

Mr John Nolan



It was with great sadness that we learnt of the death of our colleague Mr John Nolan, on Monday 20 June 2022.

It is a huge privilege to be able to make a small tribute to Herr Nolan's extraordinary contribution to teaching over a remarkable 51 years, the last 9 of which have been spent here at the High School of Dundee.

John, was born in Oakley, Fife and attended Holy Name Primary in Oakley and St Andrew's

High in Kirkcaldy. After graduating with an MA (Hons) in German and a Diploma in Education from the University of Edinburgh and Moray House respectively, he began his teaching career, becoming Principal Teacher of German at St Columba's RC High School, where he worked for an extraordinary 35 years.

Making the decision to embrace new challenges and carve his own path, John worked in a number of schools in Scotland and England for 14 years, joining the High School in 2013, to teach German part-time. From the start, it was clear for all to see that we had an enthusiastic Germanist in our midst. Many years of service had seen to it that John was a highly skilled and most knowledgeable teacher, whose engagement with his pupils fostered genuine respect and enthusiasm for the man and his subject. Passionate about German language and culture, he accompanied a group on the German exchange to Hessen in 2014, and brought German magically to life with his reworked German fairytales, delighting audiences in Trinity with his quirky and most enjoyable versions of Rotkäppchen and Rumpelstilzchen. These were just two of eight German Plays that John penned throughout his career and remain a lasting memory of joyful times, along with hard-wired German vocabulary! Through this and his passion for his subject, he has left an indelible imprint on countless pupils and on the whole community. Failing health has meant that John has not been physically present in school since September last year, but he continued to teach Higher German online, ever faithful to his pupils. It is a testament to his passion for teaching German and his commitment and dedication to his pupils that he remained in post through the pandemic, adapting to teaching remotely, and even ensuring extra classes for his pupils who were sitting certificate examinations this summer.

John's career has allowed him to bring his deep conviction of the importance of languages to generations of young people across the country. Alongside this, John ensured that he used his experience, insight and understanding of effective learning to challenge current thinking. He embarked on a research project over four years and was delighted to publish his paper 'Mehr Schein als Sein: More Appearance than Reality' in both TES Scotland and TES England respectively. As his colleagues we were honoured and privileged to be able to discuss his findings and conclusions with John earlier this year and his passion, conviction and energy were infectious.

John's motivation for this important research came from his many years as an SQA marker, examiner and sole setter for all German SQA Examinations. When, last year, John was interviewed by the press for a story marking his half century in teaching, John characteristically took the opportunity to share his conviction and the findings of his research, saying, "I formed the opinion that assessments over the last 20 years have been losing their value and I was so exercised by this that I decided to do my

own academic research. For three years I asked, 'Has German teaching testing failed Scottish pupils?' "I looked back at 50 years of assessments as part of that and the answer was an utterly resounding and compelling, yes. Simply put, the majority of pupils are leaving with high grades but do not have the competency for those grades."

In this respect, John's legacy is in safe hands. Alongside many High School Teachers, Mr Neil MacKinnon (Head of Modern Languages) is Principal Assessor for French at the SQA and we are fully invested in the current reform of Scottish Education, ensuring that all voices are heard, particularly those of our pupils. It was particularly important to me as Rector, that I was able to give my personal commitment to John, that we would continue to 'fight the good fight'!

Although John directed much of his energy and expertise towards this campaign, it was in his pupils, colleagues and family that he was most invested. Despite embarking on his profession when approaches to teaching and learning were quite different, John was vocal in his belief that the secret of effective teaching lay in the quality of the relationships, built over time, between teacher and learner. The fact that John remained in touch with so many of the young people whose lives he had transformed, is testament to the legendary status that he had acquired after a lifetime in teaching. For many, the interest and time that John took to understand the individual needs of each young person in his classes, was life changing. His pupils were enthused, built confidence in themselves and also had tremendous fun along the way. This culture allowed Herr Nolan to set very high standards and expectations against a backdrop of care and support where young people excelled, often surprising themselves along the way. The impact of this on countless generations of those who were lucky enough to be taught by John cannot be over-estimated and each and every one is his legacy.

Most recently, one of these young people, Anna Campbell, had the fortune to be the last pupil that John would teach. She has written the following tribute to Mr Nolan and it is a particular honour to be able to include it in full as part of this tribute: "Mr Nolan was by far the most enthusiastic and passionate teacher I have had. Despite only having him as my teacher for one year, I feel that he has had the biggest impact through my journey in school. His passion for German was truly inspiring and having him as my first teacher on a Monday morning made Mondays sound not as bad. He made sure I only spoke German to him. This of course, was frustrating at first, but as the weeks went by, we learnt more and more about each other, and it became easier. I learned about our mutual distaste for the SQA and his love for German folk tales! He even was determined to learn and understand the rules of my favourite sport.

"Mr Nolan was too ill to come into school, therefore almost all lessons were online. At the end of each one he would attempt to play a German song for us to listen to. As he would repeatedly mention – he was not a technological genius. So often I sat there as a disjointed song played through the speakers. But these 3 1/2 minutes were never awkward or uncomfortable, it was often the highlight of my day because I could see how excited he was to show me German music. Thanks to Mr Nolan, I wish to learn even more German and stay connected to its culture. I am honoured to say that I was Mr Nolan's last student."

It is with deep sorrow that we his colleagues and those in the Modern Languages Department in particular, learned of his passing. We have lost a loyal and committed colleague, whose thoughtful and measured input into professional discussion will be sorely missed.

Most importantly, however, is that in losing John, we have lost a true friend. Our deepest condolences and thoughts are with John's wife Trish and all his family.

Lise Hudson, Rector