

Heather McKissack biography

Heather McKissack inspired generations of King's pupils, colleagues and parents with her dedication, judgement and outstanding talent for teaching. She built such a reputation that the headmaster Andrew Halls described her as "the school's equivalent of a national treasure."

She taught chemistry for 41 years at King's, which already had a good reputation when she joined in 1976, and which she helped propel to outstanding status in the rankings. But she was honoured with an MBE, in 2016, for her commitment to raising aspirations for state school pupils from less privileged backgrounds.

When a new headmaster, Tony Evans, arrived at KCS in 1997 he noted that, while there were highly-capable women teachers on the staff, none was in the senior management team. Heather McKissack soon became the first, with a mission to build relationships with schools in south west London, whose pupils were not always from affluent, middle-class communities.

The policy bore fruit in a partnership, in 2002, between King's and Coombe Girls' School in the London borough of Kingston upon Thames. Heather and the head teacher at Coombe, Carol Campbell, forged a bond which broke down barriers between state and private education. Latin was introduced to Coombe's curriculum and there were joint classes in GCSE revision, advice with applications to Oxford and Cambridge and combined teacher training. The arrangement broadened horizons for pupils, staff and parents at both schools and certainly improved results.

According to Carol Campbell: "Heather was the pivot who made it all happen. She made dreams a reality for so many people."

So successful was this link that a failing boys' school was taken under the umbrella and turned around. The project then grew, in 2003, into The Wimbledon Partnership, bringing seven state secondary schools and many other sixth forms and primary schools into the fold with King's, raising standards and expectations at all of them.

She was the first full-time female teacher at King's but had an instinctive ability to get the best out of boys. Her love and knowledge of sport were ideal connections with male students, as was her quick sense of humour. Few OKs will be able to recall victories in a battle of wits with Miss McKissack.

She also had a highly-developed sense of where King's boys' talents really lay- if not purely academic, then in drama, sport or art. And she had the gift of motivation. A colleague in the staff room had only to express concern about an underperforming pupil and a quiet word from Heather often put him back on track.

In the many tributes from former pupils, these pastoral skills and her dedication to her subject are recurring themes: "I still vividly remember, three decades later, her kindness, empathy and ability to communicate a passion for chemistry to young boys."

"It was due to her enthusiasm for the subject and skill to get the best out of her students that I studied chemistry at university"

"She was the perfect combination of caring and no-nonsense. Exactly what a boy of 13 to 18 needed"

She was a driving force behind the introduction of the international baccalaureate as an alternative to A levels and, when the school went co-educational in the sixth form in 2010, she became a natural mentor to new generations of King's girls.

Heather McKissack was also asked to co-ordinate the professional development of fellow King's teachers and handed the sensitive task of devising a system for reviewing staff performance. Writing in the school magazine, her colleague Harry Chapman called it "thorough but humane."

Another observed: "Heather would walk around with a review in her head, thinking, probing, asking questions, and then would come the rock-solid advice. And sometimes that advice could be pretty pointed."

A third colleague summed it up perfectly: "She was a tutor to us all."

Heather Lyn McKissack was born in Croydon on November 5, 1953. When she was two, she went missing from the family home and was found an hour later in a sweet shop a mile away. She told her parents that she had simply "gone for a walk" – an early hint at the later Heather lifestyle. She grew up in Africa where her father was sent by Standard Chartered Bank to open new branches in both Zimbabwe and Zambia, Southern and Northern Rhodesia as they then were. Parents Ross and Marge, together with Heather and her younger sister Julie, moved house more than 20 times, so a stable base for education was required. The girls boarded at Nagle House Convent in Mashonaland, a flight and minibus journey from home. On the Central African Airways planes the schoolgirl Heather, with her Shirley Temple style curls, would enthusiastically help the cabin crew serve snacks to fellow passengers – another sign of a lifelong trait; her talent for, and occasional insistence on, organising. Unsurprisingly, Heather was made head girl at Nagle – but she was "quite a cheeky head girl", according to a schoolfriend.

She returned to England in 1972 to take a first in chemistry at Sussex University. Intent on further research in molecular science, she went to Brasenose College, Oxford but, after a term, found her vocation and switched to a teaching qualification.

Always Miss McKissack at King's, Heather Ray, as her friends knew her, was a talented sportswoman – a junior tennis champion in Zambia, excellent school hockey player and, later on, playing golf to a handicap of eight. Many of her closest friendships were formed at Royal Mid-Surrey and Royal Wimbledon golf clubs. She completed four marathons and climbed Kilimanjaro, Mont Blanc twice, and the Cotopaxi volcano in Ecuador. She rarely allowed herself the luxury of sitting down, rising at five on weekday mornings to run or walk around Richmond Park – a place she loved – or swim 100 lengths of the school pool.

It is an occupational hazard for long-serving and devoted teachers to be compared to Charles Chipping, the hero of "Goodbye Mr Chips", James Hilton's 1934 novella and the academy award winning film, starring Robert Donat and Greer Garson. Heather McKissack, like the latin master Chips, was certainly much-loved and respected, almost an institution at the school. Unlike him, she did not have to wait until late in life to find her soul mate. She was happily married to Ian Ray for more than 40 years, the two students having met at Sussex University. And, in stark contrast to Chips, she died at a tragically early age, from cancer. She made no concessions to the gruelling bouts of chemotherapy and her last two years were almost as full and active as the first 62. At the end, she

was too weak to walk in Richmond Park but had been driving through it with Ian when she died on the way back to their home in Twickenham on June 30 2018.