

## **ANDY KRATSI: PRESIDENT OF SCHOOL COUNCIL, ST ALBANS SECONDARY COLLEGE**



We came to Australia in August 1955. My ancestry is Greek, but I was born in Egypt, as were my parents. My grandparents were migrants from the Greek Islands, the Dodecanese, and Rhodes is the capital. My father's side came from Kastellorizon, the island closest to Turkey, and my mother's side came from Leros. The Dodecanese were occupied by the Italians until - I wouldn't be surprised if it was - 1946, when the last one was handed over. The grandparents migrated independently to Egypt in the 1800s. I was born there in 1944.

Multiculturalism was very much alive in Egypt during those years, particularly in the 'thirties and 'forties, but even in the early 1900s, because of the arrival of people from different places like Italy, Malta, Cyprus, Greece, Armenia ... People were looking for a new life, they found it in Egypt, and became part of that cosmopolitan population because they brought a little bit of Europe with them. We were very much part of the lifestyle.

My father spoke seven languages; he was by no means a highly educated man but spoke seven languages and learnt that through community contact. My mother was the same. She finished Grade 4 at primary school level but educational standards were at a higher level even at primary school and general knowledge was important, maths, writing and languages, because it was a multicultural nation. You had to know Egyptian; Arabic was the compulsory subject.

I learnt Arabic at a young age but am ashamed to admit that I can no longer read or write that any more. Between 1944, when I was born, and 1955, when we left, I had a good introduction to life and culture in Egypt.

### **Emigrating to Australia**

My family were sponsored to come to Australia as independent migrants, and were paying off the fares to a Catholic organisation in Fitzroy for about five years. We were sponsored by my uncle, my mother's brother, who was living in Pennel Avenue, St Albans. I can still remember that first day stopping at the Braybrook Hotel. Ballarat Road was an empty stretch and when you got over the bridge leading to St Albans it was as flat as a desert; it was barren land, and even along the railway line there was nothing. The one factory in St Albans Road when you first came over the bridge was Rubbertex, then nothing until well after Furlong Road. We stayed with my uncle until dad got a job at Nettlefolds, and that was his job for all the years that he worked here. In Egypt he made a living as a salesman, but here he became a process worker.

### **Settling in St Albans**

When we first arrived we were living in Albion for a little while and I went to Grade 6 at the Albion Primary School from August 1955 to the end of the year. Then we came to St Albans and lived in View Street. Nearly every second person in the street was either German or Polish.

Once dad was working we were able to start renting a place at 90 View Street. Both mum and dad worked, as did many of the couples who settled in St Albans. Mum had never worked in a factory in all her life until she came here. I'm sure it was the same for many families of the other nationalities. My parents made friends quickly with the Polish people next door; the wife worked at a tannery called Pizzeys in Richmond, and got mum a job there. It was hard work, particularly for women. They had to stretch hides and stood in water most of the day. Mum worked from 6:00 in the morning to 6:00 in the evening, so she would leave pretty early and come home pretty late. Dad worked similar hours, so they both worked pretty hard.

Dad would tell me that at the end of the week people would say: "Hey, Steve. Payday today. We going to the pub?"

Dad always said no: "No pub for me. I've got my family." He didn't want people to think that he didn't want to mix, but they had to get this money together. In no time they got some money to pay the deposit on the property at 230 Main Road East, opposite the High School site. They built a home and the family lived there for quite a few years. I just walked across the road and was at school. I was never late for school, and if I ever forgot my watch I could always jump over the fence and go home for it.

## Learning English

When I first came to Australia I had a little bit of English because we had studied it in Egypt, but I don't think I was very proficient. I can remember on the long stretch between Colombo and Fremantle being the only one in our group who could ask questions. I would ask in very round tones, "When do we ar-rive in Au-stra-lia?" So I spoke English to that extent.

When I was at Albion Primary School a kid would take me for a walk around the school and tell me the name of objects as he pointed to them: table, door, fence, window, and so on. For a while I thought clouds were called 'flag' because the kid was pointing to the flag but I thought he was pointing to the clouds behind the flag. That's the sort of problem I had in starting off in a full English language school. English expression was a battle for us at the start. If you didn't do well in the early years, when you were doing English Literature in Form 5 and 6 it was hard stuff reading the literature and answering the questions on what you had read. I got around it by doing Form 4 twice. My marks weren't too good first time round because my English was not well developed. Redoing the intermediate level meant I was ready to go on. I was also more mature by then.

## High School

I remember vividly when I started at St Albans High School in 1956, maybe because I was interested in school and took a part in it.



St Albans High School's inaugural year, Form 1d. Andy Kratsis is in the back row, first on the left.

With Jeff Barlow I was one of the first bell monitors at the school in 1957. It was only a hand bell at the time, but I had a watch, which was my qualification for the job. A teacher carried out this task when the school started at Sunshine and then it was shared by students when we came to St Albans in 1957.

Having a watch was a big thing then. I don't know what I used to do but I must have been a bit tough on the watch; it was my dad's, even though I wore it to school. My father would say "You can't play football while you've wearing your watch," so every time it broke I put it back where it belonged. My dad went through five watches when I was at High School.

The school was like a family in those days. In the first year there were about 150 students. For a lot of us, because we were migrants, it was a learning experience in more ways than just academically. We had between 25 and 30 students per class. There were many people who were freshly arrived migrants: Polish people, German people, Italian people, a few Yugoslavs, all sorts of nationalities. The Maltese and Croatians came a bit later. There were not many Greek migrants at this stage, they came later also.

The senior years at the High School were serious years. There weren't many senior students as a lot of people went to Sunshine to complete their Matric.

People took an interest in sport, and I can remember from time to time surreptitiously listening to overseas test cricket on our own little radio sets in the library. People are sports-minded now, but it was different then. Doc Walsh was always sports minded and he was a mad South Melbourne supporter. He was also the sports master for the school. I remember him saying things like: "As Magellan arrived in Portugal in ... Joe, did you mark out the goal squares for today?" Girls didn't like him because he was always interested in boys' sport. But he was a fair teacher. At that time the girls were separated from the boys - that was the tradition, though it was changing, because in the later years I sat behind girls in the same row. We had prefects, of course. They were very, very strict.



House Captains (Front): M Neskov (J), E Herman (J), B Listopad (War), C Biele (War), Mrs J Fielder, M McCulloch (Wat), F Honey (Wat), E Richards (K), J Darul (K) Vice Captains (Back): L Cameron (J), J Iredale (J), A Kratsis (War), B Babicz (War), Mr L Burchell, C Grabowski (Wat), R Priest (Wat), S Demchshyn (K), L Labko (K); 1961.

## **Starting Work**

My first job after high school was in the Bank of New South Wales, and my first posting was at the St Albans Branch, 48 Alfrieda Street. I worked there for nearly four years. My last posting was at the Brooklyn Branch in Geelong Road. The day after I left there, Ronald Ryan and his accomplice Walker robbed that particular branch. My ex-colleagues were telling me they were ducking for cover because some shots were fired. Ryan and Walker were eventually arrested.

After finishing with the bank I became a costing clerk at Hardie Rubber, previously Rubbertex. I did that job for nearly three years. Then a manager from my banking days said there was job going at British Tube Mills, so I applied for that and did that for ten years.

## **Tertiary Studies**

I then went to college and did my Business Studies Certificate at Footscray Institute. That was in the early 'seventies, when I was in my mid twenties. In 1983-84 I did my Bachelor of Arts in Multicultural Science at VUT. I was so thrilled to be doing the course, even though at times I was tired and the younger students would say, "Andy, wake up - you're snoring." Mr Pascoe was the senior lecturer and I apologised to him for falling asleep, but he understood my situation because I was also working full-time at the time. I did pass the course despite my occasional snooze in class.

## **Working at Massey Ferguson**

After British Tube Mills I went to Massey Ferguson. They used to call me the Chief Tyre Buyer. In fact, I did buy the tyres for all Australia for Massey Ferguson. A lot of the equipment came in a shell state, which was 78% completed, from Germany, Canada, and South America. The other 22%, by law, had to be Australian made. My job was to work out when the equipment was arriving and make sure the correct tyres were available, because the wheels were then installed and they could be moved about. Then in 1976 they came in shell form all the way to the factory in Sunshine.

Massey Ferguson was that part of Sunshine from Ballarat Road all the way to Devonshire Road. It was a big place. I started there as a costing clerk. My boss wasn't formally qualified but he'd been there since the age of 14 and he was 56 at the time, so he'd spent 42 years there. He'd started as the boy who followed the cart and cleaned up the horses' droppings; they'd go from Devonshire Road to the foundries with parts and memo deliveries. Then he became tea boy and later costing clerk. Over 30 years people left, died, or resigned, and he became an important person because he stayed. When they talked of the 1938 header - the farmers who still had one were looking for some screw attached to a fin or something - he'd know what they were talking about and where it was. He worked his way up from being one of the costing clerks to the chief costing clerk.

There were over a million costing cards, one for every part used in the factory. We updated the cards every time there was a change in the price. By the time you got to the millionth card you'd start again. You had a blue pen for normal costing, a red pen for negative, and a pencil for temporary figures. This particular guy had the three taped together so he wouldn't waste time picking up and putting down the pens. Each morning he'd be there at 8:20 doing his exercises before the start of work, then he'd put his head down and work until tea time. He was dedicated to the extreme. Although I was correct in my figures, no one could be as dedicated as he was.

In 1973 it was the Costing Department's job to update all cards to the metric system. After that I became part of the program planning team, where I was involved in buying tyres. My job was also to get the \$4 million stock they had on hand down to \$2 million by making sure the stock-takes were correct and that the old tyres were going out.

## Retrenched

In 1977 there was a downward trend in the Australian agricultural industry, which did a lot of damage to local manufacturing. I was one of 360 people who were retrenched that day - one day you're there, next day you're not. I had been there about five years. One week later I got another job. That's the way things were then: unemployment didn't exist and you didn't have to wait for six months to find your next position. I walked into another job as accounts receivable supervisor, because I'd finished my business studies course by then. I was at Ajax Pumps, near where Wiltshire Files was in Tottenham.

## Holidays in Greece

In 1973, prior to me starting at Massey Ferguson, I went to Greece for the first time. I had married a Greek girl, Athena, and we went to see her family. It was an eye-opener, the way of life there. They were from the Peloponnisos, in Southern Greece, and they lived in a paradise of a place called Pylos. I don't know why people left there, but I haven't lived there so it's easy for me to say. That there were no jobs is the main reason. The Greeks say, even the ones I meet now, that we left to make room for our brothers and sisters to live a proper life. The reduction in the family size must have helped families survive on limited income. The ones who stayed behind in Greece did farming and were able to establish themselves. Twenty years later when the brother who'd migrated to Australia came back to see his family he would see the changes. Socially, they had a better life there. I don't know if you'd consider having a siesta in the afternoon as having a better life, but it certainly made them more relaxed.

I recall going to the town square. Church finished at 9:30 in the morning on a Sunday, and I walked down to the square by the sea. I ordered a bottle of Coke, while a local sitting at the next table ordered a small Turkish coffee. I finished my Coke in about two minutes, guzzled it down, and my neighbour was still drinking his coffee one hour later, as he leisurely read the paper column by column. We could do that also, but we were as wound up as clocks, watching the clock: what time is it? where are we going? They don't have that attitude.

In the evening, it was different to the life of my kids. As soon as we had the evening meal at 6 o'clock the children would disappear upstairs and dress up, because they expected us to take them for a walk as a family. We'd walk down to the square. I recall doing this ritual further inland in Tripoli, which is in Central Peloponnese. To me it was like Pentridge Prison - even though there were beautiful trees - because all I could see were people walking, sometimes 10, 12, 15 abreast, up and down the square. In my imagination I thought this is what it would be like if I were in gaol walking in their little quadrangle. But after that they sat down and had a coffee and a chat, and it was very civilised.

I struck up a friendship with the headmaster of the local school, whose brother was home on holidays from Canada. I also met a local accountant and the chief of police. They invited me to join their group. At 1:00 o'clock, before they had their afternoon meal and siesta, they'd sit and have a coffee or an Ouzo by the sea. The brother from Canada was probably similar to my way of thinking, because he'd say: "We shouldn't be wasting our time here. We should go home and paint Mum's home."

His brother would say: "What's wrong with you? You are a stranger to me. You've been gone twenty years and now you've come here to enjoy yourself. This is holiday time. We are going to enjoy your time here as two brothers. You are a stranger. All you do is keep looking at your watch. Where are we going? We are going nowhere! Forget looking at your watch, forget the time, just relax and enjoy life. All I'm going to remember of you is you looking at your watch. We are not going to paint the house while you are here. Get it out of your mind. Enjoy yourself."

## **Working at St Albans Hotel**

I think we've become too oriented to running with the clock rather than being a bit more relaxed and enjoying life as we go. I've done my share of having two or three jobs at a time. When I was working at Tube Makers and Massey Ferguson I was also working at the St Albans Hotel. In fact I was the first one who worked at the bottle shop there. When I started I knew nothing about the industry but someone was helping me set up the bottle shop. The year I started it was run by Pearl Industries. Mr Pearl also owned the Tottenham Hotel and the Melton Shopping Centre. I knew nothing about the industry but Mr Pearl could tell who was working and he respected people who worked well. He came in Christmas Day and said: "Because you are working for me on your Christmas day I want you to take a bottle home for your family. I reached for a cheap bottle and he said, "No, no. Top shelf." He took me inside and said "Do you like this?" It was an expensive imported Italian liqueur. He gave me a box of those to take home for the family. He was a wonderful guy.

I'll never forget the day we started in March 1968. It was a warm Saturday night and 22 of us were hired for various jobs and to serve drinks, but people were guzzling drinks in the fridge while they were serving, and by the end of the night they were sozzled. I was working to pay off my home and so I wasn't drinking - it was also an honesty thing, and there was another worker with a similar approach. Jack Ross was in charge, and at the end of the night he called us together and pointed to me. "You, come here. And you, come here," he said, pointing to this other guy. "The rest of you, go to the office and collect your pay and don't come back on Monday."

From then on he taught me about the hotel industry and I learnt a lot from him over the years. I worked part time. I also worked at the Moonee Ponds Tavern for a while.

## **School Councils**

I was Chairperson at St Albans Heights Primary School Council for about ten years while my kids were there. I was also the first President of the Parent's Association at Keilor Downs Secondary College in its opening year, 1984. Education is part of me. I often think I should have been a teacher. I respect the dedicated teachers who work in the system, and there is a lot of them. The dedicated teacher is such a wonderful person.



Andy Kratsis (R) and School Council colleagues at the adoption of the School Charter.

I started getting involved in the St Albans High School Council in 1987 as a community member half way through the year. In 1988 my youngest son was here from '88 to '93. I was Vice President for a couple of years and then in 1990 I became President. The person before me was Tony Chandler, who'd done a magnificent job in bringing the school round. In the education system, schools go through cycles of good times and bad times, and it's the processes you put in place in the good times that help you in the bad times. That cycle could be over twenty years, and all schools go through it. Tony Chandler had come in during the tough times with Principal Stewart Homer, and they took it by the scruff of the neck with the help of the hard-working staff and made it a real good school. Now our results are tremendous. In 1990 Tony retired and I was elected to the President's job and have been there ever since.

In 1990 it was decided to adopt a new name for the school in line with the new thinking and new perceptions about secondary education within the community. I was pleased that Joan Kirner, the Minister for Education, accepted our invitation to come and formally commemorate the occasion.

Each year I say to the people: "Maybe it's time for me to go," because I don't want people to think that I own the place or that I don't want to budge. But I always get support and the support is genuine and sincere. When I can be a part of helping, that keeps me going.

Renaming St Albans High School as St Albans Secondary College, 1990. (L-R): Alex Andrianopoulos (1968-73), Andy Kratsis (1956-61), Natalie Cvijeticanin (1990), Laurie Schwab (1960-65), and Loue Traianou (1963-69) with Joan Kirner, Minister for Education.



### **Students**

The students now have more say, and they are listened to. They're encouraged to take part. Even in School Council we encourage input from students. I tried to introduce that at the beginning and in fact my son was on the School Council for a couple of years. What I like about

the school is that the students are not rude students. I'm sure they've got their problems like everyone else at times, but they also contribute to the running of the school with ideas and comments on discussion papers that are sent out.



Andy Kratsis and students, 1993.

They've come back to school uniforms in my time, about eight years ago. I believe in uniforms. When I was providing financial counselling at the Health Centre I would see the problems that a lot of single parents had in dressing their kids with peer pressure to get Levis at \$80 rather than the Target brand at \$20. There were similar arguments about expensive brand runners. That was a big problem when schools didn't have uniforms.

### **Other Community Activities**

I was Keilor Council's Citizen of the Year in 1993, an award I appreciated receiving, not just because it was a recognition of my community activity, but more importantly because it was a recognition of the efforts of many people in the background who supported me in this voluntary work. In particular I should include my wife, Athena, for the many years of diligent work at home supporting the family whilst I was away at meetings.

I'm also a Justice of the Peace. I believe JPs are needed in society and in future will have a lot more say in helping the police; for example, Justices are now the independent watchdogs on the Maribyrnong Detention Centre overseeing the assessment of refugees arriving in Australia.

### **Family**

I had two boys. I tried to be a friend to my kids and not just a father. I encouraged them to read as much as they could. I was strict in that respect. But I also encouraged sport and spent time with them watching sport. I think the second generation migrants had it a lot easier than the first generation.

Steven is now 33 and a Doctor of Science from Monash Uni. His first job was lecturing at Murdoch University at Perth. Then his professor recommended him for a Swiss company job importing equipment for the wine-making and mining industries - very, very big fields. Then he completed his MBA. People in that age group never stop their education. I suppose I'm the same because I've done my business studies in my thirties, and my BA in my forties. I believe the current group of students will change their career seven times, and each time will do it formally.



My other son Chris is Assistant Manager with the Geelong West branch of the Commonwealth Bank. He is a product of St Albans Secondary College.

I am extremely proud of both of them.



Andy Kratsis  
December, 2005.



Andy Kratsis as MC at 50th anniversary celebrations, 2006.



Andy Kratsis and classmates, 50th anniversary celebrations, 2006.



Andy Kratsis and classmates, 60th anniversary celebrations, 2016.

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