

## Vale Bernie Shepherd AM

1944 – 2017

Founding Principal, St Marys Senior High School

*Editor's note: If you'd like to read Bernie's obituary from the Sydney Morning Herald please [click here](#).*

When Chris Presland asked me to write this I knew I had the easiest, yet hardest task ever. Easy because words about Bernie are pouring in each day. Hard because what words do justice to such a remarkable person? And hard because ... it's just hard.

Every profession has them: those people with an extraordinary range of interests and talents who change the lives of others and sometimes the profession itself. Bernie Shepherd was one of these. He was a science teacher with great interest and ability in English and the arts, a school principal who established a different type of school, a consultant who carried a new method of assessing students across NSW – and a retiree who pioneered a different analysis of our whole school system.

Bernie's career initially followed a trajectory shared by most of us: classroom teacher (Liverpool Boys High), head teacher (Drummoyne Boys and Colo High Schools), then deputy principal (Seven Hills High). But it was also different. He became the foundation principal of the newly created St Mary's Senior High School – the first state senior high school in NSW.

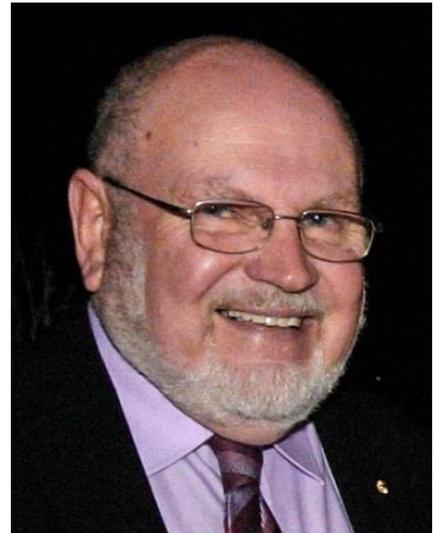
He could and did build something different from the ground up. As Christine Cawsey attests, "Bernie was determined to create a school that would give students from all backgrounds the opportunity to learn in an adult environment and to use that adult learning environment as a platform for study at university and transition to a world of opportunity". Christine also recalls how Bernie was admired and trusted among the principals of the greater Mount Druitt/St Marys district.

It didn't stop there. In between his various appointments Bernie was a curriculum consultant and also led syllabus development in science. He was a foundation member of the NSW Board of Studies and for years was an indispensable part of curriculum, assessment, scaling and standard setting in NSW. He served on the executive of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council and also as relieving deputy president. He was an elder statesman among his colleagues long before he became elder.

Jim Harkin, SPC president in the mid-1990s, recalls that Bernie was magnificent on the Board and lifted the overall profile and credibility of Government Secondary Principals enormously with the academic community, other school sectors, the union and subsequent governments as well. In Jim's words, "he is one of our Lions!"

Tom Alegounarias, President of the NSW Education Standards Authority, tells how "everyone walked away from an encounter with Bernie consciously or unconsciously, committed once again to the educational mission of quality and fairness. His positive influence at the Board [became] a benchmark of professional practice collegiality and personal care." And from Mark Scott, DoE Secretary via Twitter: "A pioneering principal, a thought leader in Australian education. Respected and admired by teachers everywhere." As I write, Brian Ralph, Jim McAlpine and Garry Richards, Bernie's lifelong friends, are wading through scores of such messages.

Bernie wouldn't seek the limelight but it sought him out. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia and a Fellow of the Australian College of Educators as well as of the Centre for Policy Development. He



seemed to gather awards and life memberships, including from the NSWSPC, the NSW Parents and Citizens Federation and the Australian Education Union. Given the politics of education this was remarkable recognition from such diverse organisations.

Bernie was also an undemonstrative person, which meant that when something really raised his eyebrows you knew it was significant. As Christine Cawsey recounted, his colleagues knew that if Bernie only asked one question at a meeting, it was the most important one to be answered. And he was always methodical and accurate. After the first couple of years of our *My School* work I suggested that the data might show what changes were occurring over time. He insisted we wait two more years - then in 2014 his analysis showed that in the years following our non-implementation of the Gonski recommendations equity and achievement in our schools was worsening. The rest is very recent history.

He would do all this, occasionally revealing, again in that understated way, his wide range of other talents and interests, whether it be photography or the magic of the theatre – yet another of his lifelong interests. He designed his first house and built much of it. He produced training and development media resources and was a very early adopter of computer hardware, a programmer and software designer. He could make a spreadsheet sing! He was truly a Renaissance man in the digital age.

As Garry Richards puts it: he was man of great integrity who used his many talents to serve the community, and always with humility. We can only be judged by the manner in which we have led our lives and by any measure Bernie has done well.

*Chris Bonnor*