

## Retirement in a Small Town

**Rod McClure**

Hi, my name is Rod McClure and I was Principal of Braidwood Central School from 1999 to 2014. Prior to that I was a classroom teacher at Dapto High, Head Teacher History at Airds High, ran the Albion Park Education Resource Centre as Training and Development Officer and then Deputy Principal at Narooma High.

### **To stay or go: 'Right or left at Oak Street?'**

For me, the issue was simply decided. My wife had a job with the Department of Defence in Canberra and my youngest was entering Year 12. Braidwood is a lovely heritage town of around 1200 people from a very wide range of backgrounds. The school draws on the surrounding areas and peaked in my time at around 450 students, over 150 of them secondary students, so it was larger in that area than a number of rural (what were) PH2s. The remainder were of course K-6 and the school had a multicategorical class.

The issue of stay or go is an important one. Many locals in my town were surprised that I stayed on after retirement. Winters are sub-zero and summers can be warm. I think that most of them were pleased that I stayed. As one old timer said to me, after 16 years I was 'almost a local'.

If you do decide to stay on in a small town, my very strong advice is to get well involved in the community. A retired principal has many skills that are valued in a small community, as those of you who are or have been in one would know. If you decide to leave I would also advise the obvious – make sure you are moving to an area that you connect with and are happy in.

### **Planning retirement: 'Am I in the money?'**

I made sure that my community had plenty of notice that I was retiring. As with others who have contributed on this topic I spent several months 'adjusting' on long service leave before official separation, although this was of limited benefit in some ways. (See 'Grief' below.)

I would strongly advise that retiring principals consult with the NSW Super retirement people. If there is anyone left out there in the 'old' super scheme you may not know, for example, that you can purchase extra units (even at five minutes to midnight as I did) and then use some of your preserved benefit to pay them off. This greatly increases your pension.

I would also recommend that retiring principals settle on an action or ritual that they can identify with as formally 'letting go'. For me it was handing over my keys to my Deputy who would relieve for me for several months. It was a formal closure although not a complete one in my case – as we shall see.

### **Grief or 'Bound upon a wheel of fire?'**

No one prepared me for this and I did not see it coming. My first eighteen months of retirement were not as peaceful and relaxing as I had imagined they would be. In my last two years as Principal I had refused to accommodate a small number of staff on a range of issues. One half of my first term of retirement was spent being under investigation by EPAC because of a complaint against me.

I mention this simply to make the point that decisions we have made, and stands that we have taken, may come back at us even in retirement. For most people this is not the case, *but if it is then seek support*. The

SPC were a tower of strength for me in that last two years. I will always be grateful to Lila and Bernie R for their unstinting support.

Also 'out of left field' were the children. The K-6 students could not understand where I had gone, partly because I was still 'here'. One young person with special needs would run across roads to hug me and, as he had limited speech, would just stare at me with his big brown eyes. When I attended my youngest son's graduation, most of the kids there thought that I had come back. Parents that had felt well and truly supported over the years also had an impact: "If only you could have been there to see my youngest through."

Don't get me wrong, there were members of my community glad (even ecstatic) to see me go for various reasons including me not doing what they wanted, when they wanted, even when their desire was unreasonable or unfair to others. The P&C saw the arrival of a new Principal as a great opportunity to move in new directions. They were a new body of parents and sort of proved my theory that every six years or so the parent body alters as their children move through the school. Each new cohort of parents wants to see change and growth. Experienced principals work with and guide such groups because, well, we've seen it all once or more before.

That brings me to the incoming Principal. As the outgoing Principal you must accept that you are 'ex' in every sense of the expression. You must let your ownership of what you moulded over a period of time go. The point is that things will change once you've gone. If you decide to stay in the town you must be aware that you may be approached by various people for advice on particular aspects of the school's current decisions and processes that they may disagree with. You should avoid doing or saying anything that may undermine your successor. Be prepared for this.

Then there is the inbuilt 'biological clock' that most Principals develop over their tenure. It has taken two to three years to stop waking at night worrying over key issues such as [whether the right texts are being taught, assessments are complete or why NAPLAN scores aren't better](#). It sounds silly and may only happen to a few people for all I know, but it did, in my case, interfere with letting go and living a non-school centred life.

The bottom line: Staying in a town that you have served as faithfully as you could for a long period of time, reflects the reality of being a principal in a small town and/or K-12 school. On occasion at principals' conferences when, after the odd glass or two, urban colleagues would stir me on how easy it is to be a principal in the country, I would tell them that a principal in a small country town does not live five suburbs and ten lifestyles away from their community. You live it, every day, and not to understand the undercurrents at any given time in your community courts disaster. The sheer intimacy of the relationship is both the joy and the potential disaster. Despite all of your experience with parents in secondary schools, you quickly learn to NEVER stand between a kindergarten mother and her child – they take few prisoners!

### **A brave new world: 'Tis new to thee'**

Staying in a small town in retirement is, in my experience, fantastic once you navigate through the real and/or potential situations mentioned above. The key is to get involved. In fact not being the 'Principal' releases you in so many different ways.

Braidwood has a community radio station (2BRW 94.5) and, as Principal, I used to deliver a weekly summation of events at the school mainly for grandparents and the wider community. On retirement I began a weekly book reading for 45 minutes. Much to my surprise the local tradies and businesses (in addition to other community listeners) really like what has been delivered (Tale of Two Cities, Capricornia, Tourmaline, Dracula) although the local butchers want 'Fifty Shades of Grey' on the menu.

When the founder of the station left I became President of the Board of the radio station and have thoroughly enjoyed the involvement. The Board are great to work with and the station is thriving and about to increase its range fourfold.

I also work three hours a fortnight in the Discovery Room (yes, with school groups) at the War Memorial in Canberra. Old principals never die – they simply use the classroom skills that got them to principal in the first place.

So it was that I was involved in the re-enactment of the trial of the Clarke Brothers (notorious local bushrangers) as a defence barrister. I think the performance must have been OK as one descendant of the Clarkes shook me by the hand and said: “Man, you nearly got them off!”

That has led to a role as the drunken Irish Catholic priest in a performance of ‘Dimboola’, a role my wife has said was made for me. The play should raise \$20,000-\$40,000 for the local hospital.

So it goes. One thing has led to another but being willing to be involved is the key.

One really valuable thing is that you can go to the pub, the club, the local show, a footy game, whatever – and be a member of the community, not a ‘pillar’ of the community held to set an ‘example’ that is as unrealistic as it is unattainable for most of us.

After the white water of being a principal and being measured in a fishbowl by people both within and outside the Department who have no real idea of the pressures of the job, especially in a small community, you do reach ‘Golden Pond’ where the waters are still, the fishing is great and you realise that you truly do belong.

### **Contributor details**

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Rod was Principal at Braidwood Central School from 1999 to 2014. Since retiring he has become President of the Braidwood Community Radio, contributing a weekly book reading plus interviews of various people. He also acts as a volunteer in the Discovery Zone at the War Memorial in Canberra and enjoys cleaning ancient Roman and Greek coins. He hopes to travel extensively in 2019.