

## MCI- The Best English Department in Toronto

Good afternoon, Esteemed Members of Malvern's Red and Black Society:

It is indeed my honour, and my pleasure, to have been invited to be your keynote speaker today. I also bring greetings from our principal, Line Pinard, who is unable to attend today. She wanted me to extend her good wishes to all of you, and her heart-felt gratitude for the remarkable ongoing support this strong and vibrant community of Malvern alumni continues to provide our school. I believe *I* am here because Malvern's English department was touted as "best in the city" in Toronto Life's September issue, and I was highlighted in the article, which has garnered me far more attention than I am used to, or really deserve—for I am only one member of a very hardworking and talented department. Indeed, Malvern is only one of many fine English departments; I believe we were selected by the coordinator of English at the Board, Dianne Fenner, because we are among the few schools in Toronto that take advantage of the Writers In Electronic Residence program—but more on that later. I am delighted to be here under any circumstances!

I joined the Malvern English department in January, 1984. Before that, I grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the eldest of five kids, earned a 3-year BA at the University of Winnipeg in Dramatic Studies and English, and traveled to Toronto to take my B.Ed. at U of T's erstwhile Faculty of Education. Interestingly, while doing my student teaching, I practice-taught at Notre Dame High School and at Malvern, with Dorothy DeLisle as my associate, about 10 years before I returned as a "career teacher", so I seemed destined to come back to the Beach, one of the first places I learned how to get to by TTC as a young "immigrant" fresh from the prairies. I began teaching at St. Joseph's College School downtown, primarily as *the* Drama department, for the first 8 years of my professional life. I then decided, in 1982, to go back to university for my fourth year, and thereafter, found myself unemployed and food-demonstrating for the launch of the President's Choice products in the fall of 1983! However, a welcome ad for a half-time position in English at Malvern Collegiate showed up in the Globe and Mail that December, for

which I obviously applied, and was hired. I'll never forget taking the call from the principal in the backroom of the meat department at the Bayview Village Loblaws. They were upset to lose me, but I was ecstatic to be going back to the classroom. Over the holidays, much to my delight, my half-time position grew into a full-time one, and I have been happily at Malvern ever since, save for a year-and-a-half of maternity and child-care leave.

As many of you would no doubt find, were you to visit, the department and the school have changed *a lot*, even in the 22 ½ years that I have been there. I've worked for four department heads, eight principals and twelve vice-principals! I was originally hired by David McDonald, then principal, and Ross Tucker, acting Head of English while Lillian Perigoe was on leave. Shortly thereafter, there was a (typical for the time) mid-year administrative shuffle, and Lois LaFleur became principal. Two months into my new job, I found myself having to re-interview for my position, (which would have happened anyway, since it began mid-year), but I was facing a whole new interviewing team. It was a little stressful, but I survived! The next year, Lillian Perigoe returned as Head of Department. Then she decided to leave teaching to enter the United Church ministry, and we found ourselves with a new head of department, Mary Rintoul. Mary headed a department of Malvern "lifers": Ross Tucker, Lucille Wakelin, Maureen Mogan, Steve Wood, and me. Dan Caldwell was also there for a time, before he left to become Assistant Head and then Head of the Jarvis English department. All but Steve and I have since retired.

However, Mary lead us into a new era, where we actually got a department office when she "wrestled" the old Wrestling Room on the mezzanine off the Boys' gym from the Phys. Ed. department for our use. Now we could mark and prepare in relative peace, where before we had to hope for quiet in the staff room, which was then where the principal's and main office are now. Finally, we could store our many books on the same floor where we taught, instead of lugging them from the book room in the basement. In the mid-nineties, Larry Smith became our head of department, with Pat Dann as his assistant, whom I replaced when she retired in the late nineties.

In the late 80s, the school qualified for a renovation, and the old library became our new staff room and conference room, recently acquired for the Malvern Archives, where we are happy to see Malvern alumni returning to continue the good work of sorting our history that the centennial celebrations began. The library moved into the new half-moon addition attached to the Malvern Avenue side which also expanded the cafeteria in the basement. The old staff room became the new administrative offices, and the old office became absorbed into the new library. Other later renovations saw the south entrance to the “lizard lounge” blocked off to create new office space for the nurse, itinerant school psychologist and social worker, which then later became the office for the co-op education department. The physics rooms 211 and 212 on the second floor got renovated, (painted a lovely soft pink accented with charcoal grey) and rooms 213, 313, 111, and 102 became computer labs. And most recently, our Design and Tech lab expanded across the hall into room 104. Due to the efforts of our wonderful and vocal parent council, we also got the auditorium roof and lighting system replaced (after the roof totally caved in onto the stage the summer of 2005—luckily no one was injured, or Jamie, our school ghost might have had some company); we are currently in the midst of having all the windows in the school replaced, and new auditorium seats are on the way.

Besides changes to the physical plant, the programs we teach have gone through some significant changes as well. We’ve been through OS:IS and destreaming (which was never really an issue at Malvern because everyone took the same program), and saw the beginnings of curriculum updating, beginning sanely under the Liberal and NDP governments, and then becoming the catastrophe of OSS with the arrival of the Harris years. Do not misunderstand—it is not the “New Curriculum” itself which was so bad—it has lots to recommend it. It was the slap-dash, and madly accelerated way it was implemented that caused all the chaos. And not just a new curriculum instituted change—a whole rash of changes threatened the equilibrium of the entire system, and displayed a wholesale disregard for the professions running it. Teachers were disparaged, administrators (who were teachers themselves) were wrested from the OSSTF—creating creating an “us vs. them” mentality, support staff were gutted, school boards and cities

were amalgamated, and chaos reigned supreme. The changes were so poorly thought-through, in their haste to be implemented, that whenever we asked questions about how to deal with certain problems that arose, the ministry would make what appeared to be “knee-jerk” amendments, which would then cause a whole series of new problems—it began to look wiser just not to ask questions. The labour unrest that beset the system is legendary, and it robbed schools everywhere of their souls. Caretakers, support staff and teacher cutbacks were so severe, we were never sure how many people were going to be left to do the same amount of work. There was so much downloading of tasks, so much change to deal with, and so few answers to our questions, that everything turned empty and sour. The years I now call the “Camelot years”, up to the fall of ’97, crumbled before my eyes. A wrecking ball hit education, and Malvern, which had run like a well-oiled and well-loved vintage car for so many decades, was on the brink of collapse. Teams and extra-curricular activities were cancelled or ran as skeletons of their former selves. Staff morale and school spirit among the students hit all-time lows. For most, teaching wasn’t fun any more, and Malvern became a “j.o.b.” even for the students, instead of a home away from home as it once had been. Fine teachers who might have extended their careers took early retirement, and the school was a very different and emaciated place compared to the one I’d come to know and love for over a decade and a half.

Still, I can honestly say most of us in the English department continued to care, and continued to teach the classics, and to model the love of language and literature that is the hallmark of Malvern graduates. We survived the double-cohort year of 2003, in which grade 13 or OACs, after 5 years of high school and 30 credits were graduating simultaneously with grade 12s, also with 30 credits after only 4 years of high school. I taught 4 sections of Writer’s Craft that year (and consequently had “no life”!) I had to stagger the delivery of the course, teaching different units at different times, because I didn’t have enough books, and even if we’d had the resources to buy more, it made no sense for a single year “blip”.

We continued to calm down our grade nines, contain our grade tens, encourage our grade elevens, and keep our grade twelves sane. We continued to teach the classic novels: Wyndham's The Chrysalids, Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men, Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, Paul Theroux's The Mosquito Coast, Golding's Lord of the Flies, Knowles' A Separate Peace, Salinger's A Catcher in the Rye, Hardy's The Mayor of Castorbridge, Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities, Huxley's Brave New World, and Orwell's 1984. We added and subtracted books, and rearranged the years of delivery. The Shakespeare canon had included *A Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. But the deletion of the OAC year saw *Romeo and Juliet* move from grade 11 to grade 9, and *Macbeth* fill the void in grade 11, while *Hamlet* and *King Lear* moved into grade 12 from the OAC course. *The Merchant of Venice* became increasingly difficult to teach as sensitivity to different cultures became important. We infused Canadian content into our courses: W.O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, Joy Kogawa's Obasan, Margaret Laurence's A Bird in the House and The Stone Angel, Margaret Atwood's A Handmaid's Tale, and Timothy Findley's The Wars, and Not Wanted on the Voyage. More recently written books began to be included to engage some of our more reluctant readers, like Rule of the Bone, The Secret Under my Skin, Cruddy, Getting the Girl, and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time. A few dramas not by Shakespeare made the curricula—like The Miracle Worker, and Saint Joan, and for a while Cyrano de Bergerac (in translation—which always got us in trouble with the French department), as well as various short plays in the many anthologies we've used over the years. Speaking of anthologies, we've been mandated by various governments to buy so many different ones over the years that I've forgotten many of their names, mainly because they no longer have such deliciously ironic titles as Enduring Prose, which for students took on a completely different meaning than the one intended by the anthologist, or Sense and Feeling which became "Sense(less) and Feeling(It)", or Poems (NOT) Worth Knowing, or Mastering (IN) Effective English as amended on the covers by "enterprising" students making editorial comments!

We continue to teach grammar—although more incidentally than as a separate unit—as the need arises in student work. We continue to teach how to write the paragraph and the essay; descriptive, persuasive, comparative, and expository writing; poetry and short stories, and encourage the students in good research habits, now on the Internet as well as in books and periodicals from grade 9 on. We teach the etymology of language, and the history of English, as well as MLA citation and how to write an annotated bibliography. We do reports and dramatizations, speeches and recitations. We encourage creative presentations on literature that go beyond the essay or the poster, to include short films, song recordings, and visual art, as well as multi- and mixed-media creations. Our students learn to be “media-savvy”, even if they don’t take the separate Media course, which many of them do. We study videos, documentaries, and films in our classes, and take the students on field trips to plays, conferences, forums, and other content-enhancing excursions, some as far away as New York City and even Europe. Most students now word-process their assignments, and handwriting is mostly relegated to note-taking and test-writing.

One of the most significant changes is how we evaluate our students. We used to prepare four report cards a year—the first one, a “mid-term” would come in late October, when some of us hardly knew all our students names yet, never mind how well they were doing—it was usually a letter grade, or some years, even a Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. Then we had exams before Christmas, and a second report card, this one a percentage grade going out at the beginning of January. Preparing those reports ruined many a Christmas holiday, believe me! For several years after I began at Malvern, we had this insanely short second term, only about 8 weeks long, when we had to come up with another report card before March Break. Marks for graduating students then had to be updated for submission to the universities—that usually meant some pretty frantic Easter weekends. Then we had more exams in June, and the final reports went out. The exam portion of the grade then was 30%, as the Final Evaluation component still is.

However, now that final 30% MUST come at or near the end of the course, and the number of our exam days has been reduced to 10 for the entire year, so the “Christmas”

or January exams are a thing of the past. If a teacher wants to give a middle-of-the-year “exam”, it must be done in class time, and it must be included in the 70% term mark. That constitutes one of the major changes. As well, the 30% no longer must be an exam—while it still can be an exam, it can also be any combination of final presentations, projects, or other demonstrations that show the student has mastered the essential expectations of the course. In English, that has translated into a gradual preparation of the students for the exam worth the full 30% in Grade 12. In Grade 9, they prepare a media presentation for 10%, and write a supported opinion essay based on course material in class in step-by-step structured classes beginning in May. In Grade 10, students do a media analysis for 10%, prepare an essay outline based on course material in class, and write the essay itself in the exam room. In Grade 11, students know the questions they can answer, and should prepare in advance before going in to write the essay without a pre-written outline. In Grade 12, they go in as in the past, only knowing that they will write an essay based on course material.

The 70% term work must be organized to address four “strands” of knowledge, each worth 20-30%—Literature Studies and Reading, Writing, Language, and Media Studies. This is different from the categories used for most other courses—Knowledge and Understanding, Thinking and Inquiry, Communication, and Application. Before, students were evaluated based on Norm-referencing. A student’s worth was determined in comparison to what his or her peers achieved, and marks were averaged. Now, a student’s evaluation is Criterion-referenced. The student knows in advance exactly what the expectations and relative worth of the assignment will be, and the criteria for the range of marks is presented in a “Rubric”, a gridwork of boxes which describe the qualities of performance in each mark range for each criterion. This takes the guess-work out of knowing what a teacher wants, and why one has earned the mark received. Additionally, now students are to have assessment opportunities before they are evaluated—they get to practise the skills before they are marked on them, with “formative” assignments given feedback by the teacher, before the summative assignment produces the final mark on a section of the course. Students are to have multiple opportunities to show they have mastered the material, and not all

demonstrations should be of the same variety—for example, not all pen-and-ink testing, in order to allow different learning styles to flourish. Finally, a student’s final mark is to be based on the more recent, MOST CONSISTENT demonstrations of knowledge—not on an average of his/her marks. This means that a student who has consistently improved over the year will earn the mark that s/he is achieving at the end of the course, rather than suffering the consequences of poor performances early in the year when mastery of the material had not yet been achieved mastery—for example, students achieving C range (or level 2) marks at the beginning of the year who are earning B+ range marks at the end of the course can receive a B+ mark on the final report, because that is what they are consistently demonstrating now. Averaging would peg that a student in the low B or high C range, which is obviously discouraging for that student who has improved so markedly over the course. Those are the highlights of how evaluation has changed.

Other innovations have occurred, too—courses like the aforementioned Media, offered to open our students’ eyes to the art of manipulation and bias as practised in the worlds of movies and television and advertising and print media, and The Writer’s Craft, for those with a love for, or curiosity about, creative writing. Indeed, it is Writer’s Craft that provided the place for one of the most fascinating opportunities to come along, a program called Writers-In-Electronic-Residence, a.k.a. WIER, (and those of us participating are called “WIERdos!) the brain child of Beach resident and long-time teacher at Riverdale Collegiate, Trevor Owen. In Wired Writers, the secondary program of WIER (which also has programs for elementary and middle school students), up to six schools from across the country are linked together in “writing salons” under the tutelage of published Canadian authors—such as Susan Musgrave, Larry Hill, Cornelia Hoogland, Lorna Crozier, Ann Ireland, and Pamela Mordecai, all of whom have visited my students at Malvern—and they are organized by teacher-moderators, like me. Over a twelve-week term, the students submit up to three pieces of their own original creative writing into the network, and the students from other schools, as well as the writers-in-electronic residence (like the ones I mentioned) respond to their work on-line. Likewise, my students respond to the work of students from other schools posted in the salons. It is very exciting for the students to have their work responded to by their peers from as far

away as the Yukon and BC to Newfoundland and Nova Scotia to Saskatchewan and Manitoba, or as near as neighbouring TDSB schools or others in Ontario, AND to have *personal* feedback from professional Canadian authors is another nifty bonus! Each year, our students have been inspired by the responses they receive, delighted (and sometimes incredulous) at the praise they receive from the professional writers, and amazed by their own creativity and the creativity of their peers. Each year, our students have been selected to be published in The WIER Tap, an on-line and hard-copy booklet of the best of the student writing, as selected by the participating authors. If you are interested, you can access these publications by visiting the Writers-In-Electronic-Residence website, [www.wier.ca](http://www.wier.ca), and selecting the links to The WIER Tap.

We have also enjoyed great success in the yearly Toronto Council of Teachers of English Short Fiction contest, each year having students invited as contest finalists to attend Author's Day held at Hart House in May, and most years having at least one of our students published in the booklet of winning stories. One year, we had the stories of three students printed in the winners' booklet of 8 or 9 stories—that was a banner year! All these successes remind me what a privileged life I lead as the Writer's Craft teacher at Malvern. My students are so gifted, and so enthusiastic about writing, a love we share, that to call my job “work” would be a contradiction—it is truly a joy to watch these young writers find their voices. We also have an enriched level of study in Grades 10 and 11, for those students whose love of English draws them to classes where we work a little harder and a little faster to keep the students challenged where they might otherwise become bored. They are an incredibly rewarding bunch to teach! We can actually watch them applying what they learn early in the year to work that we study later in the year. Talk about cumulative learning in action and seeing the fruits of one's labours—the enriched students are a treat!

Something else that is new at Malvern since the inception of the new OSS curriculum is the offering of applied and college-level courses. When I began at Malvern, it was rare that a class of General level English could run (even though there was definitely a need for it), and if it did, it was often a split class of Gr. 10 and 11, or Grade 11 and 12. The

OSS curriculum accommodates the movement of students between levels of difficulty, so that students who begin in the applied program (what used to be known as “general level”) can move into the academic program when their maturity and skill levels warrant. Now, we are running applied classes yearly in Grades 9 and 10, which become college level courses (as opposed to university level) in Grades 11 and 12. Here, students who have weaker English skills, who are reluctant readers or just reluctant students, or who have other impediments to their excelling at the academic and university levels can achieve success and even thrive in programs geared to their interests and future educational paths. These courses focus more on the practical skills of English, and provide the students with the kinds of experiences that will be meaningful to those who will not pursue further education at the university level, but who may enter college programs, or enter the workforce directly after high school.

Of course, the Malvern newspaper continues to thrive, under different names from “The Underground” by which it was known when I started at Malvern. It has been “The Maverick”, the NUZE (a pun on the acronym for NEWS as well as the name of the Malvern Yearbook, the Muse), and the current Knightly (with a “K”). Last year, there was even an ‘zine (that’s short for magazine) insert showcasing special neighbourhoods in Toronto, like Kensington Market, and Queen West. We also have the perennial samples of student writing in the yearbook, with renewed interest and participation in recent years.

Most of our students go on to post-secondary education, and most of those choose to attend university. Of those who have gone on to study English, we have several PhDs that I personally know of—two in Literature and one in Analytical Bibliography (don’t ask me to explain!). We also have increasing numbers of former Malvern students coming back as student teachers, and three former Malvernites who are now on staff as teachers. We have been fortunate over the years to have numerous students win very prestigious scholarships: like the \$40,000US Morehead to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, (we had so many consecutive winners that we became known as the Morehead factory in Canada), President’s four-year Scholarships to several Canadian

universities, and other top-notch scholarships like the Millenium Foundation and the Canadian Merit. We have also been fortunate in having very generous donors support the remarkable number prizes and awards given at Commencement every year.

Unfortunately, we are beginning to fear for the continuance of many of those awards, as the original endowments no longer generate significant interest payments to fund the awards, or donors cease to support the awards over time, or the Malvern Home and School Association cannot generate enough cash to support the under-funded prizes. The centennial reunion certainly injected sorely needed life-blood into our scholarship and prize funding, but rising costs for our students have made it necessary to adjust the value of the awards, and that continues to drain even our supplemented sources. The Home and School Association is presently launching a very exciting and potentially very lucrative fundraising initiative through “gift cards” from an organization called [shopandsupport.ca](http://shopandsupport.ca). People who wish to support Malvern can always donate individually, but the shop and support initiative allows Malvern to raise funds through the everyday shopping that we all do. If you wish to support your *alma mater* in this way, I encourage you to check out the program at [shopandsupport.ca](http://shopandsupport.ca), and if you are interested, contact Jon Lantz via the school, or his email [jonlantz@sympatico.ca](mailto:jonlantz@sympatico.ca). It really is an incredibly easy and incredibly lucrative opportunity for all of us who care about Malvern to support it in these times of shrinking budgets and fiscal challenges. While I do not wish it interfere with initiatives of the Red and Black Society and the Onward Malvern Foundation, I hope you will seriously consider the opportunity. (By the way, I have prepared cards with the addresses I have mentioned and the group code ID number for the program that you can ask me for after the meeting.)

I have watched Malvern’s history for over two decades now. I have been offered opportunities to continue my career elsewhere, but always the rewards of my career at Malvern have a stronger hold. I could have retired last February, (impossible! I’m far too young to be old enough to retire!) but as I am still healthy, still learning, and still loving what I do, I have chosen to remain an active teacher. I have ridden the crest of the Malvern wave in its “Camelot” years, and I have survived the tsunami of the Harris years. Recently, I have been both comforted and invigorated by what I have dubbed the

“phoenixing” of Malvern (And as Vandra has pointed out, I know I have made a verb out of a noun, but bear with me!). Malvern once again feels like the place I came to love so soon after I began teaching there in 1984. Our teams continue to excel, the Drama department is once again staging a school musical (another reincarnation of *West Side Story*, coming your way at the end of March), the music department is thriving, the Design and Tech department is growing, and our academic programs are as strong as ever. We have a great mix of experienced, “master” teachers, now increasingly joined by new, enthusiastic and energetic young teachers excited about rebuilding the Malvern school spirit that was foundering such a short time ago. Indeed, we have new teams and clubs springing up weekly, and it is once more an exciting and vibrant place to be. The energy is back!

And with that energy, we are embarking on a process of renewal and improvement as laid out by the National Quality Institute (hereafter called NQI) which is a journey to increase our capacity for excellence. The NQI process, designed specifically for schools, but also mirrored in programs for Canadian industry, is laid out in four steps—the green leaf or inaugural step where the benchmarks of how our school functions are set, and moves through the blue and red leaf levels to ultimately strive for the gold leaf award, which will bring Malvern national recognition as a school which truly exemplifies the pursuit and attainment of excellence in every facet of its operation. We are well-positioned to achieve the gold level within the next 3 to 4 years, and I am committed to sticking with the program to its conclusion as the lead teacher on the NQI team. Because, it seems to me, excellence is what Malvern is all about!

I have often been asked over the years, “How do you do it?”, for being an English teacher is more than a full-time job—the marking alone is overwhelming. Juggling teaching English with raising a family requires some interesting creativity. When my two children were young, I used to go to bed immediately after I got them to bed, and get up at 2 or 3 in the morning, just to have some uninterrupted “quality” time with my school work. I remember marking exams at my dining room table with my newborn daughter asleep on a pillow bed on my lap! And I soon discovered that marking, when my eyes were closing

with no permission from me, was no way to do a quality job. Hence, my unusual hours. It got a little easier as the kids got older, and I was no longer ferrying them to after-school lessons, and extra-curricular activities. But it was always worth it, for I was and am among the privileged few who get to earn a living doing what I love. I love teaching English, and I love teaching at Malvern.

I have said repeatedly that teaching at Malvern is “not the real world”—and teaching *English* at Malvern only emphasizes that. Our students tend to come from privileged and educated homes, where the children are read to at night, and stimulated by day in a community that fosters family life and tradition. Thus, by the time they reach high school age and come to Malvern, these kids are literate, well-read, often well-traveled, and far more sophisticated than I ever was at the same age! And so it is not only a privilege and pleasure to teach them, but a challenge to teach them as well. They are a demanding bunch of their teachers—and rightly so! They will not be happy with “answer the following chapter questions for homework and we’ll take them up tomorrow” kinds of classes—nor should they be! They want dynamic, interesting classes, with engaging discussions, and the Malvern English department more often than not fulfills those needs. Every year, more than a few graduates come back to visit their *alma mater*, and to find their former teachers—to let them know how they were inspired, to admit that the advice they were given was accurate, and to say hello to old friends. And it is usual that those graduates seek out their English teachers. Teaching English allows us, who are lucky enough to be in this profession, a rare glimpse into these young adults’ lives. Our students allow us to know what they feel and how they think with an honesty and candor that few parents are privy to. I am regularly humbled by the confidences my students share with me in their work, as well as in conversations both in and out of class. We have a mighty responsibility to foster these young lives, to encourage their enthusiasm, and to guide them into their futures, so bright with promise. Along with many other dedicated teachers in other departments, the Malvern English department takes that responsibility seriously. Every year, we are part of our students winning very prestigious scholarships from universities in Ontario as well as across Canada, and even internationally. We have students winning contests and being published. We also get

involved beyond the classroom, as coaches, and team and club advisors, and organizers of field trips, both local and international. We are interested in the whole student, and we care, and that is what makes our English department great!

Thank-you once again for the opportunity to speak to you today. It has been fun traveling down the halls of memory, and sharing my passion for the subject and the school that has given such enrichment to my life. I appreciate your kind attention, and I encourage you to continue to stay connected with that wonderful place called Malvern Collegiate Institute. Good Day to you all!