

Audio scripts

M.: Good morning, everyone! What a pleasure it is to be here today!

I haven't been back since my own graduation five years ago. It's comforting for me to see that so many teachers are new and realize that the school hasn't changed that much since I left.

My name's Martin and, as I said, I graduated from this school 5 years ago. Since then, life has been very interesting. First of all, I took a gap year and travelled to Africa to work as a volunteer. After a very rich, rewarding year, full of work, precious new friendships, discovering new abilities, I am feeling, I've made a positive difference in peoples' lives. I returned home and started my university course studying agriculture. This became even more important to me after learning so much about crops, the development and the challenges of the African climate. So, it was a very special time.

Now, I'm employed by a leading agricultural firm and travel around farms and businesses, advising on all matters to do with agriculture. It is very rewarding work. Not only is it an area which I'm keen on, but it also involves travelling around the country and meeting some very interesting people. No two days are the same. Life in an office working to desk is now unimaginable for me.

But in addition, when I was your age, this life would have been an impossible dream. In middle school I was terribly unhappy. I was shy, physically weak, rather overweight. I also had no real friends. I was often the only one in class whose back was kicked down a hole, who was last to be picked for the sports teams and was laughed at if I tried to answer questions and got it wrong. I was a lonely teenager who felt no one understood me and no one liked me, and, actually, it wasn't far from the truth.

In those days no one really talked about bullying although it is exactly what was happening to me. I was being bullied. So, what changed? I grew older, of course, that's alone wouldn't have been enough. I would still have been a boy people would laugh at, who wasn't much good at anything, who was afraid of everybody.

Sport was really popular then, as it is now, but PE classes were not my strength, to put it mildly. In fact, I had no talent for anything. I used to go on long walks just to get away and avoid my mother asking me how my day in school have been and making suggestions about the things I could do and why didn't I cheer up and so on and so on. On my daily walks I took a different route each day, hoping that I wouldn't meet anyone I knew.

On a couple of occasions, a young runner passed me and always greeted me in a friendly way. I started to look out for him and I was sorry on the days when I didn't see him. One day he ran along beside me and we started to chat. He asked why I was walking and what was tough. I, actually, told him. He went saying if I walked so much it wouldn't be a hard step to start jogging instead. He suggested I start off by just walking 20 steps and then running the same number. When that got easy he said it was time to increase the number of steps. It was the first time in ages anyone had been interested in me. But still I thought it was a stupid idea. I carried on just walking.

A week or so later, the same conversation took place. But this time he challenged me to make a change in my life. Maybe I could change things about myself that I didn't like. One small step at a time. The next day I wore my sports shoe on my morning walk. When I was sure no one was around to see me, I tentatively started to run. I huffed and I puffed... 20 steps were just too many. I gave up. But my new friend spotted me later and suggested I drop the number and start with whatever I could do and walk up from there. He said he was looking forward to us being up to run together one day. What a joke! That's what I thought back then. But I took him up on it simply because no one in the world was interested in me, but he was.

The year went on. Autumn became winter and then, finally, spring. By then, I could run 5 kilometres, slow, but steady. And I was losing weight, too. My new friend started getting me to run faster and longer as the weeks passed until we reached a point where we went for a run together. I never ran so far or so fast as we did that day. I'm sure he slowed down for me, but I felt like a king when we finally finished.

Meanwhile, back at school, Sports Day was approaching. I signed up for the big one - for cross country season was drawing to a close, a final event - a 10-km cross country run. On the day of the race my heart was in my mouth. A couple of my year boys laughed when they saw me. That was loud! What I thought I was doing that! I didn't listen. The starting pistol went and off we ran. I stayed in the middle of a pack not wanting to be left behind too soon but found it really wasn't that hard anymore. I felt like a real runner. I was even able to pick up the pace a bit towards the end as I saw the finishing line and site. The cross country coach came over later and asked where I trained or what my personal best times were. I had to admit that I ran with a friend and had no idea about best personal times. He said, 'You'll be training on Tuesdays, 4 till 6.30 p.m., no excuses! We'll make a champion of you!' And so it was.

Running changed my life. My image in the school changed. My self-confidence grew. Suddenly, people wanted to talk to me and no one laughed at me anymore. Even my parents started coming to races and cheering me on. I continued to run with my friend, of course. And he listened when I told what a difference he made to my life and how grateful I was to him. He said, he'd done nothing. But that I'd seen an opportunity and taken it. And that should be my lesson for life!

I hope for you all that you, too, find plenty of opportunities and do not waste them! Make the very best of your lives! I wish you every success in your future endeavours! It all starts with a small change and how you see yourself! Thank you for listening!