

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by **AN DR. I. Ó MUIRCHEARTAIGH**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, President, National University of Ireland, Galway, on 21 April 2004, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa, on **MARY DAVIS**



A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile:

Anois teacht an Earraigh
Beidh an lá dul chun síneadh
Is tar éis na féil Bríde
Ardóigh mé mo sheol
Go Coillte Mach rachad
Ní stopfaidh mé choíche
Go seasfaidh mé síos
I lár Chondae Mhaigh Eo.

Tá mé cinnte gur cuimhin le furmhór agaibh an dán sin ó laethanta aoibhinn bhúr scoile.

Is mór an onóir domsa anseo inniu, an tEarrach buailte linn, agus an lá dul chun síneadh, bean uasal, Mary Davis, a rugadh agus a tógadh i lár Chondae Mhaigheo, i ngar do Coillte Mach, a chur ós bhur gcomhair le go n-ardóimis ár seol sa gcaoi is go mbronnfaí uirthi an gradam is airde atá ar fáil ón Ollscoil.

Mary Davis is a Co Mayo native from the area between Swinford and Kiltimagh. Like her fellow East Mayo native, the wandering poet Antoine Ó Reachtabhra (1779-1835) a well known verse from whose work I have just quoted, Mary Davis's life has been lived to quote from another of Ó Reachtabhra's poems "lán dóchais agus grádh" and she has gained the respect and affection of the entire country for the way in which she brought the joy of the Special Olympics movement to Ireland in 2003 – a journey which she led in a manner which inspired a nation.

Over many years Mary Davis has enriched the lives of people with intellectual disabilities through her work to encourage their participation in sport. More significantly perhaps, she has dramatically changed the perceptions and attitudes of society regarding the abilities and limitations of those people's lives and ultimately she changed the way society views the intellectually disabled.

Following her education at the St Louis convent in Kiltimagh, Mary Davis went on to combine her family interest in sport with her educational ambition. She qualified as a physical education teacher from Leeds University and went on to complete her further studies at the University of Alberta in Canada. She was appointed as a physical education co-ordinator with St Michael's House in Dublin, an organisation catering for people with learning disabilities.

While there she became involved as a volunteer with Special Olympics Ireland – an organisation which she would go on to embrace on many levels in her professional life. In 1985 she was Events Director for the European Special Olympics Games which were held in Dublin and which involved 2000 athletes from more than 15 countries. Following these Games she became Chairperson of Special Olympics Ireland, and in 1989 she became the first Chief Executive of that organisation. In that role, and assisted by committed volunteers and staff, the work of the Special Olympics in Ireland flourished. Throughout the country Special Olympics sports clubs were established to provide participants with

opportunities for self-development in meaningful social activities through a range of sports.

The Special Olympics believes "that through sports training and competition, people with intellectual disabilities benefit physically, mentally, socially and spiritually; families are strengthened; and the community at large, both through participation and observation, is united in understanding people with intellectual disabilities in an environment of equality, respect and acceptance." In Ireland, under Mary Davis' leadership this belief has been not only promulgated widely but, it has been seen to be true by all those thousands of participants who "shared in the feeling" of the Special Olympics 2003 World Games in Ireland.

While in her role of Chief Executive of Special Olympics Ireland, the seed of an idea had begun to germinate and in 1995 this redoubtable Mayo-woman began the process of bidding to host the 2003 Special Olympics World Games. After four years of dedicated effort to gain support across many fronts and to overcome numerous logistical objections, Ireland was awarded the 2003 World Games – the first and only time in the history of the Special Olympics movement that the world games had been held outside of the USA. Mary Davis was appointed CEO of the 2003 Special Olympics World Games and then the real work began . . .

2003 Special Olympics World Games in Ireland

In the period from 1999 to June 2003, what must surely be the most ambitious event of any kind undertaken to date in Ireland, was organised by the woman we are honouring today. Mary Davis is extremely modest in acknowledging her role and is quick to point to the efforts of Special Olympics' staff and volunteers. However it was her vision, leadership and determination that mobilised the effort into the spectacular success which was the 2003 World Games. Over 7000 athletes came from over 150 countries to compete in 21 different sports. Staging the Games cost in excess of €36 million in addition to the €20 million of products and services which were donated in kind. With the assistance of over 30,000 volunteers, the hospitality of 1,000 host families, and in every one of the 177 Special Olympics host towns all over the island of Ireland, from Abbeyfeale (Tajikistan) to Youghal (Oman), the incitement to "share the feeling" was heeded.

However, it is the lasting social impact of this event which will be Mary Davis's greatest legacy. In the hearts and minds of many the notion of disability has been replaced by 'ability'; a previously dormant spirit of volunteerism was awoken in Irish society; and the families and carers of many people with intellectual disabilities have been embraced by their communities. Special Olympics Ireland is now committed to extending its programmes to cater for an increased number of athletes and will extend the range and scope of their services to its members and friends. The feeling which so many shared in June 2003 will live on ...

A sheansailéir agus a cháirde, cuirim in bhúr láthair, agus molaim dom ollscoil go nárdóimis ár seol in onóir duine de mhór laochra na linne seo i saol na hÉireann, duine dár gcuid féin, bean uasal, Mary Davis.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hanc meam filiam quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.