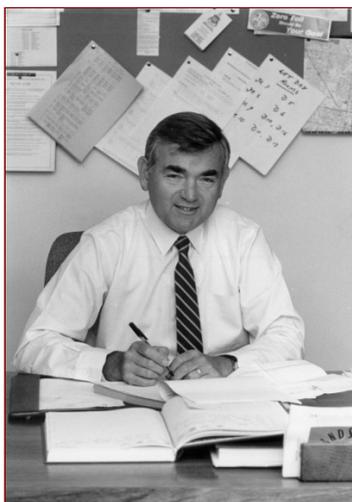


STEWART HOMER: TEACHER AND SCHOOL PRINCIPAL 1986 - 2001



Introduction

My initial posting as a Teacher was to Foster High School, where I taught for a period of five years. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the country, boarding on a dairy farm for the first three years. After this, I returned to Melbourne and taught in the northern suburban schools until my appointment as Principal of St Albans High School in September 1986, a position which I held for 15 years, until I retired in November 2001. My time at St Albans was both challenging and fulfilling.

Parents

Both my parents were born in Australia, my mother from a Scottish background, and my father from an English family. My mother grew up in Williamstown, while my father came from Coburg. I was born in Brisbane, Queensland, as my father was in the Australian Navy and his ship was in Brisbane when I was due. I returned to the family home in Williamstown, and my father remained on duty in the Navy until the conclusion of World War 2. The family home was established in Pascoe Vale once my father was discharged from active service.

Dad was apprenticed as a Fitter and Turner and served as an Engineer in the Royal Australian Navy during the World War. He was a member of the Naval Reserve when war broke out and was immediately called up. He survived 6 ½ years of active service and was at times very fortunate, having been bombed and torpedoed while at sea. Dad served in the Red Sea, East Africa, India, Ceylon, and China, mainly on board destroyers and corvettes. He saw a lot of the world, but, according to my mother, came home a very different person. He didn't talk much about his wartime experiences.

Dad passed away in 1990 after a short illness and I regret not having spent more time talking to him about his experiences. I have had his wartime service history and his medals framed in his honour, along with photos of him in naval uniform, and of the ships in which he served. I hope our sons never experience the horror of war.

My mother was a Bookkeeper, but after the two children arrived, chose to remain at home and take on home duties. She loved her tennis and her garden, and won an award for the Best Kept Garden in the City of Coburg.

Education

As a child, I attended the Pascoe Vale Primary School and enrolled in Glenroy High School in 1954, the first year of the new school. In Form 6, I transferred to Coburg High School because Glenroy did not have the numbers for a Form 6. From there, I went on to Melbourne University and completed an Arts Degree and a Teacher Qualification, majoring in Geography, History and French. There was no history of tertiary education in my family background, save for my mother's brother who entered Law and later became a Senior Partner in Blake & Riggall, a leading Melbourne Law firm. Both he and my mother studied at Williamstown High School in their youth.

Foster High School

I was pleased to be appointed to Foster High School in 1964, as I had relatives in the nearby centre of Leongatha and believed that they'd help find me some accommodation. This turned out to be the case. I headed out of Melbourne in my Austin A40 to be told on my arrival that I would be staying on a dairy farm initially. Being a trained Geography Teacher, this suited me perfectly.

The farmer worked part time in the General Store in the town, and offered to put me up for a few weeks until some more permanent arrangement could be found. Three years later, I was still at the farm and had become part of the family. My interests now included shooting rabbits and fishing, and I had joined the local Football Club and was a member of the town's Apex Club, a community service organization with its foundations in Geelong during the Depression of the 1930's.

Foster was a terrific little community in South Gippsland with Wilson's Promontory on the front door, and the Strezlecki Ranges in the background. Most of the people were dairy farmers. The school population was under 400, most of whom were bussed in to school each day from distant farms and the local fishing ports.

Country people take a while to accept outsiders. I have purchased a small property in the area and visit the place every few months with my family, so much did I enjoy the people and the area. Foster was a very fortunate appointment for me, but there were no promotional opportunities in the school and I was forced to head back to Melbourne to further my career.

Teaching in the Suburbs

My first promotion took me to Coburg High School, the school where I had completed my Form 6 and later, my Teacher Training. I was only at Coburg for one year when the Education Department changed the Staffing structure and I was adjusted into Hadfield High School, where I taught for two years, and met my wife to be, Margaret, a Canadian Teacher airlifted to Australia to help overcome a Teacher shortage at that time. From this school I was promoted to Upfield High School in Broadmeadows where I was to spend the next 15 years, during which time I became the Deputy Principal of the school.

In Term 1 of 1986, while I was at Upfield, I was asked to act as Principal at Glenroy High School during Term 2. Being part of the inaugural student intake at Glenroy back in 1954, I found this to be a very attractive offer. While I was Acting at Glenroy, I applied for and was appointed to the role of Principal of St Albans High School, a position I took up in Term 3 of 1986. Consequently, I had worked in three schools in the course of the same year.

Appointment to St Albans

At the time of my appointment to St Albans, I had no idea that I would spend the next 15 years of my working life in the one school. But, looking back, I remember this time as one of the most enjoyable and satisfying periods in my 40+ years in Education. I had been very keen to serve as a Principal and was determined to do my best for the school.

One of the disappointments for St Albans had been the frequent changeover of school leaders in the 1980's. I was the fourth Principal in as many years and this was very destabilizing for the school community.

However, there were very many positives about the school, the greatest being the strength of the Staff and the depth of community spirit. I was most encouraged by the Staff who were extremely hard working and dedicated. Many had been in the school a long time and knew the community very well.

This was a period of time when School Councils appointed the Principal in a process known as Local Selection. The interviews were conducted in the neighbouring Deer Park High School Library building, with the Principal of Deer Park, Vern Crocker, being the Principal



Representative on the Panel. The Chairman of the School Council, Graham Brian chaired the Panel, which also included Tony Chandler, a local businessman, Teachers Mario Orsini and John Myers, and two student representatives from the Council. After their deliberations, the Panel ruled in my favour and this marked the start of a long relationship. Over the next 15 years we had our ups and our downs, but for the most part, I believe that it proved to be a happy relationship.

Identifying Problems

I identified three areas in particular that I believed needed attention. The school was physically run down and the state of the buildings was depressing. Unfortunately, this problem was relatively common among schools of that vintage. The design was to cater in the short term for the needs of the community but lack of funds meant that the buildings were not replaced before they became run down. The large student population over the years meant that the buildings had experienced extensive wear and tear. This was one project that required immediate attention.

The second issue was the poor image of the school in the local community. This became apparent to me after visits to the local Primary Schools, where I was told that the parents were preferring to send their sons and daughters elsewhere. This reflected partly the poor physical condition of the school, but there were other issues also, and indicated a need for some more work in the area of transition. Primary School Teachers were very influential in the choice of secondary schools made by the parents.

The third issue was the general tone of the school in terms of student behaviour. There were some excellent Staff available and it was partly a case of putting these people to work in the right areas. Leadership was needed in the area of student management.

Initiating Improvements

After some serious lobbying within the Education Department, we were able to secure funding for a major Cyclic Maintenance, which included a repaint and repairs, but no new facilities. The Budget for the project exceeded a million dollars, which is some indication of the need for work. This is not a lot of money when the size of the school is taken into account, but the work did wonders for the appearance of the school, and for Staff morale, and it made the promotion of the school among the local community that little bit easier. At last, people could see things happening for the better.

School Demographics

Student numbers began to climb and the total enrollment rose from a low of about 700 to near 1,000 in a period of about 5 years. This, I believe is a very manageable number and it allows Staff to better know the individual students and their families. This personal contact becomes more difficult once the school grows beyond the 1,200 mark.

Our Staff numbered nearly 100, including the support groups. Because of the large number of children who required extra help with the English language, coming from a non-English-speaking background, the school was entitled to extra Staff with ESL training. Over 80% of the children enrolled at St Albans came from families with backgrounds from outside Australia.

I found that the parents were very keen for the children to do well at school, but were not always in a position to provide that assistance themselves because of their relative unfamiliarity with the

English language.



Stewart Homer at school presentation, 1996.

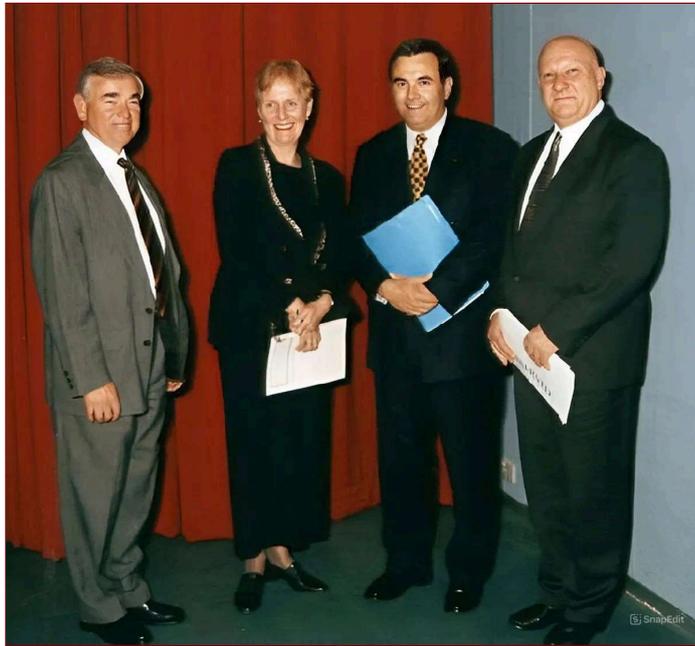
The demographics changed dramatically after my first five years in the school. We witnessed the arrival of families from South East Asia, especially from Vietnam. I believe that this was an important development in the school as these people had an excellent work ethic and a very positive attitude to schooling. Despite an initial lack of knowledge of the English language, these recent-arrivals performed at a very high level, academically-speaking. This attitude soon rubbed off on to the other children in the classroom and resulted in a remarkable lift in the academic results being achieved by the children.

School Council

Along with the strong Teaching Staff, the School was blessed with a very supportive School Council. Throughout my time at St Albans, Council was always harmonious and willing to investment funds in projects which were recommended by the Teachers as worthwhile for the children.

Graham Brian was the first School Council President in my time at St Albans. Graham was an astute businessman who was attentive to the needs of the School and regularly called in at the School en route to his work of a morning. He was followed by another local businessman in Tony Chandler, who was just as enthusiastic as Graham to see the School improve. The longest serving President in my time was Andy Kratsis, another local business person who was part of the inaugural student enrollment in 1956. A school could not ask for a more committed, nor a more enthusiastic leader. Andy was ever ready to promote the School and attended many functions in his endeavour to see the School progress. Council supported the School with funding for such ventures as the new computer laboratories, and a new accommodation building for the camp.

Andy chaired a very friendly group of Councillors, many of whom were recruited to Council as a result of the strong transition program which saw Staff make regular visits to the Primary Schools to meet the students and the parents. As our student numbers grew, so did the number of parents who were willing to join Council.



Stewart Homer (L), Andy Kratsis (R) with former student Robert Clarke M.P.

The St Albans Reputation

Unfortunately, St Albans as a suburb of Melbourne has received some poor press over the years. Statewide daily newspapers would run articles on unemployment, and rates of car thefts, etc, and St Albans seemed to feature high on the lists of these tables. Consequently, people in Melbourne would often have a picture of St Albans as a suburb with many problems. I would sometimes be asked the question - “What do you do for a living?” and when I replied that I was the Principal at the High School in St Albans, they would add - “That must be a tough job?” That would be my cue to point out the positives - the great community spirit, the strength of the Staff, the parental sport, the talented children, etc. I can honestly say that I have enjoyed my time at St Albans as much as at any other time in my Teaching career and have found the people to be wonderful.

In looking back through the old School magazines (Alba), it was evident that there was a good deal of pride in the achievements of the children in a wide range of areas - academic, sport, music, drama, business ... The School has a history of success and it was there for all to see in these magazines. I guess that I was lucky in the sense that I was able to tap into this history, and this background of pride that exists in the School and the community. People were very pleased to see the School achieving success.

The Teaching Staff

St Albans has been blessed with as dedicated a group of Teachers as I have seen in all my years of experience in schools. Some have only known the one school, while others have turned down opportunities in order to stay in the place where they feel content and comfortable. Their service to the youth of the St Albans district is outstanding. Towards the end of my time at the School, I decided to have prepared an Honour Board and to list the names of those Staff members (Teachers and Support Staff) who had invested at least 15 years of their working lives in this School. I was absolutely amazed at the number of people who qualified. This remains a work in progress.

The Transition Program

Spreading the word about the developments taking place at the High School was an important part of the plan to lift the reputation of the school in the community. We needed to inform the parents and the Primary School aged children of these changes by going out to the local Primary

Schools, and by inviting the children along to see for themselves. Some excellent work was done in this regard by the Teachers in charge of Transition - In my time, Marion Mortimer and Nigel Tarr served the longest in this very important role - and resulted in a boost to the student numbers.

Teaching English as a Second Language

Given the background of so many of the children at St Albans, this was a very important program. We also received a regular enrollment of newly-arrived students from the nearby Language Centre. For a short period of time we administered the Tottenham English Language Centre at the request of the Secretary of the Education Department. This partly reflected a bond that existed between the two institutions and assisted the flow of children into St Albans once they had reached a level of proficiency in English. I was always impressed by the attitude of these young people to improve their knowledge of English. Once again, the level of parental support was very high, although limited.

The Building Program

It always seemed unfair to me that a community of approximately 1000 students was without a gymnasium, especially in light of the State Government's pronouncements about Sport and Physical Education in the Secondary Schools' curriculum. We were encouraged to have prepared a Master Plan for the School and to pursue funds for this plan. After much lobbying, we were eventually given a grant to start Stage 1 of the Master Plan, which included a gymnasium, an upgrade of the Staff rooms, conversion of the Hall into a Performing Arts Centre, including a new Canteen in the foyer and new Technology rooms. Such further developments as a new Administration building were to be done in Stage 2.

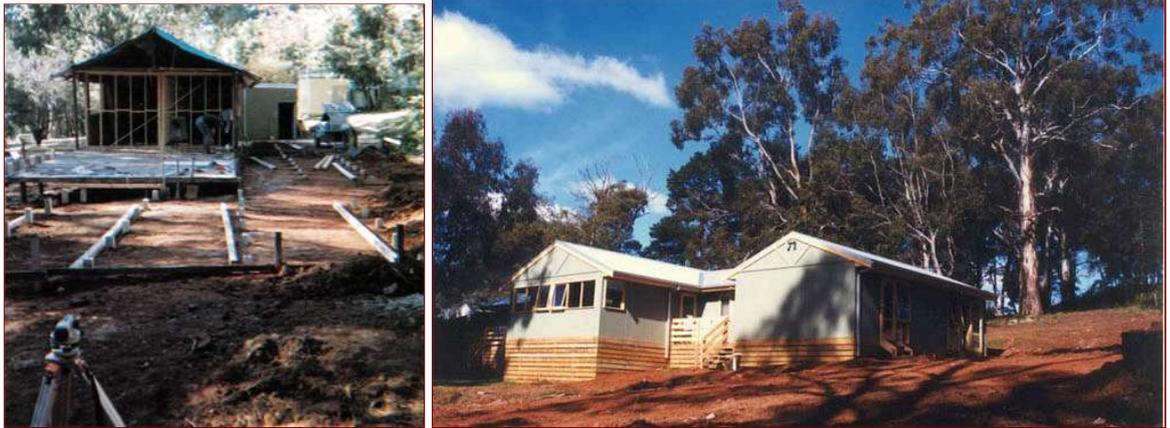
The School Camp



Old Red Rattlers, old sleeping quarters at Strathbogie being demolished.

In 1975 the Department of Education offered the Strathbogie North East Primary School to St Albans High, which was accepted. School Council agreed to the funding of a new accommodation block at the campsite in Central Victoria. This unit replaced the old "Red Rattler" train carriages that used to serve as the student sleeping quarters before they were condemned. For students with limited experience in the Australian bush, our School camp was a

very important part of the curriculum. Children were offered the chance to spend a few days each year at this site, at subsidized rates, and it was in use almost every other week by some curriculum group from the School. We used to transport the children by School bus between the camp and the School. In 1998 the campsite underwent substantial renovations.



New accommodation block at school camp.

Curriculum Development

There were many hours spent by interested Staff and parents on curriculum development, and this included the lengthy debates on assessment and reporting. Some of the highlights that I can recall include the following areas.

The impressive leadership of two Staff members in this area in my time in the School, when there were many tensions over some of the proposed changes. Both Brian Mundy and George Peart offered particular skills that allowed the program to progress. Brian was very knowledgeable and ready to make hard decisions and present his arguments logically and dispassionately, while George was totally unflappable, an important trait in this role.

Languages Other Than English (LOTE) - Previous to my time at St Albans, the School had offered Russian, German and Greek and this reflected the ethnic composition of the School population. Not surprisingly, there was a trend towards the Asian languages over more recent years, and the School now offers Japanese and Vietnamese in addition to French and Italian.

Sport and Physical Education - With the acquisition of the gymnasium, Staff are now in a much stronger position to offer improved programs in this very popular area of the curriculum. The School has been able to take advantage of student skills in areas such as soccer and table tennis and win State titles.

Performing Arts - The School has a wonderful tradition in the performing arts and has regularly held productions, which have played to packed audiences and thrilled the participants and the onlookers. Participation in the MAC productions has been the highlight of the school year for many students. Staff have invested countless hours in selection, auditioning, preparing backdrops, stage construction, scrounging materials, etc, to maintain a St Albans tradition. The support of past students and members of the community for the MAC productions, is further evidence of the strength of community spirit in St Albans.

Music - There was no unique music program in the school when I first arrived. In speaking at parent meetings, the question would invariably be asked - "Why doesn't the school offer a music program?" It was only when we decided to advertise a senior Staff position at the school that we were able to attract a teacher with sufficient experience in John Lacorcia to get this program up and running. Once established, the program proved to be very popular with the students who would willingly spend their free time in the music room practising. For some, it became the reason to remain at school.

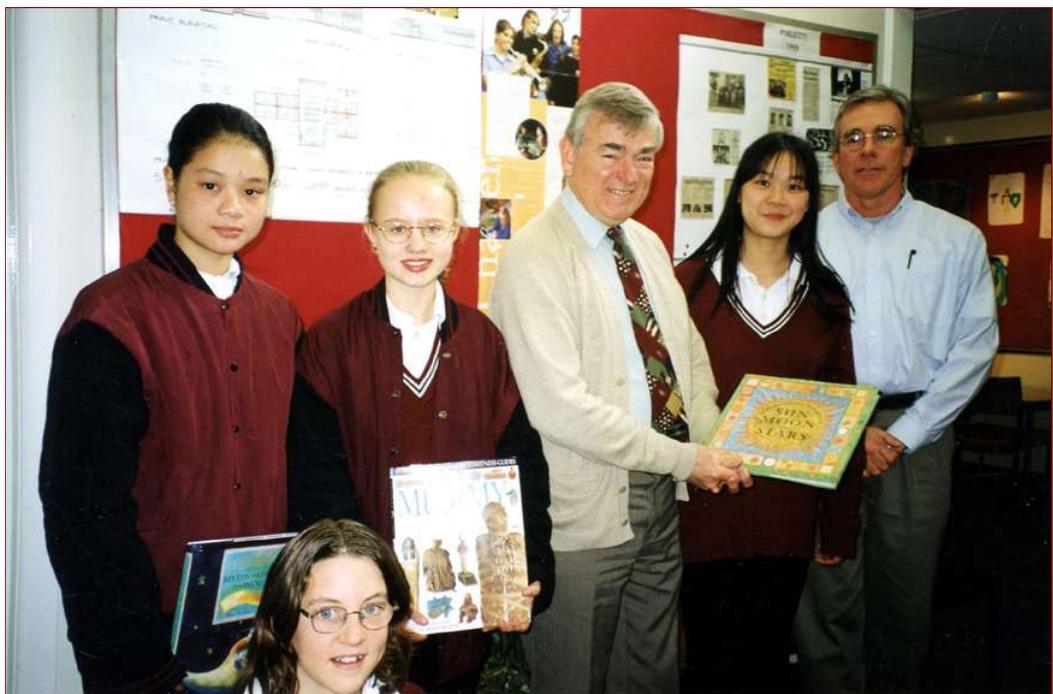
Integration Program - The Integration Program was another development in the curriculum that grew extensively during my time at the School. As with music, this program needed a leader and someone who believed in the program. Janne Stephens was a strong advocate for this program, and with the support of a number of Aides, Janne was able to set up a room that served as a base. The children in the program gained great benefit from being in the mainstream school, while the other children saw at first hand the difficulties facing some less fortunate than themselves. This program presented the classroom teachers with some significant challenges and they would have been in a better position to handle these challenges if adequate resourcing had been available.

Student Welfare is a growing issue for all schools. St Albans was very fortunate in securing the services of an excellent Welfare Teacher when Gael Meadowcroft accepted a promotion to the school. Gael introduced many helpful programs to support the students in their attempt to achieve success at school both socially and academically. She fought for and secured a unique office for this program and introduced support Staff to assist her in her work. She was also very active in gaining the support of outside agencies. St Albans believed in working with students to manage their problems. A talented group of Sub School Leaders and Year Level Coordinators played an equally important role in the student management task. Gael has recently been appointed to the position of Assistant Principal at the School.

School Uniform

Listening to the parents at Information Nights or during visits to the Primary Schools, the second most popular request, after a music program, was the push for a school uniform. Parents associate school uniform with discipline. No school uniform equates for many to no discipline in the school. On the other hand, teachers often felt that the time taken in enforcing or policing a uniform policy was better spent on curriculum matters.

The credit for the reintroduction of the school uniform at St Albans must go to the Deputy Principal Josephine Doherty. Jo had the rare talent of being both respected for her no nonsense approach, and well liked. Jo was appointed to the position of Deputy Principal from the Teaching Staff and proved to be a tower of strength in this role. With hard work, enthusiasm for the change and the belief that this was good for the School, Jo gained the support of Staff, the Parents and Friends, and School Council and worked to successfully introduce uniform to all levels. I believe that the rise in student enrollment at the school was in no small way due to this change.



Stewart Homer presenting student awards, 1999.

Duties of a Principal

Over the years, there have been many changes in the duties undertaken by a Principal. This situation has become even more difficult to manage as, with increased independence, has come more responsibility. Principals are not against the idea of assuming more independence in decision-making, but are looking to shed some of the bureaucratic tasks that make life more difficult. The lack of resources makes this task all the more difficult.

An area that has grown enormously in recent years is that of student welfare. Schools are finding that they are spending increased amounts of time on student management issues, many of which have no origin in the school. The more serious matters in this area come to the attention of the members of the Principal Class.

Choice of Staff is an important function for the school. Previously, schools have been forced to accept Staff appointed to their site by a central bureaucracy. No one is arguing that schools give up this function and return to the former system, but appropriate resourcing would be appreciated.

The list just continues to grow and includes budgets, building maintenance, Staff welfare, Workers Compensation, Staff promotion, and disciplinary actions involving Staff, State and Federal Government policy developments, etc.

A Principal must learn to turn off when away from the school or face the real prospect of health problems.

Interacting with Students

I have always taught, even after becoming an Administrator. I enjoyed the classroom, and in some ways, this activity provided me with relief from the other tasks that came in my direction.

This kept me in touch with the tasks that the teachers were being asked to perform in the areas of testing and reporting, the working conditions in the classrooms, and student interests. It also kept me in front of the students and I believe made me a more approachable person. I usually coached a sporting team for the same reasons.

Kids can be very funny and they would occasionally say to me - "Come on Sir, you're the Principal. You can give us a day off."



Interest in Languages

As a student at Glenroy High School we were all taught French as a foreign language. I continued my studies in this language throughout my formal training, and when appointed to Foster High School, found that I was the Teacher in charge of French, and the only person so

qualified on the Staff. I enjoyed the classes very much and it remained my favourite teaching area throughout my career.

I also studied Italian on Saturday mornings when I first returned to Melbourne from Foster, but did not pursue it beyond the VCE level.

With the arrival of the Vietnamese at St Albans, I decided to have a go at learning this language. However, being a tonal language, I experienced significant difficulty reproducing the sounds. I used to sit in the Year 7 Vietnamese class as frequently as time would allow, which pleased the children a great deal. I even made a brief welcoming speech to a Parent group of Vietnamese, with the aid of my Vietnamese Teacher Aide, which drew polite applause for my efforts.

Life after Retirement

Immediately after retirement, I traveled to Canada to visit Family and stayed for two months. On returning to Melbourne, I resumed my cricket career and also took golf lessons.

At midyear, I was approached by a friend who was Head of the Middle School at Melbourne Grammar. He had experienced difficulty in employing a suitable classroom teacher and wondered if I would be interested. I initially declined as I was caring for my ailing mother. With the passing of my mother, he called again and renewed his offer.

Never having taught in the Private School system, I found the idea of interest and accepted. It was a most enjoyable experience. I was teaching Year 7 and 8 boys in classes of 28 in a room overlooking the Shrine of Remembrance. The room was bright and fitted out with carpet and a video set. The boys were for the most part well educated, although not all students gained entry to the school through academic results. The Staff were as equally committed to the task as were the Staff at St Albans, but not more so. Undoubtedly, the resources available at Melbourne Grammar were far superior to any that I had found in the Government system.

Exam Supervisor

The second year of my retirement, I was approached by the Principal at Sunbury Downs Secondary College to supervise the school's VCE exams. I agreed to assist for the mid year exams, but asked that he find someone else for the end of year. Again, I enjoyed the interaction with the students, but found the role did not suit me at all, and was pleased to move on.

True Retirement

These days, I find that I have plenty to keep me occupied at home. After 15 years of neglect, our house needs a lot of attention. I have kept up my interest in sport, following the Essendon Football Club in the winter months, and playing cricket and golf in the warmer weather. As Secretary of the local cricket club, I have a number of duties to perform each week during the cricket season.

Family

My wife, Margaret, came to Australia from Canada in the 1970's as a Teacher in the areas of Home Economics and Textiles. As she still has Family in Canada, we try to visit them as often as we can afford the trip. We were married in Canada and had our honeymoon in the town of Banff in the Rocky Mountains. Canada is a beautiful country but extremely cold in the winter. We have 2 sons - Geoff is 24 years and has done tertiary studies in Sport Administration. Andrew is completing his fourth year at Melbourne University where he is studying Engineering (Computer Software) and Commerce (Accounting). He still has one more year to complete before he starts employment.

The Barbecue Story

Over 15 years there are many events that capture your interest and one of the more amusing incidents took place during a School Council working bee. This story has been well told and has even been the subject of an artist's sketch work.

School Council arranged a working bee to paint the corridor of the F wing on a Saturday. We planned a barbecue lunch for the volunteers. I had organized for some meat to be left in the refrigerator in the Staff room for the lunch. Unbeknown to all, the cleaner had found someone's pet food (meat) after school on the Friday night in the Staff room and kindly placed it in the fridge so that it wouldn't spoil.

School Council President, Andy Kratsis, along with Councillor George Peart, volunteered to cook lunch and headed off to the Staff room and retrieved the parcel of meat from the fridge. Alas, it was the pet meat. The pair of cooks could not get the meat to stick together to form hamburger patties. They persevered and all the patties were eaten and the group continued to paint the corridor.

It was only the next Monday when the Teacher Aide who had left the meat behind came looking for her pet meat that we realized what had happened.



Stewart Homer, 2005.

Menu
People
Photos
History
Albas
Top of Page
Home Page



Stewart Homer and colleagues at 60th anniversary celebrations, 2016.

Article written by Joseph Ribarow.
School photos from Nick Szwed archives.
Family photos courtesy of Ancestry.com