

HILARY PARKER – HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Chancellor Dharker, members of the University, distinguished alumni and honoured guests,

Hilary Parker, who we are honouring this evening, is an extraordinarily successful Commercial Property Lawyer. She has served with distinction on the board of two major solicitors' firms, becoming the first woman to achieve board level status in both companies. Whilst we recognise and applaud her legal skills, tonight, we are specifically recognising her outstanding achievements as a Trustee and Chair of the University's Development Trust.

Hilary Anne Clark was born in Liverpool in 1955, the middle of five children. Both parents were GPs and instilled a strong work ethic in all their children. Her mother was particularly inspirational, having qualified as a doctor at a time when it was still very unusual for women to take on such roles. It was her parents who first suggested she might pursue a career in Law and they arranged for her to spend some time in a solicitor's office in Liverpool - she absolutely loved it. She went on to study Law at the University of Hull, where she came top in her year. Hilary subsequently completed her LLM at Cambridge, where she was the first female graduate of Selwyn College.

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Between 1977 and 1980, Hilary was a lecturer in the Law School at Newcastle University. It was here she met her future husband, Professor David Parker, when she was “volunteered” by the School to teach Land Law to his Geomatics students. Hilary’s association with the University goes back further than this, although it’s fair to say her earliest encounter with us didn’t quite go to plan. Despite selecting Newcastle as her first choice to study Law, I’m afraid we turned Hilary down. Thankfully, she hasn’t held that initial rejection against us! After two years at the University of Hull, lecturing in Law, Hilary returned to Newcastle in 1982 to be with David, relinquishing her academic career to train as a solicitor. Her long and successful relationship with the Development Trust began when she heard they were looking for a lawyer to join the Board.

The Development Trust is not the only Board to have benefitted from Hilary’s assured and effective chairing. Her interest in social housing led her to serve on the Board of three different housing associations and for more than twenty years, she was a non-executive director for the Newcastle Hospitals Trust, in its many and varied incarnations. Arguably her most impactful work with the Hospitals Trust was when she was Chair of the PFI Implementation Group which oversaw the rebuilding of significant elements of the RVI and Freeman Hospitals, including the Great North Children’s Hospital and the Northern Centre for Cancer Care. At the conclusion of this work, Hilary was presented with a silver trowel.

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Whilst appreciating the gift, I'm reliably informed that what she really wanted, was the opportunity to drive a bulldozer! Now I can't promise to sort this out for you, Hilary, but I will put in a good word with my colleague Iain Garfield, our Director of Estates.

To have served with such distinction on so many different boards and to have led them for significant periods of time suggests a real talent for this line of work. So, what makes an effective Chair? This is a rich subject for reflection in professional leadership literature and there are certain skills and qualities that consistently stand out. Vision, integrity, passion, the ability to see the bigger picture whilst navigating complexity. A great Chair is decisive without being domineering; providing strength and support to others whilst remaining resilient themselves. From my conversations with those who have worked closely with Hilary in the Development Trust, it is clear she has all these qualities in spades. Fiona Watson, Head of Corporate and Foundation Relations at the University, who works very closely with Hilary, describes her as “passionate, supportive and a real driving force for good.”

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When I asked Hilary what she thought her defining qualities as a Chair were, she suggested it was her ability to ask stupid questions, which she went on to define as the confidence to ask, “why are we doing this? Is there a better way of doing it? Should we be doing something completely different?” She also felt that her years of legal training meant she was quick to master a brief – a talent she finds especially useful when faced with an enormous pack of board papers!

Never have these skills been more vital than when the Covid pandemic hit us in March 2020, bringing unprecedented disruption to our personal and professional lives. Reflecting on this period of great challenge and uncertainty for the University, Richard Dale, Executive Director of Finance at the time, praised Hilary’s clear-sighted pragmatism and her resolute commitment to ensuring the Development Trust did everything it could to support the University. Emeritus Registrar, Dr John Hogan, echoes these sentiments. He told me that Hilary was absolutely magnificent during Covid, a true partner and a reassuring voice of calm amidst the storm.

Alongside her many professional interests, Hilary is a proud Mum to Heather and Fiona and a dedicated Grandma to Martha and Edith. She adores tennis, and whilst she no longer plays, I’m told she gets very animated when watching it,

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especially when there is a crucial point at stake. She is really looking forward to Wimbledon this year, having secured tickets for the men's semi-finals.

Hilary's husband tells me she is a fabulous cook who loves hosting dinner parties for family and friends. However, and I hope I won't be the cause of marital discord by sharing this, he went on to tell me that she wouldn't win any points on MasterChef for her presentation. From which I conclude that Hilary is not a fan of fancy garnishes and dainty puddles of jus. Me neither.

I'd like to close my citation with a musical metaphor. A truly effective Chair is sometimes compared to the conductor of an orchestra. They hear every note, every distinctive voice and having listened, deftly and surely bring them all together in harmonious accord.

Hilary, you are up there with the best – a veritable Bernstein of the Boardroom.

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Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of her principled, empowering and inspiring leadership of the Development Trust, I present to you Hilary Parker to be accepted into the fellowship of Newcastle University.

Jill Taylor-Roe

Senior Public Orator

4th May 2023