

St Mary's University Arts and Humanities Faculty graduation

Keynote speech - Sean Fitzpatrick, VGC Group executive chairman

The value of family and friends

Having grown up in rural Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s, I had a very close knit family. My parents instilled in my siblings and me the importance of supporting each other.

Influenced by the arrival of family from America and England each summer, I was filled with stories of their 'new lives' and their success in business. In their experience, America and Britain truly were Lands of Opportunity.

So after completing my secondary education I decided to explore pastures new. I arrived in England without a clear idea of what to do next. After working at various jobs I took a position as an unqualified teacher in a primary school. My enjoyment of teaching led me to enrol on a teacher training course at St Mary's, where I spent three very happy years as a student.

With a passion for music, I became an active member of the social committee and booked some of those little-known bands popular on the student circuit at the time - Status Quo and Deep Purple! I performed in a band with some Irish friends and we played in the pubs and clubs around London.

After St Mary's, I enthusiastically embarked on a teaching career at a high school in West London, specialising in Maths and Physics. Making great friends, I also played in a student band and made my first foray into commerce, providing a book-keeping service for friends who ran small businesses.

Through my 20s and early 30s, my life was extremely busy. And then, for the second time, I decided to break away from the safe and conventional path.

I made a decision - that my mother thought was crazy - to leave the security of the teaching profession, with its guaranteed income, pension and paid holidays, to establish a construction business with a friend.

We were part of a generation of men and women with a shared vision to build businesses, oblivious of the economic, social and technological challenges that lay ahead. We were determined to work hard and make a success of the business. The interwoven work and social life, crafted as a student at St Mary's then as a teacher and amateur musician, formed the bedrock for my future business.

My friends have been with me every step of the way, from college, in teaching and in business.

Learning how to learn

Armed with my teaching certificate from St Mary's, you might have thought my work was done, that I held the master key to the door to a successful and happy life. I soon realised that this was just the start.

The realisation that I had to become a master of reinvention, to change and to innovate to stay ahead, meant I had to see every challenge as an opportunity. Most importantly, I needed to demonstrate commitment, resilience and a capacity for hard work to achieve success.

In business, we must continue to develop knowledge, skills and experience and retrain in real time, to stay relevant and ensure survival. We must never underestimate the value and importance of education. Beyond that, we must keep an open mind and embrace all opportunities.

In the words of the Irish poet WB Yeats,

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but rather the lighting of a fire."

Keep the fire burning and keep learning.

Life's lessons

What would I have said to my 20-year-old self? What advice might be of help to others in their lives?

Little did I know what life had in store for me when I attended my own graduation. I never imagined I would move away from teaching, or spend a lifetime building a business in construction.

Starting from a kitchen table in the 1970s, with a headcount of two, I never imagined the business I now run would employ 1,400 people nationally, or that they and their families would depend on this business for their livelihood; that we would be involved in the delivery of most of the UK's main infrastructure projects including Crossrail and Thames Tideway; or that we would work with consortia in preparation for huge infrastructure projects such as High Speed 2.

None of this could have been achieved without the support of a team of the best and brightest industry specialists. I never hoped to have the answers to every question, or have all the knowledge required to run a business. The key has always been to know where and with whom the important answers lie.

It has always been my view that the greatest asset of our business is our people, and that it is essential to create an open, consultative and inclusive culture. A place where people are treated with respect, their diversity is valued and where opportunities are provided to all employees.

We encourage and support our people to achieve specialist qualifications in their disciplines. This has allowed us to establish a reputation as a professional operator and gain competitive advantage.

Life is unpredictable: full of highs and lows, challenges and opportunities. Knowing that you can emerge from setbacks wiser and stronger, develops an ability to survive.

You will never truly know yourself or the strength of your relationships until both have been tested by adversity.

To conclude, a few words from another famous Irish writer, Oscar Wilde:

"Life is not about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself."

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