**Year 12 Graduation 1996 – a garden theme**

**Terry O’Brien**

*Mary, Mary, quite contrary*

*How does your garden grow?*

*With silver bells and cockle shells*

*And pretty maids all in a row*.

Year 12 1996 are giving us a garden as a farewell gift. What a wonderful idea for a gift. It will be here, growing and making the school more attractive for future students, and it will also continue to remind us of the class of ‘96.

This started me thinking about Penshurst Girls High School as a garden.

Let me take you on a tour of the PGHS garden. In the PGHS garden there are 6 garden plots, one for each year. Obviously the flowers in each garden plot are at different stages of development. In the Year 7 garden they are just past flower bud stage, in Years 8, 9, 10 they are blossoming while in Year 11 almost fully flowered. In Year 12 they are ready to be picked and then the garden plot will be raked ready for a new planting of Year 7 bulbs early next year.

In the PGHS garden we have 58 gardeners – the teachers. They cultivate the soil and spray the gardens daily with water and fertiliser to help them grow. In the PGHS garden we are very fortunate in that we have quite outstanding, very caring and professional gardeners with great knowledge on how flowers grow – and I hope that the students, I mean flowers, and their parents (the trees?) appreciate this fact. Let us applaud our gardeners, not just for their work in the Year 12 garden plot but in the 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 plots as well.

One of these gardeners has particular responsibility for the wellbeing of the flowers in the garden – this is the Student Adviser – for Year 12 [Name of Year Adviser]. She picks bugs off the leaves, clears the undergrowth, stakes up any plant which has fallen down and gives the flowers regular doses of dynamic lifter when they are down. What a wonderful job [Name] has done for Year 12, following them through from the little bulb and seedling stage in Year 7 1991 to the wonderful floral display we have here in front of me today.

Around the edge of our garden are rows of trees – the parents. They shelter the flowers and also admire the floral display. Each one has a particular interest in one special flower but at the same time they help us with monitoring how the whole garden grows, encourage us, provide ideas or seek advice, e.g. “My particular carnation is not doing her homework – it’s boyfriend-itis or telephone-itis – what insecticide do you recommend to fix this situation?”

The Head Gardeners (the Don Burkes if you like) are [Name of Deputy Principal] and myself. We design the gardens, consult with the gardeners, the flowers and the trees, we work out the best landscaping, read gardening books on the latest horticultural trends and technology, monitor the watering equipment and drainage, arrange shade-houses, scarecrows and windchimes. We supervise pruning, keep dogs off and make the daily organisation of the garden as smooth as possible so that the gardeners can get on with their gardening (teaching) and the flowers can get on with their growing (learning). [Name of Deputy] has another task and that is to spray regularly for pests and make sure they are not stopping other flowers from learning, I mean growing.

I'm not sure who in the PGHS garden fulfils the role of the garden gnome.

My Book on Flowers ‘What flower is that?’ by Stirling Macoby says, *“Garden lovers in Australia are far luckier than their fellows in the northern hemisphere. In addition to striking native flora, we can see practically all of the worlds' great flowers growing to perfection in some part of our land.”* This is true in the PGHS garden. One of the wonderful things about this particular garden is that we are such a mixed display. You see when we get the bag of bulbs in Year 7, we have no idea what type of flowers are in it. We don’t order all roses or all poppies. This is not a Pauline Hanson garden where the racist disease blights the leaves. This is a wonderfully mixed cottage garden and therefore an exciting, exotic and beautiful garden. At PGHS carnations mix with roses, mix with poppies, mix with busy lizzies, mix with snapdragons, mix with daffodils and so on – and no one actually even notices, because we care for each other as Penshurst people – the variety of the flower is not at issue. This is one of the strengths of the PGHS garden. This is one of the strengths of the PGHS garden, and possibly one of the reasons it wins prizes in garden shows like the Director General’s Award for Excellence that we won this year.

After six years in the garden along comes a big set of secateurs called the HSC, which cuts the flowers and sorts them into different bunches and sends them off in all different directions, like an Interflora delivery truck.

We who are left behind, the other flowers and particularly the gardeners, feel sad because over all that time of caring for the garden and watching the flowers grow from little seedlings into beautiful flowers, we have come very attached to you, we are used to having you around, we will miss you very much and wonder how you are. That is the saddest part of being a gardener (a teacher) – you work so hard for six years to help each individual flower to flourish, but at the end of it all, all your flowers go away – you don't even get to keep even one bouquet or one pressed flower – just the memories and a hint of fragrance remain.

I have one particular comment to make to the Year 12 1996 garden. This Year 12, of all Year 12s I have ever known, have had more tragedies strike in their garden these past two years – so many sad events have happened to individuals among them. Each time they have gathered round and supported each other so wonderfully, showing great compassion, caring and loving. Each time something devastating happened to one of them they were there for her. We would not have chosen any of these tragedies to happen, but each girl carries a greater strength with her into young womanhood because of this. And watching them I have been so very, very impressed and I am so very, very proud of them.

For our Year 12 flowers, leaving the Year 12 garden is both exciting and scary. It has been safe in the garden and there have been many happy times. There have also been times when they have felt very down, and times between now and the HSC results when they will feel stressed, worried and down. This morning I urged them to remember all the wonderful times in the PGHS garden and remember the words from Alannis Morrisett’s album ‘Jagged Little Pill’ – from the songs ‘Ironic’ and ‘Hand in my Pocket’. I repeat those words tonight, even though they will not be as familiar to the parents and grandparents as they are to the students.

From ‘Ironic’

*Life has a funny way of sneaking up on you*

*When you think everything's okay and everything's going right*

*And Life has a funny way of helping you out when*

*You think everything’s gone wrong and everything blows up in your face.*

*Life has a funny way of helping you out*.

From ‘Hand in My Pocket’

*I'm lost but I'm hopeful*

*I'm tired but I'm working*

*I care but I'm restless*

*I'm free but I'm focused*

*I'm sad but I 'm laughing*

*I'm brave but I'm chicken scared.*

*What it comes down to my friends*

*Is that every thing’s going to be fine fine fine.*

Year 12 1996: All parents and family here tonight should share our pride in you – pride in the achievement of completing 13 years of education and gaining a NSW HSC that is recognised and acknowledged anywhere in the world. Regardless of the actual result we are proud because we know each of you will do your personal best and that is all we ask.

Year 12 1996: Farewell – we will not forget you in a hurry and we who remain will continue to make this school better and better so that you will always be proud to say’ “I was a student at Penshurst Girls HS.”

*Mary, Mary, quite contrary, How does your garden grow?*

Well as Principal, looking at you Year 12, I say our garden is growing very well, very well indeed.

**Contributor details**

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Terry was Principal at Penshurst Girls High School then Oatley Senior Campus of Georges River College, as well as Policy Leader for the Digital Education Revolution one-to-one laptop program. ​Since retiring, she and two other colleagues formed SPICE Educational Evaluations working directly with principals. She also volunteers teaching English as a second language in her local community.