

“Heard of breaking the glass ceiling? There isn’t just one. There’s layers of them.”

An Interview with the first female Provost of Trinity College: Professor Linda Doyle

The historic grounds of Trinity College Dublin have been walked by some of the most iconic characters and personalities, from the very real Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker to Sally Rooney’s brain-children Connell and Marianne and Erika McGann’s hungry cat Pangur Bán. Walking through the wide entrance arch, it’s difficult not to feel some connection with the university’s famed 430 year history. I was on my way to meet Professor Linda Doyle. The first woman to hold the position of Provost in Trinity. My mission was to find out what it is like being the trailblazing matriarch of such a significant part of Ireland’s history.

I waited in a comfortable seating room, decorated, to my surprise in a modern fashion, a strange contrast to the medieval building through the window above the plush yellow armchair. An ink print on the wall read *“sisters quench thy thirst but not thy rage”* and a book on the paintings and memory of Jack B. Yeats rested nonchalantly on the timber hall stand. The office of the Provost herself had the same sense of modernity to it and I was sitting facing Professor Doyle at the sleek, white meeting table.

She spoke fondly of her parents. Her father had to leave school at 16 and her mother even earlier than that. She said education is something her mother always thought was really important. Prof. Doyle described coming home from an open day at UCC and hearing speakers talk about engineering. She thought *“that’s really interesting. I want to do that”*. I asked her how her parents felt about her entering such a male dominated field and in her own words, *“in some kind of maybe naive, but lovely way, they had no preconceived notions”*. She described that as empowering. The times being different then, she didn’t even realise the overwhelming majority of males in the subject. She made it clear that she knows not everyone has the same experience as her, saying she hates *“people to make statements and expect that to be the experience for everyone”* but how she found engineers to be people who just want to solve literal problems, *“they’re driving for the solution, and they don’t really care who’s suggesting it”*. She told me that Trinity has changed an awful lot in the past decades and despite there being many more opportunities than there were then, it can be quite helpful

in all pursuits (even leadership ones) when you just care that the job gets done, not about who is doing it.

In the Professor's experience running for Provost, in a historic election of three female candidates, she told me "it was very interesting, and people realised it was time for there to be a woman". She told me that not only were they great candidates but "it both removed women from the equation and put the women in the forefront at the exact same time". She described this effect as a "parallel" that in the end was "quite useful" as had there been a mixture of male and female candidates, "they would have spent all the time asking the women, you know, what do you think about being a woman versus being a man?".

We spoke about the symbolism of being a woman in such a position. "I think it's hugely important symbolically", she told me, she seemed to rise with a sense of pride as she said "I think it also symbolises a modernity or 'modern-ness' about Trinity". Her powerful conclusion for the impact on other women was "If you can't see it, you can't be it". For her however, it was less about the symbolism, she told me "I just think of myself as a person who has a job to do and wants to do that to the best of their ability."

As a young woman myself, it was important for me to ask what the Professor's advice would be, for other women, young and old, who have ambitions and dreams to achieve.

Gesticulating passionately, she said "I think women and young women are very, very good at joining dots and big picture stuff and an awful lot of leadership is about that kind of thing". She looked me right in the eye and told me definitively "don't be afraid to put your hand up". This to me, felt like the main message. To all out there who face adversity daily, Professor Doyle, the new "mother of the university" is an example of someone who isn't afraid to put her hand up. And shatter through layers of glass ceilings.