

Your Royal Highness, your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to take you to one of those rainy and miserable days that only late autumn in the Yorkshire dales can throw at you. I was with Steve Hall, Howard Waghorn and Tony Severs, all of us in our final year at school. We were wet, tired and cold and actually Steve Hall got food poisoning and was picked up by his mum - the shame of it! However, we (even Steve) were happy. Wet, tired, cold, blistered feet, aching back, but still happy?? It's can only be a DoE expedition. My expedition experience, like them all, had that special power to turn rain into sunny thoughts, tiredness into enthusiasm and blistered feet into satisfyingly poppable badges of honour. It's the expeditions we remember, the stories we tell.

As the Headmaster of the English College in Prague, I often bump into and chat to our award holders but on being asked to speak tonight I decided to have lunch with a few of our them to dig a little deeper. It was one of those slightly awkward Headmaster-student lunches where the sandwiches remained untouched but there was no such reservation in their enthusiasm to talk about their experiences. Of course heroically, painfully stories of their expeditions spilled out in the first half of our conversation. Their blisters were the size of our dinner plates, the rain drops so much bigger than those in Yorkshire!

In the last 20 years at the English College I estimate we've ran around 300 expeditions, 15,000

kilometres if you speak speak fitbit 80 million? steps. However, what was interesting for me and brings us to my main point is that in the second half of the conversation, as the sandwiches gradually curled up at the edges, the students chatter quietened and drifted to their service experiences - as they continued to talk I began to realise that their service experiences were the most special and transformative. Without these experiences:

Natalie would not have understood the simple power of a smile at the orphanage she raised tens of thousands of crowns for.

Frantiska would not have realised the enthusiasm and confidence she could impart to shy, young drama students.

Barbora would not have really understood the emotional turmoil felt by a struggling mother at risk of having her children taken into foster care.

...and Krystof would not have understood the challenging reality of parents living with two children with autism

So let's not worry about steps, kilometres, let's forget blisters the size of dinner plates. The memories of the expeditions look after themselves. But hidden in there, and without the anecdotal fanfare is transformative power of their experiences in the service of others, the discovery of their power to commit to something over a long period of time, their perseverance, their engagement with people from other walks of life. In short, to become more than they were before. Transformative that is, for me, the adjective I most associate with the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award.

I see these transformations on a student level. However, Jiri and Tomas from the Executive Board and the International Award Office see transformative power at the entire programme level. They dare to imagine this transformative power as the programme reaches into the lives of many more young Czech people, reaching across all walks of life all the way across the spectrum even into young offender lives, reaching out irrespective of social advantage or life chances. If I am being honest my students benefit from so many things already and the Award is the icing on the cake. Giving these opportunities to thousands of more young people in the Czech Republic is what tonight is about.

When - and knowing Jiri and Tomas this is not an if, this is a “when” - the programme moves from 3,000 young people to 12,000 to 50,000, I can dream that the English College in Prague, far from being one of the biggest Award centres, would be just a tiny dot of light in a galaxy of full or award centres, teeming with award holders. So unlike me but exactly like the young award holders themselves Jiri and the board, Tomas and his staff don't dream, they imagine, they do and they make things happen. Thank you for supporting them tonight.