

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS
DELIVERED BY

AN DR. I. Ó MUIRCHEARTAIGH, President Emeritus, National University of Ireland, Galway on 5th June, 2009, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*, on SONIA O’SULLIVAN

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile, agus a chairde,

Onóir as cuimse domsa duine de mhórlaochra ár linne, Sonia O’Sullivan,, a chur in bhúr láthair le go mbronnfar urithi an gradam is airde atá ar fáil ón Ollscoil. Thar cionn na hOllscoile, déanaim comhghairdeachas ó chroí léi as ucht a bhfuil bainte amach aice, agus cuirim fáilte is fiche roimpi, roimh a fear chéile Nic, a páistí Ciara agus Sophie, agus a hathair John, a máthair Mary, agus a gaolta atá linn anseo inniu.

I am deeply grateful to you, President Murphy, for affording me the opportunity to introduce Sonia O’Sullivan here this afternoon as the University confers on her its greatest honour. Today it is my privilege to present to you, a mhuintir na hOllscoile, someone who is, beyond argument, the greatest Irish athlete of all time, and someone who not too long ago was voted Ireland’s greatest living sportsperson, Sonia O’Sullivan.

Ag tús mo chainte, dhéanas comhghairdeachas ó chroí le Sonia as ucht an gradam seo a bheith á bhronnadh uirthi inniu. I’m sure Sonia herself understood the sentiment of “comhghairdeachas”, but as her husband Nic is Australian, and probably has limited knowledge of the Irish language, I had better explain to him that “comhghairdeachas”, as most of you will know, is the Irish word for congratulations. I offer this explanation so that there will be no mis-understanding, as I will always remember an incident at a conferring ceremony in NUI Galway a few years ago, when I conferred a degree on an American student. As I always did on those occasions, having handed the young lady her parchment, I said “Comhghairdeachas”. I’m told that when she returned to her seat she remarked to the person beside her: “The guy told me I was gorgeous!”. And she was!!



Born in Cobh, just down the road from here, Sonia's athletic achievements are the stuff of legend. For those of us interested in athletics, certainly those from outside Cork, the first intimation of her potential was her victory, happily recorded on television, in the Irish Women's Cross Country Championships at the age of 18 in 1987. From there the path was continuously upward: her performances as a junior (including an Irish junior record of 2 minutes 5.72 secs for the 800m set in 1987 and which lasted until last Saturday – 22years, and which even then was only broken by a fraction of a second) earned her an athletic scholarship to Villanova University, following the well-trodden trail blazed by Irish athletes such as Ronnie Delaney, Noel Carroll, Marcus O'Sullivan, and Eamonn Coughlan. Her early years in the US were plagued by injury but nevertheless while earning her degree she still managed to become National Collegiate Athletic Association 3000 m Champion. During her time at Villanova she particularly benefitted from, and appreciated the support of outstanding Irish athletes Marcus O'Sullivan (no relation) and Frank O'Mara, who were in the US before her, and who, to quote herself "treated her like a kid sister".

I have to say that for any athlete to have been born and reared in Cork bestows upon him or her some major advantages. First and foremost, there is a magnificent tradition and culture of sporting excellence and competitive drive which permeates every sport in this region. Secondly, there are the incredibly high standards which are an accepted part of that culture. I had the privilege of running here many times in my youth. I remember winning a 400m race at a local sports. The World record for the event at that time was 44.2 secs. My result was announced as follows: The winner's time was 44.1 secs (at which announcement I felt smugly pleased, though not surprised) but the follow-up remark somewhat undermined any feelings of satisfaction, as the announcer continued "and that is the best time we've seen for the 400m in these parts for some time!". Given such a background it is little wonder that Sonia should progress to the top of the World stage.

Following graduation, Sonia decided to become a full-time athlete and the following years produced a catalogue of achievements unequalled in the history of Irish athletics. The highlights included Gold in 1500m and Silver in 3000m in the World student games at Sheffield in 1991, Silver in the 1500m at the World Championships in Stuttgart in 1993, Gold in the Europeans 3000m at Helsinki in 1994, Gold at the Worlds in Gothenburg in 1995, Silver at the World Indoors 3000m in Paris in 1997, double Gold at the World Cross Country Championships in Marrakesh Morocco in 1998 (a unique achievement, winning both the short and the long races the same weekend), double Golds at 3000m and 10000m at the Europeans in Budapest in 1998, Silver at 5000m at the Olympics in Sydney [probably the highlight – for serious

athletes, the Olympics is the pinnacle], and Silver in both 5000m and 10000m at the Europeans in Munich in 2002. No wonder that in 2004 she was voted Ireland's Greatest Living Sportsperson.

Sonia was (and in many cases still is) record holder at an astonishing range of distances: national records at 800m, 1000m, 1500m, 1 mile, 2000m, 3000m, 2 mile, 5000m, 10000m and half marathon; the 3000m record was also a European record while the 2000m and the 2 mile records were world records.

But the life of Sonia is so much more than a mere list of medals and records. I think many of us will remember her as much for the emotional rollercoaster of her defeats, and her subsequent recovery from them, as for the highs of her world championship and Olympic wins and medals, and her record-making runs. We have all celebrated with her as she won Gothenburg World championship Gold and the Sydney Olympic Silver, and suffered with her and for her during the unexpected defeat at Atlanta. And for all of us parents who have nursed and nurtured our children through the joy of victory and, more importantly and certainly more frequently, through the agony of defeat, which of us will ever forget the superb philosophical response of her father John to the media on the occasion of her disappointment at Atlanta: "sure nobody died tonight!!".

Sonia is a runner's runner. She runs. That is what she does. She wins, she loses, she wins again. Like many runners, she has an almost mystical appreciation of the joy of running. In preparing this citation, as I pondered Sonia and her career, I was reminded of some verses from the well-known poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling, which to my mind, capture a flavour of this outstanding daughter of Cork, and I quote:

"If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run -

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,"

Sonia has certainly filled the unforgiving minutes with much more than sixty seconds' worth of distance run. We hope that, deservedly, hers will be the Earth, and everything that's in it. And on this day, here in her home place, it is more than appropriate, indeed it is entirely fitting,

that this university today welcomes into its community one of its own, the girl from Cobh, Sonia O'Sullivan. Fáilte romhat abhaile Sonia, duine de mhór laochra spoirt na hÉireann. Molaimid thú as do ghaisce, traoslaimid leat as do ghradam, agus guímid gach rath ort fhéin agus ar do chuid ins na laethanta geala atá romhat.

**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 Dotoratus in Artibus, idque tibi
fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.**