

Managing your retirement

John List

Preparing for retirement

I retired in 1997 when I was 61. I did so for two reasons – one was that while I loved the job more than anything else I had done, I felt I was running out of ideas on what ‘we should do next’. The second reason was that our ‘Cluster’ was in the process of being told about the template all schools would be required to use for annual reporting, replacing the previous guidelines that were part of ‘performance indicators’. I can remember being quite dismayed. We had been able to do quite a lot of innovative and valuable things for which the school had been recognised within the community, Cluster, Region and the Department itself. I can remember standing up and saying “Mr XXX, I’m afraid what we’re doing at Airs can’t possibly be accommodated by your banal template. I have wondered when I should retire – and you’ve just given me the reason to do so!”

This had all happened after the Coalition Government lost office and Virginia Chadwick was replaced by John Aquilina. Many of the support programs previously available (e.g. Staying On) vanished and I can remember feeling as if I’d had multiple amputations without a blood transfusion.

There had also been a few medical scares and I wasn’t feeling able to put up my usual fight. Relatively soon I was diagnosed with a malfunctioning parathyroid gland and had surgery for the problem.

Very soon after my decision to retire I began to experience what I can only describe as ‘future grief’ knowing my career was over. As a result I didn’t ‘prepare’ for retirement at all. My GP wondered for a while if I should have some ‘retirement advice’ but I did not pursue it.

Financial Matters

This area was never an issue. I was in the ‘old’ State Super scheme and with my wife Margaret working still we had no financial worries.

After recovering from surgery I was approached and asked if I would be interested in working in the Itinerant Support Teacher Behaviour Unit in the Campbelltown/Liverpool area. I had always had an intense interest in and commitment to kids’ behaviour difficulties and I worked with the unit for several years. I found it very enjoyable and I hope I was of use.

Health and Wellbeing Matters

Health issues now started to escalate. Eventually I discovered I had prostate cancer. That was in late 2003 and I had to decide what to do about it. My daughter-in-law asked me what I intended doing and I think I said “Probably nothing – I just hope it won’t take long or be too awful”. She was very angry with me and said I was being selfish “and didn’t I know there were people who cared for me and didn’t I want to see the grandchildren growing up!” That was a wakeup call I needed so the merry-go-round of testing, measuring and treatment started. Biopsies indicated that it had spread outside the gland and surgery was not an option. 2004 and the first few months of 2005 were taken up with radiation and hormone treatment.

I did very little else during this and sat on a deck chair on the verandah feeling awful and quite sure I would die soon – oblivious to the distress I was causing at home.

I was then asked by the social worker at the Macarthur Cancer Therapy Centre if I would be interested in joining the Macarthur Cancer Centre Community Council. This group consisted of the Director, clinicians (oncologists), radiotherapists, nurses, administrative staff and members of the community.

That is when my new life began and I found a real purpose in staying alive.

Other important matters to consider

I discovered quite soon that a lot of what I had learned from teaching and being a principal was suddenly useful again. I think I had been wrestling up until then with the fear of the 'irrelevance syndrome'. It was also a brand new experience with new challenges and demands. It was good not still trying to be what I used to be.

The Community Council stimulated me to help form the Wollondilly Cancer Support group that brought together and provided practical assistance and advice (non-medical).

Two years later I was invited to join Campbelltown Hospital's Community Council. I became a member of both the Finance Committee and Clinical Review Committee. I was amazed how working on school budgets was of practical assistance in the former committee especially as it sharpened my awareness of the torturous task the Department of Health imposed on hospital management in insisting on provisional grants (always less than the previous year) and supplementary grants that had to be applied for but the General Manager and Director of Finance never knew, until it turned up late in the year, if it would be approved.

I worked in this area for several years until all such involvement ceased with the re-election of a Coalition Government.

This experience gave me a new insight into the provision of health in a growing public hospital. My views as an observer were always welcome, but I had the opportunity to see administrators, doctors, nurses and administrative staff and understand how they were affected by decisions and policies. Overwhelmingly though, the commitment of everyone to patient care was paramount.

During this time Western Sydney University established its Medical School and the beneficial effects on the hospital, now a training hospital, became enormous.

With others I was invited to be part of the University's team of interviewers of applicants for the Medical School and I have enjoyed several years now in this role. The process was unique – all who made it to interview were subject to eight 9-minute interviews. It is almost impossible for applicants to be coached to answer questions, so the process is impressive. I have been stunned by the level of awareness of many of the young applicants.

For the last ten years I have been chair of a voluntary local community organisation Classics at Picton which organises four Sunday concerts a year and hosts two *Bach in the Dark* concerts each year. The latter is a very popular event that began in Sydney where concerts are held in the crypt of St. James' Church in King Street.

In conclusion

It will be twenty years in September since I retired. Somehow I've stayed alive. My wife used to say "You measure out your life in coffee spoons" quoting T S Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. I preferred

something less poetic so I say “You measure out your life in how many times you have to buy a new tube of toothpaste”. So every time I reach onto the supermarket shelf for another tube I cheer!

I am very grateful we made the decision to move to Picton back in 1967. Since Margaret died I am very conscious of the love, tolerance, forgiveness and support of my local community. It is a joy to see people I taught here from 1968 – 1971 and it just makes sense to try to do what I can, while I can.

Contributor details

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John was Principal of Airs High School from 1992 to 1997, after teaching in south-western Sydney for many years prior to that. Since his retirement he has been very actively involved in local hospitals, cancer support and other local organisations.