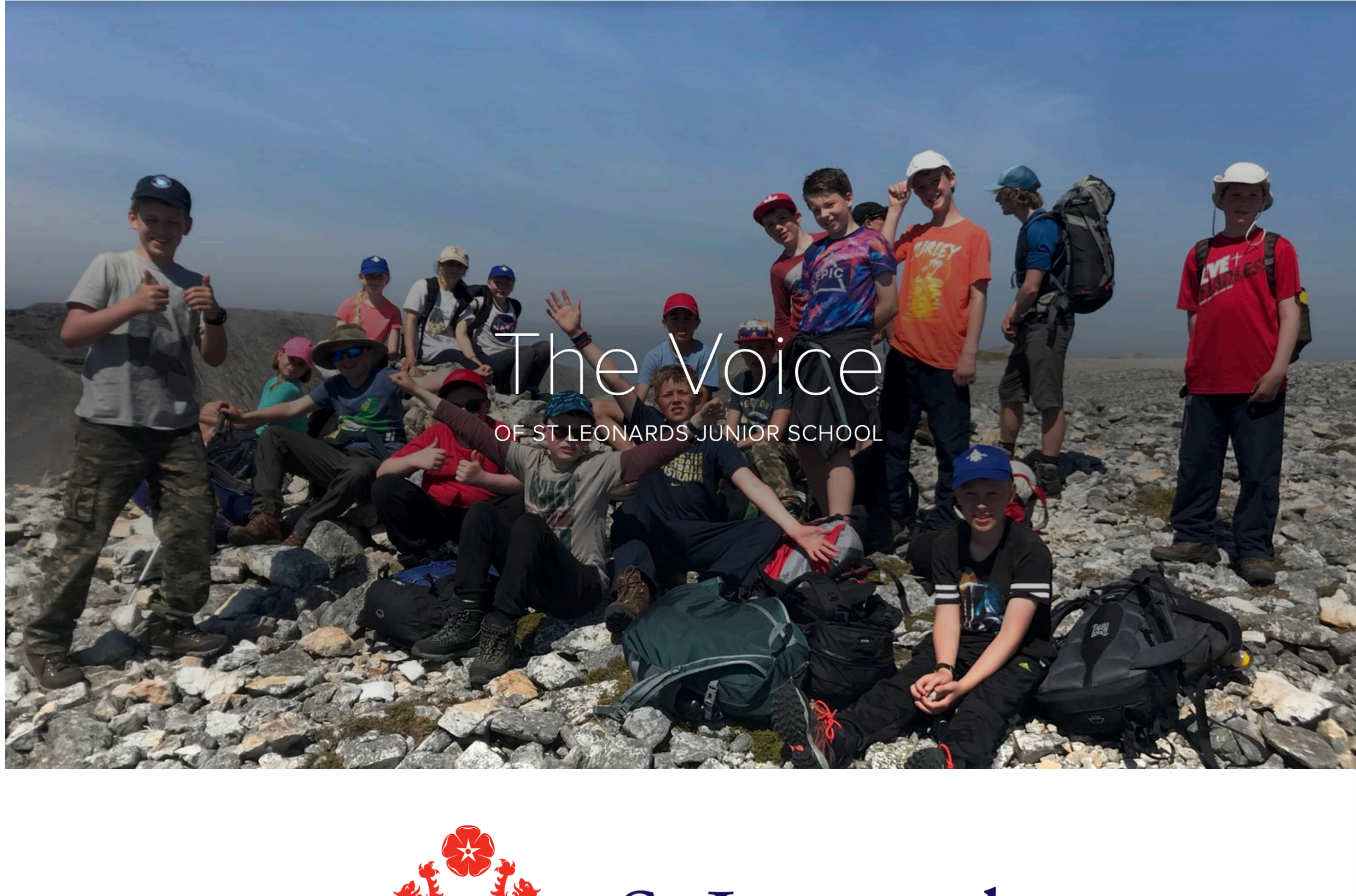




St Leonards

St Andrews, Fife

Friday, 8 June 2018

We see it, we believe it, we live it

BEHIND THE STUDY DOOR

'At dawn they were startled awake by a huge wave breaking over Rosie, as they had nicknamed the boat. Faster than you could say 'deluge', she was filled nearly to her gunwales with foaming sea water. Both men bailed hard for a quarter of an hour to rid her of standing water. Then another wave blasted them. 'It is difficult to describe the experience of a hurricane in a small boat,' John would write. 'The sea becomes a giant switchback with moving hills and valleys, all covered with foam which likes rather like icing on cake.' The worst of the storm swallowed them for six hours and then spit them out. Afterward, cooking dinner in the gathering darkness, they felt cold, wet, but triumphant, almost euphoric. The first spring hurricane in sixty years and they had survived.' (Extract from oceanrowing.com)

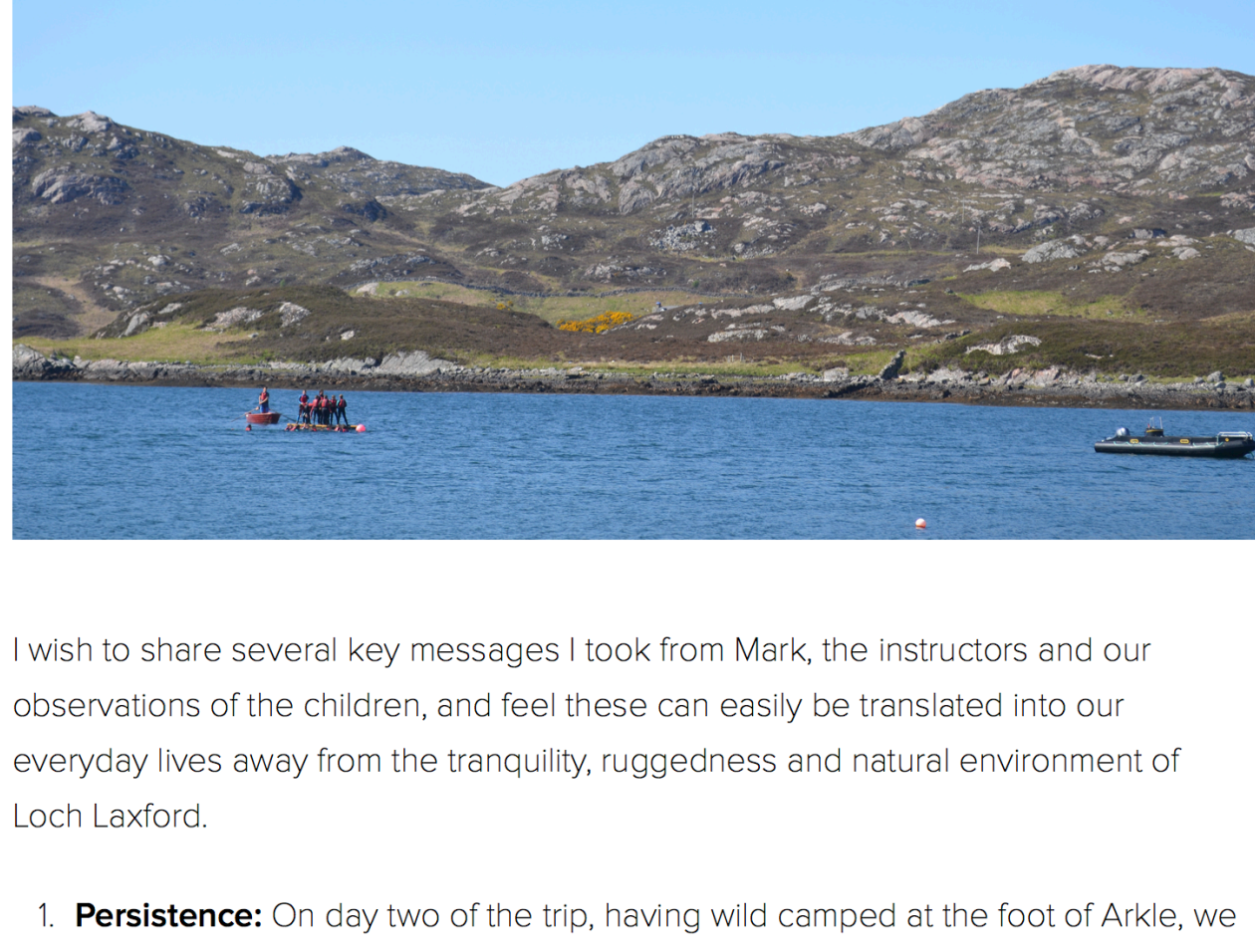
On 4 June 1966, two men, John Ridgway and Chay Blyth set off from Orleans to become the first people to row across the Atlantic. This account, approximately two weeks into their 92-day adventure, captures some of the challenges they experienced along the way.

A group of Year 7s, accompanied by Duncan Barrable, Adele Neave and I, spent Half Term at the Ridgway Outdoor Adventure School on the north-west coast of Scotland. Following his mammoth rowing feat, John Ridgway set up this adventure school, which, 40 years later, is run by his daughter, Rebecca (the first woman to canoe around the Cape Horn) and her partner, Mark. As we all looked in awe at 'English Rose III', the rowing boat he used still perfectly preserved in one of their sheds on this beautiful sea loch, we were struck by the guiding principles that John resolved to keep for the rest of his life during the 92 days he spent battling waves, sharks, physical exhaustion and sleep deprivation and the boredom one would imagine enduring. It was here that he decided, were he to survive the challenge, he would live his life by: **positive thinking, self-reliance and leaving people and places better than when you found them.**

It is by these simple, yet powerful guiding principles that the Ridgway Centre focuses its courses on. This was an extraordinary experience for us all, and one that taught the children a great deal about themselves and, critically, what they are truly capable of.



We very much hope this week-long adventure to this stunning corner of Scotland, just 12 miles from Cape Wrath, will become an annual residential trip for our Year 7s, and one where they will enjoy the beauty of the scenery, the remoteness without any signal, technology or distraction, the stretch and challenge the activities offer and the complete freedom and trust placed on the pupils, especially their night on 'Survival Island', the pinnacle of the trip, and where the guiding principles are so important.



I wish to share several key messages I took from Mark, the instructors and our observations of the children, and feel these can easily be translated into our everyday lives away from the tranquillity, ruggedness and natural environment of Loch Laxford.

1. **Persistence:** On day two of the trip, having wild camped at the foot of Arkie, we climbed to the peak at 880m. It was a very hot, still day and this took its toll on everyone, especially after a night outdoors. In the reflections afterwards, the boys and girls quickly came to realise that it was not only positive thinking that got them to the top, it was also showing persistence. In such a connected, interactive world, it is very rare at this age to find yourself engaged in just one activity for eight hours: quite literally, putting one foot in front of another. Not only did this prove the value of persistence, but also allowed the boys and girls, for a precious few hours, time to communicate to one another in meaningful conversation and also to individually reflect on their own strengths, motivation, positivity and self-reliance. As Mark, the lead instructor pointed out, having time to self-reflect is so much more powerful for a young person than having to be 'reflected at' by an adult.
2. **Communication:** The success of the week, and in particular the night on survival island where the group literally had to fend for themselves, depended entirely on good communication skills. A great deal of responsibility was given to the children themselves to make decisions, and at every opportunity the instructors would stand back and allow the young people figure things out for themselves (a very powerful and important exercise for a generation used to such adult interventions). This required the children to very quickly learn some important communication skills: it is impossible to hear if two or more people talk at once; poor communication is often the cause of most problems with friendships, teams and relationships; the importance of gauging someone's emotional reactions are just as important as their verbal communication, hence why group decisions were much more effective if they were sat in a circle; being able to let your ideas go if someone else has a more effective idea (this also ties into the value of showing genuine respect for one another).
3. **'Type B fun':** Some of the activities provided instant fun for the children: kayaking, raft race, beach day, abseiling. Some, such as the search-to-survive and mountain climb, were labelled to the group as 'type B fun', not necessarily providing instant fun for them, most probably hard work and at times tough going, but once complete, you would realise that the activity was in fact rather good fun, and immensely rewarding. Again, this is such an important lesson for us all to learn, and in a way links with perseverance. The temptation for the groups on being dropped off by boat on Survival Island might have been to run around and enjoy the instant freedom, perhaps leaving the fire starting, foraging, cooking and shelter building until later on. However, they realised that in order to have fun later on, they would need to invest two hours' hard work at the start of their night to ensure they were fed and had adequate shelter for the night.
4. **The power of positive thinking, and in a group setting not allowing your negative thoughts to impact on others:** This was perhaps the most challenging lesson to learn, and one that became so very clear to many of the group when they reached the summit of Arkie, came off Survival Island at 7:00am on Thursday morning and managed to reach the peak of some pretty tough climbs. In their reflections at the end of the week, several children cited a shift from a negative mindset to positive thinking as a defining moment of the week for them. Positive thinking is also reflective in how you view others positively, and I was struck by a rather lovely activity on the final evening: each member of the group had to write something positive about the person to their left, then give them the note to keep. This was a heartwarming moment for sure, and I hope these notes are kept for ever. Positive thinking, and seeing the very best in others is such an important feature of living a happy and fulfilled life.



The challenge of building a raft as a team seems such an easy task. I have no doubt that any of you that have done this will wholeheartedly agree that it pretty quickly escalates into squabbles, plenty of critics and loud voices, yet very little leadership or teamwork.



In most cases, whether for adults or children, building a raft out of eight barrels, six wooden poles and eight metres of rope would very quickly fail. This would have been the case for our Year 7 group on the first day of the adventure week, however on day four when this challenge was put to them, I saw the following skills deployed in full: **good communication, leadership, teamwork, positive thinking, the ability to listen to others and step back if needed, persistence, self-reliance and mutual respect.** As a result, two brilliantly designed rafts were pretty quickly constructed, and raced the following morning (Mr Barrable still isn't speaking to me).

One overarching thing I learned from the whole experience was that these children, as individuals and as a group, were far more capable than I ever imagined them to be. Give children true responsibility, freedom, trust and the encouragement to be self-reliant and positive, and they will far surpass their own and our expectations.



The Ridgway is a very special place indeed, but I hope that the three guiding principles will be translated into everyday life for these very talented young people. John Ridgway's principle aim for the outdoor school remains the same as in 1969:

'The main experience is a direct contact between the individual and the real world in which he lives yet seldom sees.' (John Ridgway, 1970).

Wishing all St Leonards families a happy weekend, wherever your adventures take you.

William Goldsmith