Reaching for the stars: Four graduates in Massachusetts are on the right to move on and leave the past behind.

And yet we carry the sins of our fathers with us. Our children are no longer born free in this Ireland of ours. This was on the mind of Dr. Pepper Cremin in this week, as he retired as president of Mary Immaculate College after serving 35 years in education.

"I want our children to have the opportunity to blossom and not to be burdened by the sins of others or their mistakes." he said. "The Government of this country has a duty to provide the best possible education for all children."

And yet his personal approach is at odds with the cuts taken in Dublin which affect institutions, students and staff around the country. Dr. Cremin can't pass a student in the halls or the college gates without talking to them, find out their goals, and encouraging them to do what they were set out to do.

While the life or dream job we had idealistically imagined might not find us straight away, we cannot, can we? We must stay confident, and we must stay strong.

Prof. Barry invoked the words of Nelson Mandela: "There is no power to be found in playing small, in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living."

"But first, let me say that every voice, every choice, and every road that will get you closer to where you want to be," said Prof. Barry. It is a message to everyone trying to find their place in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Great speeches to inspire us all

EACH year professor Don Barry, president of the University of Limerick, delivers a stirring speech to up to 1,500 graduates about to make their way into a lesser certain, big bad world. This year was no different.

"Pause for a moment," he said, "take a step back. - How do you feel? - Breathe it in."

In one sense, it was reminiscent of Liam Lynch's famous speech Sunscreen, which offers advice to those graduating and yet recognizes the reality of the world we live in. It speaks of life's uncertainties, triumphs, failures, of just how the race is long, but in the end it is only with yourself.

"Whatever you do, don't congratulate yourself too much, or berate yourself either. Your choices are half-chance. So are everybody else's" is one of the many memorable lines from Lynch's speech.

A good education, however, can boost those chances and open doors to a life you might not otherwise have known. While the world around us is increasingly uncertain, it is only in certainty in ourselves which will pull us through. That was the message in the University of Limerick's event.

SEPTEMBER 1963 and Limerick was consumed by the drama of an election campaign with Fianna Fáil woolly wipers to stick with Lemass in reversing emigration and Labour's Frank Aiken saying that the population of the city had fallen by 11,000 in five years and "letters home are no substitute for the absence of our young people".

There were thrills and spills aplenty in the local cinemas, which were showing "The Magnificent Seven", "The Guns of Navarone" and Hitchcock's "Psycho".

But nothing dreamt up in Hollywood could have prepared the people of Limerick and Shannon for the drama that befell them on September 10, when an airliner dropped from the sky suddenly after take-off, killing all 118 on board.

In the Woodrow Wilson, known as the non-coded or un-registered President A Line, which had only set up in business earlier that year. Most of the passengers were German steel workers and farmers on a chartered trip from Dusseldorf to Chicago via Shannon and Manchester, Newfoundlard. It took off in fog shortly before 6am before plunging into the Estuary a minute after take-off.

"It was one of the worst crashes ever in Shannon," said journalist Arthur Quinnian said this week, "and there had been a number of them in the years leading up to it. Thankfully, it has been a long time since we have seen anything like that in Shannon."

Mr. Quinnian said scores of volunteers gathered in the hours that followed to search the wreckage for survivors, taking boats when the tide was in and standing knee-deep in the algae when the waters receded.

"It was apparent straightaway that they were dealing with a recovery rather than a rescue operation," Mr. Quinnian said. Over 20 men attached to the Board of Works were detailed to lay a railway line over the mouth of the river along the crash site half a mile from shore and three tons of hay were brought in to prevent the tracks from sinking.

At an inquest two days after the tragedy, Shannon Airport Fire chief John O'Leary said the first thing he saw was the tail of the jet sticking out of the mud. Arriving at the wreck, he broke in some of the perishables but could see no signs of life, only "a few decks of playing cards, a water bottle, a knife"

Shuddering in the water away from the plane was a young female passenger who was waving at Mr. O'Leary's boat. She was handed ashore and examined by the airport medical officer Dr. William Flynn, who died shortly afterwards.

Other victims included American stewardess Erica Urban, a regular visitor to Shannon who had just started a new job with President, and Joseph Beucher, a Swiss Austrian banker on his way to Canada to shoot moose. Pieces of his hunting guns were later found among the debris.

Dr. Flynn, who performed post-mortem on 41 of the victims, described horrendous scenes of bodies which had been decapitated and otherwise disembowelled.

And so it was a gruesome task for Limerick undertaker Frank Thompson who was called in to supply over 60 coffins and prepare the remains to be sent home.

Mr. Thompson drafted in the specialist team of six embalmers and six other assistants who worked around the clock in the days after the crash.

Relatives of the deceased, diplomats from Germany and Austria, representatives of President Airlines and US officials had by now come to Shannon and all were grateful for the work of Frank Thompson.

"At Shannon Airport, one was very conscious of the efficient manner in which a local firm had handled such a difficult job," the Limerick Leader of September 21 reported.

"It must have been horrendous," said John Thompson, who took over the funeral home after his late father.

Frank Thompson himself admitted that while it was "a big job to do". It was actually nothing new for the firm. President was in fact the fourth air disaster Thompson's had dealt with inside seven years.

A KLM plane had also ended up in the Estuary and taking off at Shannon in 1964, killing 38 people. Frank Thompson was sent to Galway six years later after 99 people were killed when another KLM airliner crashed 90 miles off the west coast. And in 1965, he was again called upon when an Altitalia plane crashed into Conleghan graveyard near Newport-on-Fergus, claiming 34.

Mr. Thompson, who passed away a number of years ago, told Tony Browne in an RLG interview in September 1999 that by the time of the President disaster, he was almost used to this type of work.

"You don't know the people for a start, which helps, and..."
in Shannon

whom American stewardess Erica Urban, inset, pictured at the crew hostels in Shannon, was one of 63 victims

then you are just so keyed up with the amount of work you have to do. So I didn’t find it too tough (emotionally),” Mr Thompson said.

Contemporary reports suggest the airline paid Thompson’s five-figure sum as they arranged to repatriate the victims’ remains to Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Accident reports were inconclusive as to what caused the crash, with equipment or mechanical failure one possibility. Air traffic control at Shannon had cleared the pilot to turn right after take-off but he instead banked left and plunged into the Shannon scarcely a minute into the flight. The artificial horizon, which reads altitude, may have been defective. Or there may have been a fault with the fuel, the hinged flaps on wings which help pilots roll the aircraft. Foggy conditions on the morning of September 10 had reduced visibility to less than 200 yards, while crew fatigue was mentioned as another possible cause.

Concerns were soon being expressed in the industry over the safety record of the growing non-scheduled sector, of which President was part. A short-lived venture, the Woodrow Wilson was one of only three planes the company owned and President was soon in trading difficulties.

A Time magazine article of February 1963 claimed the “non-skids” were cutting corners. The piece, which mentions the Shannon crash, was written shortly after US Army recruits were killed after another non-scheduled operator, Imperial, crashed in Virginia. “Surpassing after World War II as ex-military pilots bought dirt-cheap surplus cargo planes, the non-skids grew like weeds and were treated with an air of benevolent indulgence by the federal regulatory agencies. Politicians championed the fare-cutting non-skids as the little guys who were fighting the big guys, e.g. the scheduled airlines,” the article states.

After the Shannon and Virginia crashes, the US Federal Aviation Administration looked anew at the sector and found evidence of fraudulent maintenance reports, certification breaches, and undertrained and overworked crews.

“Statistically, it turned out to be more than 20 times as dangerous to fly on a non-skid as on a scheduled airline,” the Time article went on.

Whatever caused the Shannon disaster, people on the ground knew on take-off that something had gone seriously wrong on the morning of September 10, 1961.

Tired of the continuous noise and vibrations, Sara Donlon had been lobbying Transport Minister Kirsten Childers to be rehoused away from her thatched cottage at Kinneras South. But there was something especially peculiar about the Woodrow Wilson which, she told the Limerick Leader, had caused her calves to start crying.

“This one on Sunday was so low that I am sure I could have hit it with a sod of turf,” she said.

Disaster: An aerial shot of the crash scene taken by Donal McMonagle

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Tough job: Late city undertaker Frank Thompson, pictured here in the 1950s, had to supply over 80 coffins for the crash victims