

NSWSPC CHICKEN SOUP 3

Greg Wann, Geoff Hogan

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 ☺

Raining white goods – Greg Wann

I was Principal of a Sydney mid-west suburban co-ed high school. It was a Tuesday morning about 8:30. The school was eerily very settled and ordered as everyone was preparing for the usual high standard of teaching and learning that would soon commence. The Maths Head Teacher popped in to my office. After the requisite conversation about differentiation etc, he mentioned in passing that the staffroom fridge was broken and could they have a new one. "Of course," I said. "I'll arrange for that." I rang the General Assistant (let's call him Jeff) and asked him to pick up the fridge and take it to the dumpster. The door would have to be removed and the fridge broken up so that its volume was reduced. I checked that he had the special three-wheel stair trolley with the strap to help him get it down the stairs. Now, the Maths and Science faculties are in a four storey building at the back of the school – you know the sort – open corridors that access all the classrooms. Around midday there was an almighty crash that could be heard all over the school. This was quickly followed by a phone call from an hysterical Science teacher. "Something just fell out of the sky and hit the ground outside the classroom! There was a great big explosion, I don't know what has happened!" I immediately took off for the other end of the school and arrived to be greeted by screaming kids, frenzied teachers and a million white pieces of refrigerator on the playground. My first and obvious thought was to send for Jeff. "Jeff, what happened?" "Well," he replied, "you asked me to remove the fridge and then break it up so that it would fit into the skip. So, I decided that the fastest and easiest way was to just throw it over the edge and let it fall to the ground." After I gathered my thoughts, restrained myself from wanting to kill him and then forced myself to calm down, I said (through gritted teeth) "It could have killed someone! What if there was someone underneath?" "But it was lesson time," he replied. "Everyone should have been in the classroom." Well you can't argue with that logic, but as we all know, one thing you can never assume in a school is that everyone is in the right place at any given time.

The bucket – Greg Wann

Having established myself in my new role as Principal, I felt that I could start making changes to the school. I approached the P&C about beautifying and landscaping the front of the assembly hall and front entrance to the school. After deciding on a landscaper I arranged for him to come out to the school to quote for the job. The assembly hall was quite high off the ground and underneath it there was a lot of enclosed space – great for storage and lots of headroom. I called up my GA (let's call him Jeff) to come over and walk around the site with us. We wanted to check if any utilities would be affected under the hall from outside on the road, as we were going to do a bit of digging up at the front of the hall. So Jeff arrived and opened the door to the storage area. I searched for the light switch as it was quite dark under there, and then turned it on – but nothing happened. Jeff very informatively told us that they didn't work. "What do you mean they don't work? I can see all these fluorescent lights. How long haven't they worked?" I asked. "Oh a long time," he replies nonchalantly. I asked if he had a torch with him but of course he didn't. So the landscaper and I stood there in the dark, making conversation until eventually Jeff came back with a torch. We then walked through the storage area towards the front of the hall, looking out for pipes and other utilities. Right in

front of us there was a bucket hanging from a pipe. Without wishing to question the obvious, I asked Jeff why there was a bucket hanging there? “Well to catch the water,” he replied, as if I was an idiot for not knowing that. “What water does it catch?” I asked. Jeff replied, “The water from the kitchen sink upstairs in the assembly hall. You know the church uses the hall on a Sunday. Well on Monday mornings I come in here and empty the bucket – throwing the water on the ground – and then hang it up again for the following Sunday.” “How long has this been happening?” I ask incredulously. He looked at me slowly, pondered for a while and replied “How long have you been here?” Meanwhile the landscaper looked up, took the bucket down from the pipe and screwed the two ends of the pipe together with his hands. That’s all that was needed to fix the problem.

Always check the repair bills – Greg Wann

It was a Monday morning and as was my habit, I checked for any issues or problems that may have arisen over the weekend. The church that was using the assembly hall on Sundays had left a note saying that a toilet seat needed replacing in the female toilets in the hall. As a result I called for the GA (let’s call him Jeff) to meet me over in the assembly hall. We had a look and yes it did need replacing. Jeff said “I’ll go up the road and buy another one, they’re not expensive.” I told him to buy a few extra seats so we have spares, but also to get the old one off first. I leave Jeff to it. A month later and I was checking the bills. There was one that I didn’t understand, nor give approval for, from a plumber. It was an expensive one for the replacement of a whole toilet in the assembly hall – a whole toilet bowl and everything. I immediately called Jeff up to my office to ask him if he had replaced that toilet seat in the hall and if so, why was I getting a bill from a plumber? He replied, “Oh didn’t I tell you? When I went up there to take the toilet seat off, you know the wing nut? Well, it had rusted on a bit. I didn’t have any pliers on me but I did have a hammer.” “So?” I queried with a little bit of trepidation in my voice. “Well I swung the hammer to hit the wingnut, but I missed and hit the toilet bowl instead and it broke in two.” So that’s how a \$7 toilet lid turned into a \$558 plumbing bill for a replacement toilet! Always check your bills!

The shortest way – Greg Wann

A few years ago I had an accident that required two major shoulder operations and consequently I couldn’t drive. Apart from being Principal, I was also President of one of the CHS sporting regions in Sydney. We had two world-class amateur student golfers at the school and the CHS Golf Carnival was being held at Bankstown Golf Course. I thought that I should go out there and give a bit of support to these talented kids, but had no way of getting there on my own. We devised a plan where my GA (who I will call Jeff) could be roped in to be my chauffeur. It was all organised with the front office and off Jeff and I went. Now to get to Bankstown Golf course from the school was fairly simple. You drove west along Victoria Road towards Parramatta, then before you got to Parramatta you turned turn left into Silverwater Road, which would take you all the way to Bankstown. It’s a very direct route! So we jump into the car and set off. We had passed Silverwater Road and were heading into Parramatta when I started getting a little worried. I confirmed with Jeff that he knew how to get there. “Yeah, yeah, I do. I know how to get there,” he replied in a positive tone of voice. We kept heading west along the Great Western Highway and by this stage were approaching Girraween. “Jeff, we are nowhere near Bankstown, its 12-13 km back towards the city. I asked you if you knew how to get there?” His immediate reply was, “I do know how to get there, from my place.”

Mowing the oval – Greg Wann

The school has big playing fields. The local District Cricket Club hires the facility on Saturdays. They pay us a fee and we prepare and maintain the pitch for them. It had been raining during the week but it finally stopped on Thursday. On Friday morning I called the GA (who I will call Jeff) and asked him to pop in to my office. Our conversation started with “Jeff, I think you’d better go and mow the lawn today in preparation for Saturday. You’ll need to get it finished this afternoon as the game is tomorrow.” I checked up on the progress on the oval at midday and noticed that no work had commenced. I was then distracted by principal-type work and conversations with parents. At around 1.30pm I was doing a walk around the school and noticed that still no mowing had commenced. It’s a four hour job and he had two hours until he finished work for the day. So, I walked over to the oval, arriving just in time to see Jeff up on the tractor mower doing about 40 km an hour around the oval. All that was coming out of the back of the mower was a fountain of rubbish that had been left on the oval by the kids at lunchtime. I went down there and started gesticulating in a frenzy, waving my hands around to get his attention. He was still whirring around with rubbish spewing out behind, oblivious to my crazed efforts to get his attention. The whole oval was covered in cut up paper and chopped sausage rolls, like a confetti garden. Eventually he saw me and pulled over. “Jeff, what the f... are you doing?” “What do you mean?” he innocently asked. “I asked you to mow the grass and you had to finish it by 4.00pm this afternoon, but all you’re doing is mowing rubbish, cutting it up and making confetti but not actually cutting any grass.” “Oh yeah,” he replies, “but if I set the cutter to the normal height then I wouldn’t finish in time.” Needless to say Jeff received a lesson in lawn mowing the following week.

The rewards we often don’t get – Geoff Hogan

I was a Year 10 Adviser (the term used then was ‘Year Master’ or ‘Year Mistress’) in the days when the role of Careers Advisers was to distribute booklets on various occupations to students (and not much else), and the Year Advisers did some of the tasks Careers Advisers now do. In the process of discussing post-Year 10 options with students, including subject selections for Year 11 and the HSC, I often raised the issue of what occupations or courses students intended to take up when they left school. While I tried to draw out from them their intentions and thoughts, in some cases I reluctantly ventured into making suggestions. The school had students from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

Student 1

One particular student came from a wealthy family who had a weekender near a lake, and on summer weekends the family would go water skiing. They also had a caravan in the snowfields and in the winter would often go snow skiing. He was a reasonably bright student. I asked him what he thought he might do when he leaves school and he replied, “I am going to become a ski instructor” (i.e. snow skiing). I suggested that he may like to think of some additional options, e.g. possibly doing a degree. After some discussion he said, “What do you suggest?” I was reluctant to give a direct answer, but after further discussion I mentioned that since his family had business interests and he had done Commerce for the School Certificate, he may consider Accounting or a similar degree and select HSC subjects related to that. “Okay,” he replied. Some years later, in my first year as a Deputy Principal, I received a phone call from the Senior Clerical Assistant (now SAM) at the school in which I had been a Year Adviser. When I was there, she had looked after the reception, the rolls and late-comers etc and all the students knew her. She told me that the student above had called into the school and had asked her to contact me and let me know that he had completed an Accountancy degree, doing it part-time as he had other interests and commitments that I would know about. He had then worked as an accountant for some years and had obtained his professional

registration, but next week he was leaving to go overseas as he had obtained a job as a ski instructor in St Moritz.

Student 2

This student was extremely bright and a lateral thinker. I actually taught him in Years 11 and 12 and had to remind him that in exams he needed to answer the question on the paper, not the one he thought should have been asked. In discussing options with him in Year 10, he clearly was going to proceed to a Science degree after the HSC. At the end of the discussion I told him that I was reluctant to make predictions, but in his case I would make an exception. I said that I thought he would go to university, do a Science or Science-related degree, get first class honours, proceed to do a PhD and then go on to obtain a job in a university or in research. Again in my first year as a Deputy, I happened to be in the foyer when he came through the door. He mentioned that he was back in Australia for his sister's wedding and wanted to make contact with me to let me know what he had done. He had gone to Sydney University after the HSC, did a Science degree obtaining first class honours, then a PhD and was working as an associate professor at a university in the USA.

Student 3

Recently I was in contact with this student. The following is an extract from the email he recently sent me:

"It has been a very long time since we were in contact. When we last met I was doing a Postdoc in Chemistry at University of Oklahoma – Marine Natural Products for potential anti-cancer compounds. Since then much has changed and evolved. I also did a Postdoc in Genetics/Genomics working in the very early days on the Human Genome Project – Chromosome 22: Philadelphia Breakpoint region (leukemia) and DiGeorge Critical Region (genetic abnormalities). We were one of the teams developing the methodologies for doing high-throughput sequencing and genomic analysis of the human genome. Since then I have been in various companies and roles including genetic diagnostic technology development, protein chemistry, and pharmaceutical drug development. I am currently a contractor/consultant for the DoD (Department of Defence) US Army as their Analytical, Assay, and Manufacturing Advisor for the Government for Vaccines and Diagnostics Products Development – and yes, COVID vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics are a big part of what I advise on. Keeps me out of trouble and pays the bills. Great team of people to work with."

The aberrant deputy (1) – Geoff Hogan

One of the deputy principals in a school in which I taught displayed qualities and behaviours that could be described as eccentric, bizarre, idiosyncratic etc. One area was in his use of words. Rather than use more commonly-used words he often used ones with which students were unfamiliar. I suspect his choice was deliberate. For the students this was confusing, but for the staff, entertaining. Following are a few examples of extracts from his addresses to students on assemblies held in the main quadrangle. In every case the assembly would collapse into uproarious laughter, including the staff. As the staff recovered they were then able to slowly restore order. "I draw your attention to the behaviour being displayed at the level crossing before and after school. I am concerned that one day, one of you will be hit by a *pantechnicon*." "I have had a request from a neighbouring girls' school asking that students at this school join them in their *thespian* activities." "That boy behind the basketball post *masticating*, please cease that behaviour immediately."

The aberrant deputy (2) – Geoff Hogan

This same deputy's management of disciplinary issues was similarly aberrant. One day I was walking past his office and he called me in to have a chat. I was an Industrial Arts teacher, he was not, but he had an interest in Woodwork and often called me in to chat about things practical. While I was talking to him an English teacher (I will call her Miss Smith) who was also somewhat unconventional, particularly in her standard of dress and use of language, stormed into the office with a Year 9 boy in tow. I actually taught the student. He was a bit of a rascal and not particularly bright. She thrust a note onto the desk and shouted angrily, "This student has been passing this note about me around the class." The Deputy took the note into his hands and read it, nodding his head and making other gestures while doing so. He then said, "My my, Miss Smith, you have done well with this boy. I taught him in Year 7. You now have him starting sentences with capitals and finishing them with full stops. Congratulations! Now, what do you want me to do?" I was about to explode into laughter and hurriedly left the room, so I can't give details of the subsequent exchange.