEL

As young women, embarking on the next chapter of our lives, we could not have asked for a more exemplary role model than Dr A. She led by example in all that she did and in doing so, fostered the development of countless young female leaders across a multitude of disciplines.



Dr Aitken was the epitome of grace and elegance – not only in style, but more importantly, in manner. To this day, I have never met another woman like her – always impeccably dressed and groomed, so polite, courteous, well-mannered and versed in fine etiquette of days past.

Softly, yet confidently spoken, Dr A's distinct Scottish accent brought sincerity and warmth to her every word. Any woman who attended College during her time will have witnessed the eloquence of her voice and admirable command of the English language, not to mention the most beautiful delivery of the College grace. I stand by my belief that aside from their age, you can pick one of 'Dr Aitken's girls' by the way she pronounces these pre- and post-meal Latin phrases. She was also an accomplished raconteur and to hear her relay stories of her former life in Scotland, including her own university days, was always a special treat.

Under her leadership, our eyes were opened to a plethora of rich experiences and opportunities many of us would never have dreamt of or otherwise have been exposed to. Everything Dr A enjoyed, she in turn shared with us: her love and appreciation of music, language, the arts and even her beloved pets.

She had a great interest in the history of the College and sincere admiration for all those who had come before her. Annual College Calendars, Programs for Academic and Valedictory Dinners complete with profiles of those after which Prizes and Bursaries were named, Honour Boards, rare Library books and the College Archive Collection, were just some of the projects to which she was fastidiously committed to honour the College's history and many long-standing traditions. Even in recent years of visiting her, she would often refer back to her treasured collection of College Calendars if needing to check dates, names or events past. She brought the College's rich history and proud traditions to life in practical and meaningful ways, helping to instill in us all the importance of the past and its role in shaping the future.

A MOTHER-FIGURE

Dr Aitken was a woman of great faith and her Christian values were an intrinsic part of her every thought, word and deed. As a mother-figure, her way was one characterised by gentleness, warmth and kindness. She made College feel like 'home' with the safety, wellbeing and happiness of her girls being paramount. Her nurturing of the women in her care could not have been better and she took us all under her wing. In the words of my fellow 2001 fresher, Charlotte O'Shea, also a former Resident Assistant and Senior Resident Assistant, *"We were treated as adults, expected to be ladies and mostly, we rose to meet her expectations."*

Dr Aitken provided the calm in times of stress or concern, the confidence in times of doubt or worry, the encouragement to step-up to new challenges, the understanding in times of trouble and the love, each and every single day.



A beautiful example of this 'mother-figure' role she played was recently relayed to me by fellow Council Member, Olivia Williamson, who also enjoyed five years as a resident during Dr Aitken's era. In Olivia's words I quote ... *"A strong memory I have of my final year at College is after receiving a phone call with a prestigious job offer for when my degree was completed, I ran to Dr A to tell her the news immediately. Before parents, friends and anyone else - turning to Dr A was automatic and still was decades after leaving College. We celebrated the news together and I was sure at that time (and still am) that it was her guidance and belief in me that gave me confidence and allowed me to flourish. Dr A retained the ability to support and challenge you with the most wonderful combination of strength and gentleness. She was a beloved friend and mentor."*

FINAL WORDS

In closing, Dr Aitken was and always will be a much-loved member of The Women's College family. Her commitment to the role of Principal over almost two decades was remarkable and simply inspiring as was the magnitude of the impact she had on the lives of 'her girls'. Speak to any women who were fortunate to have been in College during Dr A's time and they will attest to the truly profound influence she had on their development as young women and aspiring future leaders.

Today, Dr Aitken's spirit continues to live on throughout the College - in the laughter of the corridors, the sun beaming through the Dining Hall's stain-glassed windows, the melodies of classical music drifting from a piano, the charm of a cup of tea enjoyed from fine-bone china and the beauty of fresh blooms in the garden.

Hers is a legacy characterised by graciousness, humility and kindness which she so willingly bestowed on us all. Her presence was constant, her loyalty unwavering and her love for College and all that it stands for, strong and steadfast.

How blessed are we to have known, admired and cherished Dr Aitken. May precious memories of the sparkle in her eyes, reflective of her kindness and warmth and the outstanding leader, role model and mother-figure she was, live on in our hearts forever.