

For a Catholic High School in Newcastle, a slim book of gentle words and drawings has been inspirational in these unprecedented times for teachers and students alike, says assistant head **David Swindells**

# Kind hearts at St Cuthbert's

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"



"Kind," said the boy

**O**N 18 MARCH St Cuthbert's was informed that come Monday our doors would be shut for the majority of students as lockdown gripped. It had already been a strange week with hand washing and hygiene being a hot topic in the yard (which in my experience is very unusual for an all-boys school!). The school community wondered what the coming days and months would bring.

Now in times of chaos and uncertainty I would usually turn to Scripture for inspiration, however I found myself drawn to a charming little book chock full of wisdoms called *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*, by Charlie Mackesy (inset).

The aforementioned quartet journey together through uncertain times and become bonded through their experiences. Looking back over what has been an unprecedented time in society and education I can't help but see the parallels between our school community and Mackesy's characters.

"What is that over there?" "It's the wild," said the Mole. "Don't fear it." St Cuthbert's

faced many challenges from late March to July. Our approach as a staff body was to go at the problems head on, with a can-do attitude, realising that we are all in this situation together. This was palpable when, in our first staff briefing on Monday 23rd, we prayed: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can and the wisdom to know the difference." As the school gradually reopened we worked to engrain this attitude into our young men.

Adversity provides opportunities for growth; this was at the heart of our new provision. We welcomed the boys whose parents were key workers for full days of teaching from the outset of lockdown. The main student body who

did not have access to school were provided with high-quality lesson materials online, including recorded video lessons. Form tutors and pastoral teams contacted families for updates on student academic and emotional well-being, offering guidance and comfort when needed through access to mental-health resources and guided physical workouts from



An illustration from *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*, by Charlie Mackesy. Ebury Press, £16.99. Tablet Bookshop price £15.29. Inset photo: David Loftus

our PE Department. The spiritual needs of our students were met with weekly collective worship videos and re-integration assemblies, enabling face-to-face contact with all students. These were created and delivered by our four Heads of House, covering St Paul's teaching on the Body of Christ and John 10:10.

"**NOTHING BEATS** kindness," said the Horse in Charlie Mackesy's story. "It sits quietly beyond all things." Kindness can often be a rare commodity in uncertain times, which is why we felt it was important for our students to continue the fundraising effort they had begun on Ash Wednesday during lockdown.

As part of our response to "The Year of the Word", the money our boys raised will go to buy Bibles to send to Fr Rupen, who is the parish priest of St Mathias Mulumba Parish in Lusaka, Zambia, to comfort people and to evangelise. From the extra collections we have nearly reached our target of £500.

As well as being globally conscious, our young men are aware of local issues and we were proud to discover that, during lockdown, a group of boys completing their Duke of Edinburgh's Award donated 377 hours of voluntary service to the local community with the social value of those hours equating to £1,639. Inspired by this, we launched our 2020 Lockdown Learner Award, which encourages the students to complete a project over the summer holidays demonstrating leadership and participation.

School looks very different this month now we have reopened our doors for all students. Each year group is taught in a "bubble" with teachers moving from room to room between lessons. Our superb range of extra-curricular activities are temporarily suspended and Mass is not being celebrated in our beautiful chapel for the foreseeable future. But these setbacks will not stop us from delivering an outstanding Catholic education to those in our care.

**OUR HEAD TEACHER** Carol Davison believes, and I quote her, that "the story of St Cuthbert's is a fascinating one. It has never been an ordinary school nor will it ever be so. It's not an organisation, it's a living entity, changing and adapting when circumstances require it, holding firm and steadfast in the face of adversity with a firm sense of purpose and determination to see things through for the best outcomes. Our young men and staff are resilient, tenacious and mature in their aspirations to serve the community."

I am looking forward to our community spirit deepening over the coming months. "Sometimes," said the Horse. "Sometimes what?" asked the Boy. "Sometimes just getting up and carrying on is brave and magnificent."

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