

A FAMILY LIKE NO OTHER

Stephen Withnell left behind life as a high-flying banker in London to become Deputy Head of Stonyhurst College. A year on, he tells us why he doesn't regret a thing

WORDS: Ellie Fells

It's a year since you and your family moved to Stonyhurst, but what drew you to the position initially?

I attended the school when I was younger, and was then a Governor for a couple of years before moving up here. The school asked whether I would ever consider the move and the answer was 'absolutely' for a couple of reasons: one, because I have an enormous affection for the school and also a huge affection for Lancashire. And two, because as a family - and Stonyhurst is for me defined as a family school - it was absolutely the right time for us. My sons are aged four and six, and the Ribble Valley is just such a magical place to bring up children.

The other thing that is so distinctive about this place is the Catholic ethos: the school considers itself to be very outward-focused. We are not really interested in how much money our pupils make and that kind of thing. What we're really keen to see is how they use this amazing privilege to give back to others. Stonyhurst is a springboard to a life of purpose.

You are a former investment banker at the prestigious Goldman Sachs. How are you bringing what you learned there to Stonyhurst?

It is refreshingly not as difficult a career change as you might expect! The job is obviously very different, but the things I oversee here are the kind of things that I experienced while working in London - I look after





ABOVE:
Stonyhurst
College

RIGHT:
Stephen Withnell
sees parallels
between his old
job in the City and
his new role at
Stonyhurst

the outward facing aspects of the school, so for us that means development, admissions, marketing, fundraising and so forth. I think a lot of the skills are transferrable, but with a corporation it's a transactional relationship, whereas working in a big family school like this is a vocational relationship.

You're now based in the heart of the Ribble Valley, but do you miss London life?

We were not Londoners by choice – my wife grew up on a farm surrounded by horses and fields and she always wanted to be a GP in the countryside, which is not so easy when you live in Chiswick! But now our next door neighbour is a field and the only things we see during dinner time are deer. The boys wear wellies to school and we cross one country lane on our commute, rather than having to take a 45-minute Uber ride. The quality of life is different beyond recognition.

What challenges have you encountered in your first year?

To be honest there haven't been many of the major challenges that you might anticipate, and I think that comes down to the ethos of the school. In 1601, one of the first headmasters wrote



that Stonyhurst is 'a family like no other'. And I think that's the reason that the normal challenges that arise when you move county, change job and change industry just haven't been a problem. Everyone who works at Stonyhurst really cares and wants to be here.

You were of course a student at Stonyhurst yourself – does it feel good to be back?

Absolutely. In our first assembly

of term this year, I saw a man sitting in the front row next to his daughter who was starting school that day – he and I boarded on the same corridor, so it's lovely because I hadn't seen him for 20 odd years.

What are your aims for the school?

I think success would look like us remaining as a very much national and international school. One thing that's really unique about this place is that there's as many kids here from Norfolk or Cornwall or London as there are from Lancashire, and there are 30 different nationalities – that's pretty special.

I am very focused on fundraising and, in particular, fundraising for bursaries. Our vision with the school, and an ultimate goal, is that any pupil who we think will thrive here is able to come regardless of their means, so we will work very hard over the coming years to increase our bursary endowment. We're already working towards it – last year, the school had its best fundraising year in ten years. We want to be the best school we can be, and for as many people as possible. 🍀

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