

## Strategies for transitioning to retirement

Angela O'Callaghan

I thought I'd share with you a few strategies that have helped me over the last 20 months to move successfully from the busy life of a Principal to unexpected retirement. I was looking forward to working for another three terms. However, the sudden need to provide long term ongoing support to my twin brother, an invalid pensioner with numerous health issues and living 300kms away, resulted in a decision to relinquish my position as Principal of Narromine High School and to commence long service leave, prior to retirement.

Suddenly, after 37 years in a field that I loved, I was no longer working and was in uncharted waters. Always passionate about education and the students and staff for whom I cared, I feared it was going to be very hard to let go and adjust to the next stage of my life. Much to my surprise, I have managed to do that without too much difficulty.

From the start, I have always ensured there was something to look forward to. It could be large or small such as coffee or lunch with a friend, a new book to start, a visit to or from family, a few days away or an extended trip. In the first few months, when my mind often wandered to matters associated with school, I would make myself stop and think about what I was looking forward to. My mantra has been to look forward not backwards. When friends from work ring I continue to steer our conversation to topics other than school. This has helped me significantly with the transition process.

After the routine of work, I knew I needed something to frame my days. When a friend invited me to walk the Camino with her in 2017, I decided to set a walking challenge that I could do from home. At that stage, I would certainly not have won a prize for fitness. My goal, which I achieved, was to walk up and down sections of the gravel road that goes through the centre of our property until I had walked the distance from home to the tip of Cape York.

Please don't think I am suggesting you adopt such an enormous challenge! As the experts keep telling us, and I have discovered to be true, any form of exercise will improve our overall wellbeing. Exercising in the outdoors has brought additional bonuses. Each walk, now alternated with a bike ride, brings something different. It may be the beauty of light reflecting from leaves off a tree, interesting cloud formations or, in my case, wild pigs or kangaroos crossing my path. Thank goodness for the ABC listen app which I listen to as I walk. It allows me to keep up to date with current affairs, broaden my general knowledge, and be intellectually stimulated and entertained by its enormous range of podcasts.

One of the best things for me about retirement is having flexibility about how I use my time. For example, summer mornings can now begin with lap swimming at the 25m pool in our local village. Work days involved 234kms of travel – hence there was no time to enjoy such activities.

While retirement means I don't have the pleasure of the daily company of the many friends I made on staff, it has brought welcome opportunities to spend more time with family, including grandchildren. Old friendships, some of which were put on the back burner because of work, have been renewed through lunch groups I have established and a book group which I recently joined. Each involves time spent time chatting and laughing which, as we know, is good for the soul. Instead of saying vaguely to a friend we should catch up some time, I now suggest a date, venue and time. As a result, a week rarely goes by without meeting a friend for coffee or lunch.

My advice is to take every opportunity to get to know new people. A chance meeting at a ball in Dubbo was followed by an invitation to the Australia Day luncheon at the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron at Kirribilli and a friendship that is ongoing. I have kept in touch with a group of people met on a European river cruise in 2016. As a result, my husband and I have enjoyed staying with new friends in Newcastle and bike riding around Lake Macquarie. A group of us had a great time at trip reunions at Jindabyne, where we climbed Mount Kosciuszko and Goolwa, where we went on a half day cruise to the mouth of the Murray River. I have already purchased tickets to fly to Hobart for our 2019 reunion.

How good it is to finally have time to enjoy old and new hobbies. I'm relishing sorting through family history information and have become a much more regular user of our local library. The services it offers are fantastic. As I read a book, I record a few lines about it so I can keep track of what I have read and share information with friends who are fellow readers. It has been a pleasure to write long letters to elderly friends in nursing homes, knowing how much they appreciate contact. Whatever your hobby, make sure you take the time to enjoy it.

Retirement has brought a sense of achievement and satisfaction as projects have been accomplished. Some have been short term such as renovating a room or sorting photos from overseas trips and deciding on ones for framing. Others have been more complex such as finding out what happened to my great grandfather after deserting his family and fleeing the colony. I have commenced writing my memoir for my children and am thoroughly enjoying delving deep into my childhood memories and reading supporting documents such as my school reports from first and second class. As you can see, my days are busy – in the nicest of ways. Soon it will be two years since I left work.

It seems another door is about to open. Having recently attended a funeral where the celebrant showed little empathy and twice named the deceased incorrectly, I have decided to do some training and be available at low cost for families who struggle to pay funeral expenses. And so begins my next chapter!

I wish you all well in retirement. If you are considering it, take the plunge. It is a wonderful stage of life.

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Angela was Principal of Brewarrina Central School from 2003-2004 and Narromine High from 2005-2016. While passionate about her work as a Principal, she is enjoying the opportunities offered by the flexibility that comes with retirement.