



[Oakgrove IC]

L'Derry



The UK City of Culture's only post-primary Integrated College marks 21 years since its official opening by three students on December 10th, 1992. The school, then regarded as unnecessary by many in the local community, now plays its part at the heart of the Foyle Learning Community as one of the key educational providers in the city. Students and staff were told that the school has grown through changing times to a point where it plays a part in education, community events and partnerships across the world.

Speaking ahead of the anniversary, Principal Jill Markham said: *"These 21 years have seen dramatic changes in the local community, and massive progress for the city and Northern Ireland as a whole. Oakgrove has been proud to be at the centre of those changes, bringing young people together to help shape a society in which difference is celebrated, not tolerated, and where people recognize the intrinsic value of individuals and the contribution they make."*

Oakgrove sees this milestone as an opportunity to celebrate. An integrated college in the city was in many ways an idea ahead of its time, bringing people together which is now copied in many other "shared education" projects across the city and beyond. It built on the tireless work of many people from all backgrounds in the city to reach out to others and to challenge hatred and prejudice.

Since 1992, 3508 young people have passed through the doors of Oakgrove and the school believes that these are helping to change attitudes in the wider community. Jill Markham explains: *"Oakgrove was founded by people who got together to meet a need for a school which would let people learn together. Largely, this was not happening in Northern Ireland, with young people coming from mainly separate communities into separate schools, to be taught by teachers from similarly separate backgrounds. The integrated school sought to do that differently."*

Oakgrove points to scores of pupils' testimony about how their attitudes have changed since encountering people from different backgrounds at the school, and suggests that these are now challenging others' attitudes in the community, locally, nationally and internationally. Jill Markham continued: *"The fact that there are now so many young people who have been influenced by our school's values means that there are many in the world who will think a little differently because we have been here."*

[<http://www.oakgrovecollege.com/>]

Pointing to the success of the school's founders, Jill Markham explained: *"History is made by those who take their future into their own hands, in great and small places, and in large and little ways. Our school was established because people took risks and persuaded others that it could happen. Throughout our years, our young people have been inspired by the examples of great world lives and by the more important example closer to home of parents, teachers, teaching assistants, office staff, caretakers, supervisors, kitchen staff who are a model for them of a way of being brave and doing what is different."*

In Wednesday's special assembly to prepare for the birthday celebrations, students heard of "years of darkness" as well as "years of hope" and were reminded of the city's darker past and why there was a need for schools like Oakgrove. They were also asked to reflect on sorrows within the school community: *"Oakgrove as a school community has come through tragedy, and we hold in our hearts the people in our school community who did not live to see us reach this day. Although 21 years is quite a short time, we have seen more than we would have wished of young lives cut short while here, or soon after they left us."*

The anniversary Assembly also focused on the date that the school officially opened, the anniversary of the day in 1948 when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was agreed, a document which protects the rights of all. A poster of Eleanor Roosevelt has pride of place in Oakgrove, a reminder of her connection to the Human Rights Declaration and her words "No-one can make you feel inferior without your consent" which inspired the school's principle of "self-esteem". Students were reminded of what this means *"Oakgrove happened because people believed in the vision they had and did not let others put them down. No-one is better than us and we are not better than anyone else: we are equal people in an equal world."*

Oakgrove looks back over 21 vibrant years as it celebrates its milestone birthday but staff and students are very much looking to the future. The school's Assembly was told that the school must now keep up its work to ensure that the values it set out are embedded, and that the young people continue to influence the community and the ways people think about difference so that respect and welcome of difference becomes the norm. Jill Markham concluded: *"We have much to celebrate but this school is still young, and our work must continue. The challenge remains for us to keep going until words like 'separation' are gone, and until no-one sees 'integration' as a threat. In fact, until people recognize that life is richer with a mixture of differences, we have much more persuading to do. Oakgrove has shown how much can be achieved when people work together, and also how much that can be fun and so we celebrate this birthday and we celebrate Oakgrove, past, present and future!"*



Four teams of students from Oakgrove Integrated College competed in the Big Bang @ SciFest North West competition held in St. Mary's College last Friday. Achieving a total of six awards, the Oakgrove Students excelled in the event showcasing their talents in areas of Physical and Biological Science.