

NSWSPC CHICKEN SOUP 1

Terry O'Brien

NSWSPC Chicken Soup records some of the many wonderful anecdotes and stories that we all hold from our many years as Principals and teachers. If you have a special little anecdote, short story or even a longer story about times past, please take the time to share it with us. Simply email it to principalfutures@nswspc.org.au ☺

That lump in my throat (1) – Terry O'Brien

It's the mid-1970s and I am an English/History teacher at a south west Sydney girls' high school where Vietnamese migration has begun in earnest. I am also Year 7 Student Adviser and have a particularly lonely girl in my year – let's call her Mua. Mua's whole family was killed in the Vietnam War and she is a refugee in temporary foster care. Her English is improving but she is a sad little girl. This particular day, the period 1 bell is yet to ring and about 800 students are milling around in the main playground. I have been called down to enrol a new student. She is also a Vietnamese refugee who has arrived in Australia with her mother and brother. Maybe she will be a possible friend for Mua? I take her out into the playground and stand at the top of the steps, scanning the playground for a lone student who might be Mua. Suddenly a loud cry pierces the air. The playground falls silent as Mua emerges from the melee, arms outstretched, running, crying. The new girl next to me also cries out, hurtles down the steps and arms outstretched runs sobbing loudly across the playground towards her. They meet in the middle and throw their arms around each other sobbing and shrieking. They are cousins, brought up as sisters, both believed the other dead. Ever heard the sound of 800 girls sobbing?

That lump in my throat (2) – Terry O'Brien

"Please do merit certificates," I say over and over again to my staff. I am Principal at a new southern Sydney coed senior high school. We are trying to do positive reinforcement but too many teachers believe only in the negative aspect of student welfare. There is a particularly painful boy in Year 11. Let's call him Vlado. Who would ever give Vlado a merit certificate? He is studying VET Construction and the Year 11 teacher decides to do picnic tables and seats as a class project, as well as an in-ground chess board for the courtyard. Vlado has surprisingly thrown himself into this project, not only coming in on a Saturday to stain the tables and seats but also filling all the plastic chess pieces with sand so they could not be easily stolen. For this he finally receives a merit certificate on assembly (to the derision of some staff). My battle with staff about positive reinforcement continues. The football season arrives. Vlado is half knocked out in a soccer match. We ring his parents and I drive him home. They invite me in. I am in the small lounge room of a small sparsely furnished flat. There is a lounge covered in a blanket, a big TV and one picture proudly framed in the centre of the wall. I look at the picture. It's Vlado's merit certificate.

Charity woes (1) – Terry O'Brien

The scene is a Sydney girls' high school where I am Principal. The Year 12 Formal Committee stand on the stage at assembly and enthusiastically urge all students to help them raise money for their end-of-year projects by selling chocolates. A queue of girls forms afterwards to sign up. Fast forward four weeks. The School Captain and Formal Committee President knock on my door. They tell me they have raised an impressive amount of money but there is one Year 8 student, let's call her Louisa, who took 24 boxes each of 12 chocolate bars and despite numerous reminders has yet to bring in the money. I am asked if I can

help. I decide the quickest way, given the number of reminders, would be to phone Louisa's mother, a single mum who I know from P&C. Louisa's mother says she knows nothing of the chocolates and that Louisa has certainly not tried to sell any to the family. Have I made a mistake, I wonder? I send for the records showing where students signed for the boxes, but before they arrive on my desk, Louisa's mother phones back. She has found 288 chocolate wrappers under Louisa's bed. What do you do?

Charity woes (2) – Terry O'Brien

Red Nose Day looms and the Year 9 Student Adviser, a dynamic young TAS teacher (let's call her Lesley) wants approval for Year 9 to run it across the school. She tells me she will coordinate the day. Year 9 promote it well and ultimately sell nearly 800 red noses and also raise a stack of additional cash via various events on the day. Well done Year 9! Well done Lesley! A month later a red-nosed, I mean red-faced, Lesley shows up at my door. She confesses to me that she deposited all the notes with the office but took home a huge box of coins intending to count it at home to save the office staff, who had been grumpy at the size of the mountain of coins. She put it under her bed meaning to do it on the weekend and promptly forgot all about it. One morning four weeks later she noticed her husband dip into it and take a fistful of coins. "What are you doing?" she had either said calmly or shrieked at him. "Just taking my lunch money from your secret stash," he said. The problem was, as she explained between sobs, that he had been doing this for the past month – and not just for lunch, but for train fares, petrol, shopping and whatever else – and they had no idea how much he had taken. What do you do?

Head Teacher days (1) – Terry O'Brien

Going back in time to the early 1980s: I am a keen young first year out Head Teacher History at an inner-city high school with a significant Aboriginal student enrolment. The Land Rights flag has begun to gain mainstream significance but at that time most schools did not own one. I decide it would be a good thing to fly it for ATSI week and therefore I approach the very conservative Principal for permission – which he eventually gives, although he refuses to pay for one. I ask my Year 9 History class and one boy (let's call him Steven) says he has one at home that I can borrow. So we fly it proudly on the playground flagpole all week and my faculty feels very proud and forward thinking. The following Monday I find Steven to give it back to him with thanks. "That's okay Miss," he says. "It was great to see it flying there all week, but just one question though?" "Yes?" "I was wondering Miss, how come you flew it upside down all week?" Mea culpa on assembly that week: "It's not a sunset but each of the colours mean..." The Principal subsequently paid to buy one for next year, so long as I attached the meaning of the colours to the box it was kept in.

Head Teacher days (2) – Terry O'Brien

Same school, and I am still Head Teacher History with a bad habit of leaving my blackboard duster in the staff room. I arrive for my lesson and send Steven next door to borrow one. 'Next door' is a young teacher's home room. Let's call her Carol. Carol is only new on my staff and is quite prim and wears blouses with bows tied at the neckline. She has offered to run the ISCF. Anyway Steven knocks on the door and says loudly "Mizz O'Brien wants to borra a dusta." Carol glares at him and in her most important voice demands "Don't you know the MAGIC WORD?" "Ye-e-e-s" says Steven. "Then say it," she booms. Steven stands up straight and bellows back "Mizz O'Brien wants to borra a fuckin' dusta."

My front office staff (1) – Terry O'Brien

I am the newly appointed Principal of a south west Sydney girls' high school. My appointment coincides with the installation of fax machines in all schools. We are one of the trial schools. My front office staff gather around the machine for a lesson and are very excited to be at the forefront of technology. There's only one problem – we can receive faxes successfully but those we transmit to others arrive there but are blank. District office constantly asks us to send faxes but all they receive are blank pages, time after time, day after day. They ring and ask "Did you send it?" "Yes," I reply, "I checked with the SAM. She did it herself." They call in the technicians to district office. They replace their machine. "Bah technology!" say my office staff, "What's wrong with using the courier?" They refuse to fax anymore, so I say "Give me the faxes and I will send them myself." I do. District office phones us with great excitement "We got them, hurray, the technology is fixed." My front office staff asks "What did you do?" so I demonstrate. "Oh, the printed side goes *face up*," they say.

My front office staff (2) – Terry O'Brien

Same school, same office staff. The office staff have headed home but I am working back. Gradually the school empties and silence settles. The cleaners leave. It's five to six and I gather my stuff and head to the front doors to set the alarms. Suddenly a sleepy girl emerges from sick bay. "Hello miss," she says. She has been in sick bay since lunch time and totally forgotten by the office staff.

Sing Song Blue – Terry O'Brien

My Head Teacher CAPA (let's call him Geoff) has been in the Schools Spectacular Orchestra. Geoff comes into my office and demands "Why did you never tell me that Ken Boston looks like an aged Neil Diamond?" Geoff tells me that he was sitting at his piano at interval when this man comes over and says "Well done, what school are you from? What do you do?" "I'm HT CAPA at XX High School" says Geoff and then asks "And what do you do?" There's a pause and the man replies "Um, I'm the Director General."

My Head Cleaner (1) – Terry O'Brien

I am principal of a high school in south west Sydney. I have an interesting Head Cleaner. Let's call him Mark from Macedonia. Mark had a habit of going through the bins to see if there was anything he could take home. This particular day the Head Teacher HSIE had decided to clear out the History storeroom. Standing on a ladder she had heavily dropped dusty box after dusty box from the top shelf. These boxes contained memorabilia donated way before her time by the RSL. She had told Year 7 students to take all of them to the dumpster where they had turfed them in. About 4pm that afternoon, I was sitting in my office talking with the President of the School Council when I walked Mark throwing what looked like a dark brown egg-shaped ball from hand to hand. "Look what I find," he said lobbing it into the air. "World War 1 hand grenade." "Stop throwing it about," say I. "It okay" he says, throwing it higher and catching it. "I was in the Macedonian Army." Ten panicky minutes later the grenade is down behind the assembly hall with Mark guarding it from a distance – and I'm onto the Army bomb disposal unit. They instruct me that any car engines nearby might set it off and to please tell staff that nobody is to drive off the premises until they arrive. I get onto the loud speaker system and explain the situation and tell staff they can't leave – and that the bomb squad should be here within 30 minutes. Four minutes later the air is filled with the noise of teachers' cars screaming out of the car park.

My Head Cleaner (2) – Terry O'Brien

Mark from Macedonia is going to a family wedding in Melbourne. It's a very hot Friday in November and the wedding is tomorrow. He walks by my office wearing a thick red beanie pulled low over his brow. I ask "Why are you wearing a beanie?" He tells me the story. He is very excited about the wedding as he hasn't seen his brother's family for some time and he wants to look his best. He decides he will dye his greying, thinning hair black. However when he sees the price of hair dye he is shocked and decides that it is much cheaper to buy black shoe dye. He takes off the beanie to show the result. His whole skull is dyed shiny black with the still-grey hair sticking up through it. I saw the wedding photos. He wore the beanie.