

Dr. Bob Thomas' Keynote Address
Summer Summit 2004

Thank you Dr. Cyrus Macfoy. To have you introduce me is an honor. Like many of you present, I have known Cyrus since he was a teenager. You've done us proud, academically and personally. You were president of our union in the U.K., so when you came to the States and I knew you would help revitalize our organization and you've done just that. Thank you again for the introduction, and thank you for the help you've given our organization!

Fellow Regentonians thank you for the honor and privilege of making me the keynote speaker.

Contemporaries and near-contemporaries of mine who took the Common Entrance Examinations had to indicate our first and second choices of secondary schools. I would assume that, presently, the young men and women entering secondary schools have to do the same. That's where Robert Frost comes in, when he says "two roads diverged in a wood, and I---, I took the one less traveled by and that has made all the difference." Choosing the Grammar School made all the difference to us. A school that taught us a sense of worth, to accept responsibility for self, family, community, societal well being and the capacity to be productive. What a school!

Someone once said that the C.M.S. (Church Missionary Society) taught us the 3 Cs: CLASSICS (The literature and language of ancient Greece and Rome), CHRISTIANITY and CRICKET

CLASSICS

Greek and Latin held sway with our parents, but we studied mostly Latin. And along the walls of our chapel an observant eye would see Latin and Greek aphorisms, when translated, means "A sound mind in sound body" or "To work well is to study well." We found education in the Classics, important in our future studies, particularly, those who pursued medicine and law. And if you want to stretch the meaning of Classicism you have to bring in Shakespeare, Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson. All and all, we are grateful to have studied the Classics.

We are also grateful for the dedicated, paternally and maternally influential faculty and staff we had. These are some of those that reflect my generation: Edwards, Odeyimbo, Pa Taylor, Jacobs, Dan Decker, Wellford, Pullin, Lemon Johnson, Frank Wood, Mama MacFoy, Pa Gegba, S.O. Green, and Rev. Davies, who taught both Latin, English and Bible Knowledge.

CHRISTIANITY

In Christianity, the school taught us about Christ and his teachings. We were taught that we are our brother's keeper, respect for others, and respect for our parents, elders and older ones. We were equipped with an unflinching sense of right and wrong. We inculcated a sense of sharing; for example, we paid missionary collections for mission work of the diocese. But more than these Christianity

also taught religious tolerance. We had schoolmates who were of the Islamic faith and despite the morning chapel and related events non-Christians were able to grow in a non-stifling, non-oppressive religious environment.

Maybe the writer should have said the C.M.S taught us CLASSICS, CHRISTIANITY and SPORTS, not necessarily cricket, because sports are a metaphor for life. For example, in cricket you learn that every day is a new day; you may have made a duck your last at bat, but you have another opportunity to score a century or vice versa. It taught us that, just as in many things in life, there are easy times and hard times; you've had your turn at bat, now you go and field, time to labor.

So does football, where our school song reminds us "We are marching home in glory and beaten them six nil..." Implicitly, this line is not only reminding us of our victorious heritage, but a warning that you are the victor today but may be the loser tomorrow so be gracious in victory and be courageous in defeat. Or, in inter-house athletic competition where Ambrose Ogunade reminded us that life is a marathon. And wasn't he right. Just take an introspective gaze and reflect on people you started the Grammar School with, some dropped out of life's race, some barely in the race, others are strongly in the race.

And in sports, particularly inter-house sports, we find, in my view, may be the bedrock of our commitment to our school. It fostered strong emotional bond between our schoolmates and us. Other than family bonding and war, there is no better crucible to further deep lasting bond among people than participating in a team sport. Team sport is a gentle surrogate for war. We won together, so we shared the fruits of victory; and conversely, we lost and shared the agony of defeat. And it was at the field at Fourah Bay Road that we honed our skills. **OH, HOW THAT FIELD BECAME OUR SECOND HOME.** We stayed long till the lights came on. Pa Gegba and Frank Wood, our Principal, used to drive us off the field. And going home, leaving that field was like saying good night to a friend; you longed to see it again, longed to go back to school the next day. Longing for school meant also longing to see your friends. Consequently, strong emotional bond with our schoolmates, led to strong emotional bond with the school.

At the Grammar School, beyond the 3Cs that the CMS may have taught us, maybe the greatest lesson of all is about our obligation to our school. Many times the question arises, why are you guys so committed to the Grammar School? I don't know what your answers are but for me I usually say, first, if not us, who will, the Germans, the French, Russians? It has to be us. Then my other answer is how can we afford not to be when we stand on the huge shoulders of these distinguished old boys like David Fraser and his brother, Pa Feyi Cole, Eldred and Doc Jones, Donald George, Pa Buxton Thomas, Dr. Arthur Wright, Dr. Hebron, Dr. Songo-Williams, and countless others, but above all Dr. Otis Pratt. These giants showed us what it means not only to be a Regentonian but what it means to be a TRUE RENGENTONIAN.

To be a true Regentonian means not allowing the Grammar School flame to diminish in its intensity or worse have it extinguished. Not just to sing the school song, attend

Reminiscences and Thanksgiving Services, impeccably attired in the school colors but to provide sustained moral and financial commitment to the school.

Another reason why we are so committed is that we a progressive, futuristic bunch. We have the mindset that asks the question, which is a quote attributed to the late Bobby Kennedy, but not his brainchild, that says, "Some men see things as they are and say why? We dream of things that never were and say why not?" That's us Regentonians "WE DREAM OF THINGS THAT NEVER WERE AND SAY WHY NOT"?

And that's why we are here. What we do this weekend will reverberate for generations to come, IF WE DO OUR JOB. Whether we privatize or not we must not only sustain but revitalize and then enhance the learning processes and so achieve a vastly improved learning environment for the young men now, and in the future at the Grammar School. We've been lucky not only to be Regentonians, but we are also lucky to be in the U.S. at this time in history. We've been blessed with an extremely reliable, academically and administratively sound, morally and ethically upright principal, with a supportive faculty and staff, an effective governing board and very committed group of old boys. With these ingredients, why can't we make the school the best in Africa? Our BIGGEST OBSTACLE IS OUR DOUBT. We must attenuate the grip of doubt.

Let me make this clear, we cannot do it alone, but we can surely help in the realization of these objectives. And so we dream things that never were and ask why not?

LIBRARY SPACE AND BOOKS:

Why not have a library that's the most spacious, the most equipped? Why can't we have the best high school library in West Africa? Why not?

With the school population now 1550, the only way we can increase library space is to focus on completing the Peyton Memorial Building, of which, although the soil was turned in 1995, nothing has been done to date. So let us help in getting a new library and in providing books, periodicals, magazines, etc.

SPORTS:

Why shouldn't we be, consistently, the best school in sports?

We presently have two Games Masters but there is a clear need in terms of sporting items. Also, the playing field needs to be re-laid and with more help transform the volleyball court into a multi-purpose court. But to expand the scope of inter-house sports we have to find ways of supplying sporting goods. Providing adequate sporting goods could translate into improved participation in inter-school sports.

We have to find ways to support the re-introduction of our yearly competition, in cricket, table tennis, volleyball and soccer with Christ the King College, Bo, and Magburaka schools. These competitions, base on my personal experience, lead to lasting friendships and the blurring of regional and tribal lines and so help to unify us as a nation.

STAFF

Why can't the Grammar School attract, hire and retain the best teachers the country and neighboring countries can provide?

Yes, potentially, we have the resources to attract and retain the best teachers, particularly, in English, French, Technical, Religious and Moral Education, and Mathematics, areas we know teachers are needed most.

With the private sector and particularly NGOs offering better salaries and conditions of service, it's hard to attract and retain teachers. Under the leadership of George Nicol, our very able president of the Sierra Leone Grammar School Alumni Association of North America, we have established a Revolving Fund to help cushion the impact of late payment of salaries by the Government. Though this is not a panacea, it should go a great way to achieve this goal. **Most importantly**, the construction of more staff quarters would be crucial if we want to attract and retain staff and faculty who are burdened with double shifts.

The present operation of double shifts has affected overall teaching, particularly, the covering of syllabuses and study time. The school buildings are open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. so individual supervision and contact time cannot be further stretched unless the double shift is jettisoned and this is unlikely. It seems that the present solution is to aggressively make working conditions better for the faculty and staff because the Government sees the double shift plan as the most expedient way to offer education to a large pool of students.

EXTRA-CURRICULA ACTIVITIES:

In dealing with extra-curricula activities, again, as our school song says, we are "not a learning store alone" and this intent is alive in the Social Education Program and Missionary Meetings. These are still being pursued with the hope of furthering outreach programs to the immediate community. In this instance, money may not be directly needed, providing some of our used apparels and linens could help on these community outreach programs.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE:

Talking about programs, relevant computer teaching and learning programs are needed and so are audio-visual materials in our budding computer lab.

But here is the good news. With our financial support leakage in the science laboratory has been solved. We have also assisted in ensuring the provision of **lab equipment**, but supplies of "consumables" are needed.

There is another need. In 1962 we moved to Murray Town. Since then the only addition to the original buildings has been a third level on the Administrative Block, but enrollment has increased from 700 to 1550 and the staff from 20 to 60; therefore, **construction of additional buildings and facilities is needed.**

In conclusion, we need resolute financial commitment to provide the following: resources for the library, sporting items, improved working conditions for faculty and staff, support for extra-curricula activities and in the construction of additional buildings and facilities.

Fellow Regentonians, in the next day and a half let's live up to the expectations that befit our true Regentonian heritage. Thank you!