

Monday, February 28, 2011. Dr. Helen Wright, GSA, After-Dinner Remarks.

MS. DARLING: Dear colleagues. Good evening. Don't worry. I don't sing. I won't even try. I certainly don't play the piano in the way we were treated to in the earlier presentation.

My name is Lisa Darling. I'm the president of United World College, and I am at the podium to begin your international moment in this conference. I had the opportunity, the privilege, the pleasure of being this organization's representative to the Girls' Schools Association meeting in the UK this fall. The meeting was in November at The Midlands Hotel in Manchester, in the UK, where Rolls met Royce, truly; where Eisenhower and Churchill made up after a falling-out, where the children of the founders of Marks & Spencer were married. I learned this history from the mat on my breakfast tray at the Midlands Hotel. It's something. If you would like to know more about the history of Midlands Hotel, you too could look at this later and see my historic coffee stain.

I had the pleasure of being with our colleagues and counterparts in that wonderful organization in the UK, and I could go on and on and on -- but I won't, because I know better -- about the ways in which they are like us and experience so many of the same issues that we do, and the ways that they bring their own particular wisdom and experience and humor to their work.

The big themes at their conference certainly are the same collegiality that we experience, the need for friends to be together, to share experiences, to laugh, to cry, all of those good things. There was also lots of information about girls in the UK, and then, it turned out, in the wider world being wildly stressed in this environment by any measure. There was talk about the environment of the UK still not being terribly pro professional women. A *Sunday Telegraph* article listing 100 powerful women in the UK was referenced. Seven or eight were business leaders, the rest were pop stars, models, and actors. This surprised me.

Opportunities for professional women were seen as better in the States. I did not expect that, and there was a lot of conversation about that.

There was a great deal of conversation about governmental regulation and the shifting sands with the new government in the UK. Lots of talk about university admissions and about economic pressures.

I will share with you a couple of my favorite quotes from the conference. Knowing I was reporting to you, I took down quite a few. The outgoing president of the GSA, the Girls School Association, Gillian Low, who was president last year in 2010, when I attended, said, "It is time for our schools to focus on students rather than structures, on common sense rather than compliance, on teaching rather than testing." Wise, intelligent woman.

There were other quotes. Some we say here are often repeated on the other side of the pond. For instance, "All boys should be educated in mixed-gender schools. No girls should be educated in mixed-gender schools." It was repeated there.

And perhaps the most fun and funny of the quotes to me was from a 32-year-old alumna of one of the schools who was brought in to speak to us in a beautiful gala evening. She was a bit of celebrity in the UK in that she had been a part of a UK version of a television program called "The Apprentice," so everyone knew her there. She's an entrepreneur. She was there to talk about her experience as an entrepreneur coming out of the experience of one of these truly excellent girls' schools in the UK, and she went on and on singing the praises of her headmistress. She described the model she had been to her, how much she meant to her, how much she thinks about her and her life on an ongoing basis, and she concluded by saying, "But what I love about her most is, she made me a Rottweiler."

I don't know how her headmistress felt about that, but this young woman thought that being made a Rottweiler by her headmistress was the greatest praise.

My favorite quote of them all came from a woman named Jude Kelly, who's the artistic director of the Southbank Centre, who said her wish for our girls is that their career matter to them but that they also leave the world a better place. She went on to say, "We need to teach them that they can be more than equal. They can, in fact, lead, but without making others feel diminished."

It was a great privilege and a great pleasure to represent this organization and to learn with and from colleagues at the Girls' Schools Association, and yes, it is true, they dress better than we do. We're told that every year.

It's now my privilege to introduce the new president of the Girls' School Association. I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Helen Wright while I was in the UK in Manchester. I did not meet her husband, Brian, who has been with her through this conference; I know many of you have met Brian along the way. He's in the Knowledge Transfer Group at Oxford University. He also, with Helen, is the parent of three that they bravely brought along and visited Washington, D.C., and then brought on to Charleston for our conference.

Dr. Helen Wright is the headmistress of one of the UK's leading independent girls' schools, St. Mary's in Wiltshire, and she is the incoming president, the 2011 president, of the Girls' School Association. Dr. Wright -- and this says this on her bio, submitted by her office -- "Dr. Wright, 40." I did not do "Lisa Darling, parentheses."

Dr. Helen Wright is an Oxford modern and medieval language graduate and is a well-known figure in the education world in the UK, and that was clearly evident when I was with her and her peers in November. She is also *Tattler Magazine's* current best head of a public school. Can you imagine that there is such? The 2010 *Tattler Schools Guide* says of her, "You won't find a more impressive role model for your teenage daughter than Dr. Helen Wright. She regularly writes and advises on education and parenting issues in the media and beyond, and is an advisor for the GSA's website aimed at parents." They have a section of their website as a resource for parents called Mydaughter.co.uk, and she is a contributor to the GSA's new book, *Your Daughter: A Guide to Raising Girls*.

Dr. Wright was appointed to her first headship at just age 30. She joined St. Mary's, Calne, as head in 2003. She's been an active participant in our conference. I know many of you have had the opportunity to meet her and to chat with her. We're now going to hear from her for a few minutes. Please welcome Dr. Helen Wright.

DR. WRIGHT: Well, good evening. I'm not sure I can live up to that bio. I shall try.

It's a tremendous honor to be invited to speak to you this evening. I thank you both for your invitation and for your wonderfully warm welcome. When the opportunity first arose to come to your conference, I leapt at the chance. And when I met Bruce Galbraith in London last summer over a very congenial lunch, I just knew that we would share much common ground. To be able to meet with colleagues from across the pond and to share thoughts and experiences about our life's work in the education of girls has been an immense privilege over these past two days, and I would like to say that I have been having a fantastic time, so thank you.

I came here to learn and I most certainly have done this. And above all, I have learned from people's stories and their experiences. I'm a huge believer in how much we can learn from the narrative of people's lives, and as leaders we have a particular responsibility in this respect.

Sometimes I think that the girls in our schools learn more about what is important in life from who we are and what we do rather than just what we teach them in the classroom. Our stories are important to them. We are mentors, guides, role models for them, and we take that on when we accept the role of principal or school leader. But if they just want to learn, I want to reciprocate and share, so I thought that this evening I would share my story with you with a very quick tour around the issues that affect the girls in my school and girls in the UK education system in general.

As I start with my school, St. Mary's school in Calne, the mystical county of Wiltshire in southwest England, about an hour on the train to the west of London. It's an all girls' independent boarding school founded with the Church of England Foundation in 1873, with around 325 girls aged from 11 to 18. And although I shall say this with typical British embarrassment, we know we are one of the top schools in the country. The girls do extremely well academically. Around 15 to 20 percent of them go on to Oxford or Cambridge each year, and they just become amazing young women. They're sensitive but ambitious, forward-thinking yet appreciative of traditional values. I'm really proud of what we do, as I know already you are of your schools, and with reason.

Now, education is a hotly contested issue in the UK. It would surprise you, of course, to know that everyone thinks that they're experts in education because they have all at some point in their lives attended school. And we have a particular tension between state schools and independent schools. It's generally and widely recognized, though not by all, that independent, fee-paying schools actually offer the best education to young people, but they find themselves hampered by legislation, and there's a particular type of popular opinion commonly expressed by the media that seeks to undermine them. Independent schools in the UK educate only around 7 to 10 percent of the young population, but proof of their effectiveness can be seen in that over 50 percent of the members of our new government in the current UK cabinet were educated privately, including our prime minister. Yet parents who send their children to independent schools receive no tax relief, are often made to feel guilty for their choices, and are faced with a persistent rhetoric about exclusion and how they're contributing to divisions of social class, which isn't true, by the way. Around a third of pupils in independent schools receive some form of financial support, and it's absolutely right that they do. Moreover, parents just want the best education for their children. If they work hard, then surely they have the right to spend their money on this.

There's also a tension on the educational scene between coeducation and single-gender education, with each fighting its corner. We seem, in the UK, to be inextricably bound up with our past, unable to break free, so that when people talk about all girls' education, it will often conjure up well-worn but still widely accepted images of timid girls who experience a narrow education and don't even learn how to say "Hello" to a boy, rather than, of course, understanding the amazing value of girls learning in a strong and supportive environment. I do say often that the detractors of this education should meet some of my girls.

There are changes in the air in education in the UK, a new coalition government elected last May. But then, I think I have learned that change is always in the air as far as education is concerned, and I suspect that some of you might understand that problem. There's always some new initiative around the corner, some new assessment format, some new directive.

Currently, the trend in the UK is towards a greater, more traditional form of content-based education and assessment. Now, I sit rather on the fence in this respect as it would, of course, suit my academic and ambitious girls, but it won't suit everyone. And I have this little suspicion that it's a rather hasty reaction to the fact that the UK has been slipping down the international schools' need table for the past few years. Something has to be done, but is this it? It feels sometimes as though there's this underlying sense in the UK that we're trying to return the school system to some idealized version of education from the 1950s, the golden age of Britain, apparently, when the then prime minister, Harold Macmillan, told everyone that we had never had it so good.

I wasn't there in the 1950s when the empire was still in full flow and Britain still ruled the waves. You do know that we haven't got over that yet. But it strikes me that with, for example, the restrictions on women's employment at that time, I would actually rather prefer to be in the 21st century for all its imperfections. And going backwards is never an option in any case. Of course, we should be looking very carefully at our educational system, and of course, we should be looking to improve it. But in order to do this, we need to look at the excellent practice that's going on in our older schools, independent of government control, and working out what we really do need to change so that our children are the very best prepared they can be for society and the world that awaits them.

Now, I'm not afraid of change. I was brought up as the daughter of a Scottish clergyman and we moved around a lot when I was a child. So I learned a lot about how to adapt quickly. My background also gave me a strong sense of duty, of doing what's right, and making a difference in the world, and this is really what took me into teaching.

After attending Oxford, I trained to be a teacher. I ended up in an independent boarding school, first teaching all boys, then co-ed, then I found myself developing a real passion for the education of young women, whom I felt didn't always get a good deal in education, so I moved into all-girls' schools.

I always pushed myself. I blame my Scottish work ethic for that. So by the time I moved into girls' schools, I was deputy head and very quickly the head. Now, as many of you will know, your first headship or position as principal is mostly spent learning how to be a head or a principal and trying desperately to put your mistakes right before too many people find out about them. But as you go on, you learn how to do this and you have more freedom to contribute to wider issues that really matter in education. And by the time I moved to my current school, I was able to become much more involved in our Girls' Schools Association, and I'm now tremendously proud to be the president for 2011.

But I also became a parent. This is where my life took on a completely new dimension, all for the better. Now, as you know, all three of my children are here with me, as is my amazingly tolerant husband, who juggles his work around mine so we can both bring up our family. The new dimension of our life came about because there is no more hotly contested ground in the UK than the debate about whether, as a woman, you can work and be a mother. And I discovered this very firsthand last year.

I take you back first, though, to our first child, Harry. He's seven, born in 2003, a month and a half after I took up my current post. I have been very lucky with my employers, as the governing board of my school. They have always made it clear that they thought there was a great role model for the girls to see me with children. They even wrote this into my letter of employment, setting down that they were perfectly happy for me to work as flexibly as I needed to manage it all, especially in the early stages. And so I have been able to create working patterns that mean I could run a successful school and raise our family, and I have taken practically no time off as a result. We live in a house onsite. That makes it a lot easier, and the motivation is there to keep doing what you're doing.

When Caitlin was born in October 2006, very conveniently on the Friday at the end of our half-term break, I brought her in to school on Monday morning with me. So that was great.

Now, Jessica was born in the early morning, the 9th of December 2009. And everything was wonderful, and I brought her in to school that very same day. Living in a community forges a special bond with the girls in your care. They had seen me grow until I was enormous. I was huge. And we were all waiting for the baby to arrive. She was late. I was determined that I wanted to read the lesson at our annual carol service after she was due. We had all sorts of plans as a school in place to cover all eventualities. You never know. It could have been a very memorable nativity.

I was in school the day before she was born, watching a drama rehearsal, and it was the most natural thing in the world for me to bring her in to school as soon as I could, to share her. The pride you have as a new mother.

We educate girls. They're future mothers of society. And we do them a disservice, I think, if we don't engage with them in talking about families, births, work, life. I have a strong constitution, I've had very healthy pregnancies, was very positive about the experience. It was all perfectly normal.

So I lived this, and I lived it to the full. My babies have always stayed with me when they were little, snuggled up in warm slings while I talked to people, led senior faculty meetings, juggling from side to side and generally

just led the school. I had no shortage of willing helpers, of course, and I felt very strongly that this was 21st century interweaving family and work in a flexible, balanced, and harmonious life.

When the story got out, it went national, viral, and global. "Headmistress takes baby in to school seven hours after giving birth." Shock, horror. There were outpourings of criticism, but also of approval. I found myself talking on national radio, on national breakfast television. There were articles about me and the baby in national newspapers. My girls at school were indignant at the criticism, and they started posting comments online to say how inspirational I was, which was really nice of them, and in time, it all simmered down.

We were able to look at the real issue, the real need for change that underpinned the furor, and the real issues that I think we should be focusing on in our schools. Essentially, of course, we came to understand that this was all about choice for women in our society, or rather lack of choice. The anger that some women expressed was actually really about the choices that they themselves did not have to manage their lives for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Despite the massive changes that our society has experienced in the last 100 years, there are still many hurdles for women to overcome. There's a persistent gender pay gap in the UK, with women earning on average 19.8 percent less than men. Only 22 percent of our Members of Parliament are women. Only 12.5 percent of board positions in 5100 companies in the UK are held by women, and yet women in our developed society are fortunate compared to women in less-developed countries. In the world, 37 million girls are not even in education, which is why in this year, as president of the Girls' Schools Association, I'm promoting the charity campaign, Because I Am A Girl, run by Plan UK, which aims to change this.

Schools are about people and about people in society. We know our society is unequal and unjust, and our schools should be and are places where we teach the values of kindness, tolerance, and deep, deep care that we need if we're going to improve the world. The girls we're educating are all unique individuals, individuals with a history, a character of their own, and a distinctive future story that has yet to be written. It's up to us, I believe, to understand and guide these girls so that they can make the differences in the world that are still needed. And this, I venture to suggest, is why we all do what we do and are so deeply concerned about the education of young women. We need to give them the insight and the courage to face the hurdles they'll encounter and must overcome if we're to become a fairer, more balanced, and happier world. We need them to see, like my girls at St. Mary's, Calne, that it's perfectly right and normal for women to be able to make choices that work for them, for who they are, and for all around them.

Our girls matter. Our roles as educators of girls matter. Educate a girl and you educate a village. Being with you here, listening to your stories, understanding our shared vision which spans the continents and the ocean, has given me an even greater energy which I'll take back with me to the UK. I thank you again for all that you have given me. I would love to welcome you to my school one day. Thank you for everything.

MR. GALBRAITH: Thank you, Dr. Wright. Thank you, Lisa Darling. Thank you, Jill Muti, for a spectacular program and to our performers. We have breakfast at 8:00. Caryn Pass, the lawyer, is not going to be here, so you cannot have breakfast with a lawyer. Have breakfast with your friends. We start at 9:00 and we have two speakers and then cap it off by our distinguished Edes Gilbert with a luncheon. The two speakers tomorrow have a reputation of being absolutely outstanding. I hope to see you in the morning. Have a lovely evening. Thank you. Good night.