



A tribute to Sr. Mercedes, St Aloysius' former Principal (1978 – 1985), teacher, colleague and friend.

12th May 2023 Sr. Mercedes Desmond passed away peacefully surrounded by her loving family and community at St. Maries of the Isle. In memory of Sr. Mercedes we wish to share with you a little tribute to her life, her commitment and her passion for education. Sr. Mercedes was a kind, dedicated and progressive Principal in St. Aloysius School. She was a pioneer in the advancement of education in Science in Ireland. We remember Sr. Mercedes warmly and we will be forever grateful for her legacy of excellence here in St Aloysius School.

Sr. Mercedes Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis.

Some memories ...

Sr. Mercedes Desmond, R.I.P.

Sr. Mercedes was known to all of us here for many reasons and in a variety of ways:

To her family of birth and her Mercy family she was a kind and loving presence for all the years of her long life;

To the community of Science educators, she was widely and rightly regarded as one of the pioneers of Science education in Ireland. She was a founder member of I.S.T.A., the Irish Science Teachers' Association, and was awarded an honorary doctorate from U.C.C. for her contribution to science and education. Fittingly, Sr. Mercedes was conferred with her Ph.D, in 2015 on George Boole Day, a day which commemorated a great pioneer of science.

To us in St. Als, though, she was simply our own Sister Mercedes, classroom teacher, principal, colleague, and friend. Her pupils found always a kind word and encouragement. She was a great advocate for the education of girls and women in the sciences, as is borne witness to by the long list of eminent past pupils who have made their mark in all branches of Science from Astronomy to Zoology. As principal, she encouraged her pupils and their teachers not just in academic pursuits but in extra-curricular activities too and she took great delight in sports, musicals, debates, quizzes. Her smiling face was there to congratulate or to commiserate.

Parents, too, found her understanding and accessible and were happy to entrust their children to her loving care during her years as principal of St. Als.

Her fellow-teachers have happy memories of her as a colleague. Hers was a warm and easy-going presence in the Science department and in the Staff Room.

One memory that former staff members have shared with me concerns an incident that took place in 1979 and illustrates both Sr. Mercedes kindness and her practical nature. At that time, Sr. Mercedes had been principal for less than a year, having been appointed in 1978. In the spring and summer of 1979, the postal workers went on strike for 18 weeks with the result that no post could be delivered. This included pay cheques, which, in those days, came directly to school, once a month. Teachers would collect them and go to the bank to lodge them to pay their bills. No post – no cheques. No cheques – no money. People were very worried. Sr. Mercedes, however, took action. She took the train to Dublin, somehow persuaded the powers-that-be in the Salary Department that they should release the cheques to her, hopped on a train back to Cork and had the pay cheques into the hands of her very grateful staff a few hours later.

Many are the stories I could tell of Sr. Mercedes kindness, but I don't want to keep you too long. I am going to leave you with the words of one who was a pupil and a colleague of Sr. Mercedes Desmond and who also worked under her as principal. She said: 'Because of her sensitivity to people's needs, Sr. Mercedes was always very aware of what was happening in her staff members' personal lives, and she rejoiced with or sympathised with us, as appropriate. Today we sympathise with her family, her Mercy sisters and her many friends.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam uasal.

Miriam Uí Dhonnabháin, past pupil and teacher of St. Aloysius School

Physics Laboratory St. Aloysius School dedicated to Sr. Mercedes in 2022 to mark her 100th birthday.





Sr. Mercedes 100th Birthday 2022

Sr. Mercedes was due to celebrate her 101st birthday on Sunday 14th May 2023. This time last year Sr. Mercedes enjoyed a wonderful celebration of her 100th birthday with family and friends. Sr. Mercedes looked forward to this celebration for a number of years as she said to me in 2019 when we celebrated St Aloysius school's 180th that "it will be my 100th next". We are delighted to say that the 100th took place and was thoroughly enjoyed by all.



Sr. Mercedes celebrating her 100th birthday with Taoiseach at the time Micheál Martin and Mary Rose Desmond

Honorary Doctorate 2015 UCC

Sr. Mercedes was awarded an honorary doctorates on 2nd November 2015 by UCC.



University College Cork
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

2015 Press Releases

A quiet revolution: UCC to honour education stars



American computing pioneer Donald Knuth; Anant Agarwal, CEO of edX; Sr Mercedes Desmond, who has championed science education in Ireland for over 60 years; and Desmond MacHale, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at UCC, were awarded honorary doctorates on George Boole Day, November 2. Photo: Michael McSweeney/Provision

Sr Mercedes Desmond, now 93, has championed science education in Ireland for over 60 years.

Born in Donoughmore, Co. Cork, Sr Mercedes was professed as a Sister of Mercy in 1944 and despite having never studied science at secondary school, she enrolled to study Physics at UCC in 1945. In addition, she studied astronomy, which spurred a lifelong interest in the subject. She also studied chemistry and, due to the daytime rationing of gas during World War II, carried out practical work in Chemistry at night in the old science building (now Civil Engineering) in UCC.

After graduating with a B.Sc. in Physics and Chemistry, and later a HDip in Education, Sr Mercedes was assigned to St. Aloysius School in Cork city in 1949, where she taught Physics, Chemistry and Maths, as well as Physiology until the introduction of biology as a subject on the curriculum. After her appointment as principal of the school in 1978, enrolment rose to 1200 students, becoming the largest all-girls secondary school in Ireland.

In 1962 Sr Mercedes, along with a small group of others, founded the Irish Science Teachers' Association (ISTA). Sr Mercedes immersed herself in science education at local and national level, organising courses for science teachers, from glass-blowing and electronics to ecology and astronomy. She will be conferred with a Degree of Doctor of Education.

Widely esteemed for her humility, Sr Mercedes' commitment to science education has made a massive impact on standards across Ireland and beyond.

December 1977 Letter to Sr. Mercedes from Ernest Walton an Irish Physicist and Nobel Laureate



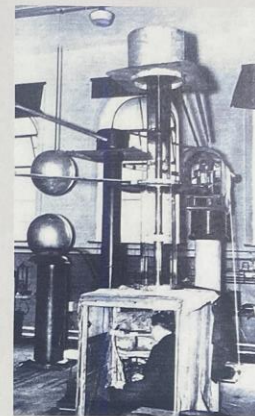
UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN
 PHYSICAL LABORATORY
 TRINITY COLLEGE
 DUBLIN 2
 10 Dec. 1977

Dear Sr Mercedes,

Thank you very much for your kind letter which I appreciated very much. But I cannot believe that I am deserving of all the nice things you said about me. The only photograph of me available at the moment is too small for hanging on a wall. I will get a larger one made and send it to you later.

I would like to show the demonstration experiments to your Science Teachers Association but there would be considerable difficulties in showing them away from my base here. Hence I cannot accept your kind invitation until the apparatus is made more portable and is in a form not requiring any special setting up or special facilities. Would you be interested in my giving a talk about Physics and Physics at Cambridge? I will be giving a lecture on this subject at the Young Scientists Exhibition in Jan and members of your Association may be at it. If not, I could repeat it in Cork.

Best wishes,
 Yours sincerely,
 E. T. S. Walton



The Nobel Prize in Physics 1951 was awarded to Sir John Douglas Cockcroft and Ernest Thomas Sinton Walton 'for their pioneer work on the transmutation of atomic nuclei by artificially accelerated atomic particles'.

National University of Ireland, Galway
 Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh

Sr Mercedes Desmond,
 St. Martin of the Isle,
 Cork.

01 July 2005

Dear Sister Mercedes,

Thank you very much for your beautiful card and message in connection with my father E. T. S. Walton and for enclosing his letter which you have kept so carefully. Your thoughts about his personality and abilities are so true and I thank you for them.

With regards to the letter you enclosed I have discussed it with the family and we have decided that we would very much like to return it to you. I have therefore made a copy and am returning the original to you.

I am also enclosing a photograph which was taken by a group of journalism students from Dublin City University whom came to his house to interview him. I am unsure of the date but it was probably when he was about 75 years old. The copy may not be as good as I would like but it is the family's favourite picture of him.

I am also enclosing two postage stamps for you which were issued a few years ago.

I must compliment you on your lovely handwriting. I resort to the word processor.

We hope you are keeping well.

Regards,
 Philip
 Ernest Walton



Sr. Mercedes wrote to E.T.S. Walton and received the above reply in 1977. The original letter remains in the Physics laboratory at St. Aloysius school. While Cockcroft and Walton pioneered atomic physics, Sr. Mercedes has embraced a lifetime of teaching and learning particularly in the scientific field.