**Ball Speech - Daniela Shanly**

What a week – that’s a bit of an understatement! - and what an amazing way to end a week of enormous ups and downs, cross examinations, tears, trials and tribulations.

The week started sadly with the tragic and untimely death of the great David Bowie – an enormous influence in the lives of my generation. We then had our gruelling 3 day public inquiry followed by a visit yesterday to the school by the Home Secretary Theresa May. And it culminates here tonight in a wonderful beautiful celebration. God knows what I’m going to do tomorrow!

I have lots and lots of people to thank for making this evening, indeed this whole week happen, but before I do that I would like to just reflect for a moment on the significance of why we are all here tonight.

I would like to speak to you about **love** and there is a lot of love in this room tonight.

Let me begin with one of my own experiences of love and friendship – and school. When I was just 13 I nervously walked into my first day at secondary school, a boarding school in Rutland and met my dear friend Sarah, who I am very very proud to say is here tonight. Our incredibly close friendship has endured for nearly 40 years. One can only wish for a friendship like that and I feel extremely privileged to have it.

Sarah and I were young and idealistic, and love at that time meant Mick Jagger, Keith Richards and some questionable boyfriend choices – especially hers! We were young and dreamy with hazy ambitions. I was going to be an Earth Mother surrounded by children and she was going to marry some bloke called Angus.

And that came true!

After we retired from being hippies she eventually married Angus – not the Angus we were with at school with but the one who sits with her here tonight and I now find myself blissfully surrounded by wonderful children, not only as mother to my own but those at Beech Lodge School.

Beech Lodge School’s foundations are firmly built on Love and I make no excuses for that. When my dear friend and rock Emma Barklem and I decided to set up the school, love was the motivator, love was the driving force. The love for our two sons is what drove us completely. As many of you here this evening know all too well, it is sometimes not enough just to love your children.

Love, cannot sadly, conquer all, but it can have a bloody good go.

When your child is disadvantaged in some way, is struggling with life and at school; when your child is isolated, sad, frightened, bullied and their challenging behaviour is misunderstood - as a parent no matter how much love you give, you are often powerless to help.

So sometimes you have to tear down the walls and start again. You have to rip up the rule book and do it another way. And this is what we decided to do with Beech Lodge.

Meeting Lucy Barnes our magnificent head teacher was a gift, serendipity that came from who knows where. The three of us immediately became an unbreakable team with one vision with love and friendship at our core. We were determined to help as many children as possible who were struggling desperately in mainstream education.

Of course, none of this could have been done without the incredible and practical support of my darling Michael who has been behind the scenes all the time allowing us to realise our dream.

Staff soon followed, the amazing Rachel Cassidy, Jack Rider and Sue Wells - and we opened 3 years ago this week with 5 pupils, Max, Dom, Chelsea, Tom and Phoebe.

Someone once explained to me about Compassionate Warriors and that is what everyone at Beech Lodge aspires to be – people who actively try to bring more love into the world with the courage to confront injustice and suffering. That could not have been evidenced better than at our recent public inquiry with the heart rending statements, letters of support and pleas by parents and educational professionals who hailed our school as a ‘life saver’ and a ‘beacon’.

Every single prospective parent that walks through the door of Beech Lodge School is a compassionate warrior and brings with them a unique heartfelt story of love and challenge. Many of our parents have adopted children who have not experienced healthy love and struggle to accept it. All our parents have fought and advocated for their child. Their child that ‘doesn’t fit’. How awful to be told that! Your child doesn’t fit! To fit what?!

Our parents have had to battle the system – a system hell bent on A\* grades, conformity and often punitive discipline – which may work for the majority but it just doesn’t work for our kids. Our square pegs.

The school has grown quickly and successfully. From our first 5 pupils we have now grown to over 20 with 20 outstanding members of staff. We are still very small but we are inundated with enquiries for places and are desperate as you know for new larger premises.

Our logo – the Beech tree is the symbol of learning and wisdom. Folk lore suggests that if you feel that you are fettered by old ideas and habits and cannot see a way forward, relax in the presence of a beech tree and a way ahead will be revealed. Beech Lodge School truly is a family - a family of parents, staff and pupils and I am very proud of everybody involved in the school - most of whom are here tonight. I feel very blessed to have some truly wonderful people in my life.

There are many of you here that came along to support us at the Public Inquiry this week and I would like once again, to say a huge huge thank you for taking that time out of your days to sit through it. Thank you to our incredible and very brave parents who spoke with such openness and honesty reducing most of us to tears and to Lucy and Sue who spoke with such heart-rending expertise that I for one was in pieces! I have no doubt that the Secretary of State’s Inspector was moved.

Huge thank you’s must go to the organisers of this splendid event. Thank you so much to the Ball Committee of parents – Sharon, Jason, Sue, Rachel and Suzie for working so incredibly hard over the last 6 months or so to make tonight a reality and Emma has some flowers here for you as a little token of appreciation.

Thank you also to Larry Gerrard for his amazing graphics on the invites and a very big thank you to Steve Rider – who is also a parent at Beech Lodge – albeit to a teacher - for being our Master of Ceremonies.

Thank you to everyone who has donated to the AMAZING auction and raffle prizes. As you know we are aiming to raise funds for outdoor gym and play equipment tonight and the response so far has been astounding!

And lastly a very big Thank you to all of you for coming tonight to support our wonderful school, raise lots of money and to join our happy celebrations!

I will leave you now where we began with a quote by the late great David Bowie – we can all be Heroes, and if it is just for one day let it be today, let it be tonight and Let’s Dance!

Thank you.