



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR PAT GUIRY on 7 MARCH 2023 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa* on MARI CAHALANE.

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle.

Mari Cahalane is the Head of BT Young Scientist & Technology Exhibition (BTYSTE), one of the longest running science competitions in Europe for second level students. It was founded in 1965 and will celebrate its 60th anniversary in January next year. The BTYSTE, commonly also referred to as “*The Young Scientist*”, is a national institution, deeply embedded in schools and communities across the island of Ireland. Its aim is “to spark curiosity through the next generation” and BT Ireland has responsibility for the preparation, organisation and financial management of the Exhibition on an annual basis. As Head, Mari plays a critical role, and the success of the Exhibition since her involvement is due to her leadership, dedication, personality and organisational ability. She is a national treasure and it is a great pleasure to honour her today with a Doctorate in Science from the National University of Ireland.

Mari is the youngest of five born to two proud West Cork parents – Con, a Garda Sergeant (who sadly passed away when Mari was 13), and Nora, a primary school teacher. We are delighted that her mother Nora is here today as we honour Mari, along with her sisters, Annette and Sheila and brothers, Tomás and Denis. Also present are Shay Walsh, BT Ireland Managing Director, and of course Dr Tony Scott, co-founder with Fr Tom Burke of the Young Scientist all those years ago.

After she left school, Mari began studying computer science at Waterford Institute of Technology, but soon recognised that this programme was not for her and her career took a different path. She moved to the UK to work with BT as part of the secretariat

and in public affairs, moving her way into marketing, event management and PR. She returned to Ireland in the late 1990s to work with Ocean and ESAT and then joined BT in 2001. Since then she has held a variety of roles, including Head of Sponsorship and Events for BT in Ireland, Head of Events in Europe, PR & Events Manager, as well as working in the Public Affairs Department in BT's London Headquarters.

In 2001, Mari started volunteering with BTYSTE, and then became involved in its day-to-day running. Since 2009, she has headed up the event, which involves not only the participating students but also panels of judges, hundreds of volunteers from BT and media in the RDS, and thousands of members of the public who visit the exhibition, as many as 59,000 attendees in 2015.

All was going so well until Covid 19 hit the country in 2020 – a big decision had to be made for BTYSTE 2021 – cancel it or hold it virtually. This was discussed at length with the Board of the Young Scientist & Technology Ltd. and ultimately, with Mari's vision and BT Ireland's technology and know-how, the virtual option was chosen. Students submitted three minute videos and soft copies of their reports and were judged virtually over a phenomenally busy three-day period for Microsoft Teams, with judges and students all working from home. A portal was set up for visitors to view the project videos, a wide range of interviews and a selection of interactive exhibitions. It was such a success in 2021 and unfortunately it was necessary to run it virtually again in 2022. Some facts and figures to illustrate the impact and outreach of these two years - in 2021 there were over 7 million hits on the website and portal from 77 countries, whereas in 2022, there were over 7.5 million hits on the website and portal from 70 countries. How important it was to ensure that even when almost everything else was stopped or closed in Ireland for those two years, the BTYSTE was still open as a beacon of hope and light for students, teachers, and parents (myself included with both of my daughters entering over those two years).

Fast forwarding to this year's BTYSTE and some more extraordinary facts illustrating the complexity of the event that Mari heads - it had 550 projects, shortlisted from over 1600 entries, 83 judges, 27 exhibitors, 37,000 members of the public attending (16,000 of these were school visits), over 100 invited guests including the President, Taoiseach, Tánaiste, Cabinet members, TDs, Senators, Ambassadors and MEPs,

84,000 visitors to the online portal which had visitors from 106 counties with over 9 million hits on the website/portal. BT staff play a very important role in the BSYTE and over 160 volunteers were on site for the Exhibition, equating to approximately 5,200 hours on site (almost 700 working days).

Mari is quoted as saying: "It is all about the young people; they are core and central to what we do." What do the students think of her? What follows are some comments from previous BSYTE winners:

Aisling Judge (winner in 2006) *"Mari has quite simply been the heartbeat of the BT Young Scientist for the past two decades and in many ways is the personification of the energy and passion shown by the students each January. I have been lucky enough to witness how her leadership and determination has seen the exhibition grow, not only in size but also in impact and reach - ensuring participation from every county in Ireland. This was always very important to Mari, that the exhibition is accessible and inclusive for all."*

From Emer Hickey (2013 Winner) *"Having been involved in other science events and conferences, it's not unheard of to never hear from the organisers again afterwards. However, when you win the BSYTE you gain an incredible mentor in Mari. Mari guides all the past winners through an overwhelming year with wisdom, wit and the overarching idea that their welfare comes first. Her advice was always unmatched. For me, Mari became an extra mom throughout my teenage years and even now, 10 years since meeting, she remains a top supporter and mentor in my life."*

Shane Curran (2017 Winner) – *"Mari is a force of nature and has been one of the most influential figures in Irish science education. After winning the 2017 BSYTE, I saw at first hand her unparalleled dedication to both students and nation — the extent of which I've never encountered before."*

Peter Taylor (Winner in 2001) *"Every successful initiative requires both a visionary who casts vision and a leader who actualizes that vision. Mari Cahalane is the leader who has carried the vision and mission of the exhibition for the last 20 years. This she has done with excellence and integrity, making no small contribution to cementing the BSYTE in the cultural and educational fabric of Ireland."*

Mari is the also Irish National Organiser for European Union Contest for Young Scientists and helps the BTYSTE winner(s) prepare for that contest, travelling to the event and offering them support and advice. It is remarkable to note that Ireland has won first place 17 times in the contest's 33-year history. In 2018, she organised and hosted a hugely successful 30th edition of this event in Dublin.

Other important initiatives she has led include the Primary Science Fair and the BT Young Scientist Business Bootcamp. For over 20 years, the Primary Science Fair has been a core component of BTYSTE. It encourages 3rd to 6th class primary school students to develop their interest in STEM in a non-competitive environment. It also inspires them to become future participants in BTYSTE. The BT Young Scientist Business Bootcamp is held in UCD each year. There, 30 intermediate and senior students are part of 4 days of workshops and presentations where they experience the world of technology, commercialisation and entrepreneurship – a breeding ground for Ireland's next generation of entrepreneurs.

Mari took up playing Gaelic Football after turning 50 and played on the hallowed ground of Croke Park last year in one of the matches played at half-time. She is a proud Munster rugby fan although living in Leinster! Next week, the Cheltenham Festival will take over her life – form will be studied, bets will be placed, lunches will be had with friends - it is the one week of the year that Mari almost switches off from the BTYSTE.

As you have heard, those who know and have worked with Mari attest to her extraordinary contribution to science and education in Ireland, never moreso than in 2021 and 2022 when she led the virtual running of the BTYSTE. Therefore, it is right and fitting, and indeed a very happy occasion today, that the National University of Ireland recognises Mari Cahalane by conferring upon her the Degree of Doctor of Science.

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 Scientia, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.**