

Statutory Annual Report 2011

Schools are complex communities, where, unless a high degree of repression is implemented, feelings, thoughts, opinions and values are expressed with more intensity and passion on a regular basis than, I suspect, in any other environment except the family home. Schools daily face the particular circumstance that children with “negative” feelings towards their parents and siblings (and all children of course have these feelings from time to time – but some children have them to an unhealthy degree) will bring those feelings to school and project them onto the relatively safe targets of teachers and their fellow students. A kind of circle is completed when parents, should they hear of these episodes, but almost always unable to confront the truth of their own role in the child’s hostility, respond with horror, anger etc, directed to the child, the school, a teacher or teachers, other students – any or all of the above.

Schools are expected to handle the conversations which follow these events with not just maturity, objectivity and wisdom, but even with grace. We are not supposed to look the parent squarely in the eye and say “The root of these problems is in the dynamics of your family”.

Some parents, and God bless them, are able to face such truths unflinchingly. But they are in a small minority! Some teachers and school administrators are particularly good at handling uncomfortable conversations. It’s not one of my strengths, I have to admit. I remember a conversation with one father and his child, when I told the father to “stop jabbing your finger into your son’s face, stop treating him like you’re a lawyer and he’s a hostile witness, and try listening to him for a change.” I did have an ulterior motive on that occasion, I must admit: I wanted to show the son that his father could not bully and intimidate everyone the way he bullied and intimidated his son, but the father reacted (hardly surprisingly) by withdrawing his son from the school...



Anyway, the point I want to make is that schools are for many or most students the safest places they have in which to express feelings of hostility, anger or rage. This means that every day we are dealing with intense emotions: every day in every school the observant teacher will notice dramas, often melodramas, being enacted. I think Candlebark is a good school, and I think that was evident again in 2011. I would describe it as a “good-natured school”, where students display tolerance, generosity and open-mindedness every day, but they also of course display selfishness, greed, cruelty and bad temper. This means that one of the most important challenges for the adults working in any school, including Candlebark, is that of micromanagement. Every day, so many small, medium and large episodes must be dealt with, preferably positively and constructively... A Nerf gun missing from a locker, a trampled sandcastle, a child calling another child “a retard”, someone not pulling their weight in cleanup, a broken stool which no-one knows anything about... If for, say, three days we ignored these incidents, we would, I believe, have chaos.

When Archbishop Hollingworth airily dismissed criticisms of his performance as Archbishop of Brisbane by saying that he was “a big picture man; he left micromanagement to others”, he was saying, in my view, that he was unfit for his position. To fail to attend to the small, medium and large dramas that are being played out in every corner of every school every day – including Candlebark – is like driving a car without attending to the oil, the water or the air pressure in the tyres.

But these are just general comments; they do not relate to 2011 in particular. 2011 did seem to me a good year for Candlebark. But that’s because the adults who work at the school continue to attend to the “oil, water and tyre pressure”.

Unusually, we had the same adults in 2011 as we did in 2010. We made up for this with quite an exodus at the end of the year: a full-time teacher and a part-time teacher leaving to have babies, a full-time teacher accompanying her partner to Germany, a nearly-full-time teacher pursuing a unique opportunity in the USA, and a full-time teacher leaving the profession to spend some time reflecting, writing, changing the pace of his life...

So we said goodbye to Scott Hatcher, a trusted, well-liked and respected teacher of English who had been here four years, Jess Liston, a dynamic, positive, lively teacher of primary subjects who had been here two years, Melissa Wilson, a quietly dedicated and meticulous teacher of young children for three years, Zan Carroll, a good-humoured, multitalented, idealistic teacher of (mostly) Spanish for three years, and one of our foundation teachers, Claire Rosenhain, who taught dance with creativity and passion, and who changed the nature of Candlebark by doing so.



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Photo: Hahn Tran

We also said goodbye to a Year nine group, whose leadership, idealism, maturity and intelligence were outstanding. As with previous Year nine groups, they scattered to the four winds at the end of the year, or, more specifically, to Sunbury Downs Secondary College, Fitzroy High School, Mowbray College, Kyneton Secondary College, and Gisborne Secondary College. Two went overseas for a full year’s exchange – one to Spain, and one to France.

Their year was, as has become customary for Year nine, a full one. As well as a trip to WOMAD in South Australia, and spending three days “doing” the Science Experience program at Latrobe University they went canoeing, hiking and camping, visited Broadmeadows court (under the kindly tutelage of the Chief Magistrate, Mr Kumar), and spent six weeks in Tanzania. The time in Tanzania was life changing for many.

Supported by teacher Sam Ford and his wife Krista, teacher Zan Carroll, and ex-Candlebark teacher Sarita Ryan, they spent time in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, in the hinterland and a game park, and helping local communities.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, other students were also engaging in different adventures and excursions. In 2011 various kids participated in the Melbourne Writers Festival and the Little Big Shots film festival, and went to Canberra, Benalla Art Gallery, a farm which specialises in Waler horses, an alpaca and chestnut farm at Bright, the Holocaust Museum in Melbourne, a New Zealand theatre performance called Kia Ora Khalid, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Werribee Zoo, a James Morrison concert, a concert by the Resonance String Orchestra, an evening dance/music/theatre presentation by Victoria's outstanding VCE students of 2010, a Spanish cabaret at a restaurant/nightclub in Melbourne, a performance by the Australian Opera, and the AG ideas conference. They went on canoe trips, bushwalks, camps, hikes and a bike camp. At school we were visited by young Australian Ballet student Asher Watters-Cowan from New South Wales, a Japanese member of Parliament, the students of Fitzroy Community School, ambulance officers (to run first aid courses), and Federal member of Parliament Mr Bob Mitchell.

We had a chess evening at school, where parents and children came in and learned more about this fascinating game from Basil Eliades. Students continued to participate in chess tournaments, with remarkable success, and qualified for the state titles. They also participated in many sporting competitions with other schools in the district, including a cross-country race at Hanging Rock and another one at Bendigo, and soccer, basketball, T-ball, cricket and netball matches.

Among the special events organised at the school was Candlebark University, a three-day program where students chose from a variety of courses, which included Dentistry, Music Composition, Breadmaking, Drawing, Medicine and Surgery, Kitchen Gardening, Crime Solving, Animal Husbandry, Healthy Living, and Fluff and Nonsense. All students graduated successfully, and were awarded appropriate degrees and diplomas at the end of the courses.



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Photo: Hahn Tran

We also had an Autumn arts festival, a concert by our very own string ensemble, a couple of wonderful evening soirées, and a Festival of Ideas. This last-named, which also ran for three days, included the exploration of different topics, such as “Is there a time when lying is OK? Should we flush the toilet every time? Ideas worth spreading. Should school be compulsory for kids?” Values were discussed and considered. Mini workshops were offered, for example “Design a new sport for kids”, “Design an ideal

house for kids,” “Analyse ideas on a scene from Avatar”, “Toy Story 3.....what is friendship?”, “Drawings of the future”, “Run a survival game where critical choices have to be made”. Many of these workshops were organised and led by our senior students.

June 29 saw the culmination of a great deal of work by our grade 4 students, assisted by Candlebark teacher Jess Liston and curators from Dromkeen. Dromkeen is at nearby Riddells Creek, and is famous for its collection of art from Australian children’s picture books, which is regularly displayed in a number of beautiful galleries. In 2010 we put a proposal to Dromkeen that our grade 4 students should curate an exhibition from their collection. We felt that such a venture, perhaps unprecedented for an Australian gallery, would be good for everyone – curators, who would get a different perspective on artwork; the public, who would see an exhibition with a fresh flavour; and our kids, who would learn a lot about art, galleries and exhibitions.

Kaye Keck, the Director of Dromkeen, enthusiastically embraced the proposal, and planning went ahead, but tragically, Kaye did not live to see the results. Nevertheless, the exercise fulfilled all our hopes, and a huge crowd turned up for the opening (which was catered by our Year 8 students). A lot of thought and planning had gone into the exhibition, and it seemed that visitors to Dromkeen, both at the opening and in the months that followed, were delighted by the students’ choices and comments.

In August we had the entire school undergo comprehensive eye testing on a scale which (as far as we know) has only been undertaken once before in Australia. We arranged this with Vision for Children, in Sunbury, who shared the cost of the program with us. We contributed to the cost because we believe that undetected vision problems are likely to impact on students’ learning, and Vision for Children contributed because they saw it as an opportunity to enhance the statistical data available on Victorian school students.

Vision for Children provided a written report and advice on the outcome of every examination, to parents and to the school.

It was well worthwhile, from our point of view. 13 students, or 17%, were recorded as having vision problems that had been previously identified. In five of those 13 students, it seemed likely that vision changes had occurred since their last examination. Another 13 students, 17%, were found to have previously unidentified vision problems.

These findings were almost exactly consistent with the results at the only other school where this kind of testing has been done: a Melbourne government primary school. At that school, 30% of the students were found to have vision/eye health problems. Problems identified ranged from myopia (blurred distance vision) to hyperopia (difficulty focusing up close) to astigmatism (distortion of vision) to amblyopia (lazy eye). There is however a substantial difference in that half of the Candlebark children had been previously tested, whereas many/most of the other school’s population had not. At Candlebark, half the possible eye-health problems had been previously discovered; at the other school only a few had.

We participated in a second research project, a survey of the salt intake of school students. This was conducted by Deakin University, and was the first Australian study to assess salt intake in children, using the validated 24-hour urine collection method. Given that excessive salt intake can affect cardiovascular health in later life, the researchers wanted to establish whether Australian children were consuming too much salt. The National Heart Foundation was also interested in establishing how much children’s taste

preferences affect their food choices, and whether, in particular, a preference for salt leads them to make poor food choices. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that most children are consuming far too much salt, and parents of students in this situation were informed of the findings.

Another innovation in 2010 was the introduction of a Community Service scheme for the Year eight students. We felt that these young people had reached an age where they should be able to develop a commitment to the wider community – Candlebark and beyond. I never want the kids here to have a sense of entitlement and as they approach Year nine, when they become our senior group, it's important that they can demonstrate attributes of generosity, maturity, responsibility and leadership.

So we told the year eight students that we wanted them to accumulate 100,000 points by the end of the year, by acts of community service. They responded really positively, and among the projects they undertook was a pledge that each and every one of them would run the weekly cross-country course in under 15 minutes, to set an example to younger kids. As well, they painted and refurbished the first aid room at school, they helped with catering, supervision and care of younger students at sleepovers and excursions, and they catered for various school functions. Beyond the school gates, they worked hard to raise money for a Cambodian charity, and a number of them became involved in individual projects – for example, helping teach autistic children to swim.

Towards the end of 2010 teacher Jessica Liston proposed an equestrian program for the school, which would focus not on horse riding but on helping students to progress socially, emotionally, physically and academically by working with horses. We eagerly accepted her proposal, and in the months that followed Jessica spent countless hours selflessly equipping herself in tangible and intangible ways to run the program. This included working as a volunteer with experts in the field, and thousands of kilometres during the holidays driving the length and breadth of Victoria in search of suitable horses.

We launched the program at the start of 2011. It is based on the philosophies of Equine Assisted Growth and Learning. Horses are powerful, dynamic animals that have a highly developed ability to read their environment. They react honestly to signals given to them, and provide a “mirror” for the actions and feelings of those working with them. Hence, they are wonderful “tools” for personal growth, understanding the impact of actions on others, confidence building, problem solving and developing nurturing behaviour.

The idea is that students learn to develop a relationship with the horse so that the horse willingly chooses to cooperate with them, as they will have earned the horse's trust and respect .

The program was dramatically successful, and we received feedback throughout the year from parents reporting on the remarkable changes they had witnessed in their children, seemingly stemming directly from the work with horses.

We also introduced speech therapy to the school in 2011. The wide-ranging skills that speech therapists have nowadays enabled support to be offered to students with many different difficulties. Therapist Sally Armstrong worked with some students for just a short time, finding that a few sessions were enough to remedy problems they were experiencing, and other students throughout the year.

We added drums and vocals to our lively music program, and recruited a new cello teacher, Edwina Cordingley. It was a particular delight in 2011 to witness the number of students who chose to learn musical instruments, and the rapid improvement in their skills and confidence.

One of the most time-consuming events of 2011 was the inspection of the school by the VRQA, the Victorian Regulations and Qualifications Authority. It is the job of this authority to ensure that schools are conducted according to the rules and regulations. We knew that we had an excellent school, which does not neglect any aspect of the care or education of the children who attend it. We felt that we were easily able to demonstrate this to any statutory authority, including the VRQA. However, we were taken aback by the pedantic, hostile, and negative tone adopted by the VRQA at the beginning of the inspection, and in subsequent correspondence. It seemed to us that the culture of the organisation was unnecessarily antagonistic, and that this culture was evident at the highest level, as demonstrated by the letter we received after the inspection from the Director.

The VRQA's attitude was especially extraordinary, given that, in my view anyway, they found nothing meaningful to criticise. I have attached to this report a letter I wrote to the director of the VRQA (/official-stuff/2011-statutory-annual-report-appendix-1), in response to the report and the accompanying letter from her. In time, I was contacted by the Deputy Director of the VRQA, who visited the school, and apologised for the standard of the inspection and the rigmarole to which we had been subjected. Nevertheless, a great deal of time and energy was spent on this frustrating exercise.

I await changes in the approach to schools taken by the VRQA, as per promises made to me by them during this process.

If the VRQA inspection was the low point of 2011 – and it was – the high point was the completion of most of the building construction and alterations during the year. Every building in the school has been dramatically altered and extended, and as well, thanks to BER funding and the school's own substantial contribution, the school has a new library. This is an innovative building constructed underground so that it can serve as a fire shelter in dire emergency. It has been engineered to the highest standards to ensure its adequacy for this role.



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Photo: Sam Slicer

The library features a magnificent table made from blackwood timber obtained from a fallen tree on the property, shelves custom-made by a local craftsman, (plus bookcases bought dirt cheap from the Border's closing sale!), and a ceramic mosaic done by students of the school under the supervision of Art teacher Basil Eliades.

The library was opened twice, firstly at a wonderful cocktail party featuring flamenco guitar music, and secondly at an official function, featuring the local member of Federal Parliament, Mr Rob Mitchell. On both occasions we were able to thank the architect, the visionary Paul Haar, and the builders, Thoroughbred Constructions of Gisborne, who set exemplary standards of careful and skilful workmanship.

As 2011 came to an end, work on the final building scheduled for extensions was also nearly finished. This means, that in a two year period the school has acquired a new dance studio, three new store rooms/music practice rooms, a Principal's office (not nearly plush enough, but it'll have to do), three new classrooms, an expanded science laboratory, a larger art room, an enlarged amenities block, four new bathrooms/toilets, and of course the new library/bushfire refuge. As well, a special area has now been designated as the music centre, so music teachers no longer need to traipse from building to building.

It is a happy achievement, to see the school so soundly established for the future. In 2011, we also began the process of applying to the relevant statutory authorities to raise the maximum number of students we are permitted to enroll. This involves satisfying the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal that we can safely accommodate extra numbers. It is a process that was ongoing at the end of 2011.

After the Candlebark 2010 annual report was circulated, as required, to parents of students at the school, I received the following response from the father of a year nine boy:

"Thank you for sharing the annual report with us.

"The reports that matter most to us as parents are the ones coming from our kids.

"Just before A (*his son; name removed to protect him from being embarrassed by his father) left for Tanzania, I sat him down for a long chat, just to put a chalk mark where he's at and what he's thinking and feeling at the threshold of a new adventure. I'd like to share with you, your staff and other parents the following snippet of our chat.

F: If you could pick out a few things that make you happy, what would they be?

A: Going to Candlebark... I'm particularly happy about that. Well, there are few things that I think absolutely there's no bad side to them... just everything about them is absolutely perfect, and Candlebark is one of them.

"I was blown over by this remark as hyperbole or hearty praise of anything is never part of A's kit bag. So I thank you, all Candlebark teachers, staff, students and parents that together make up this "absolutely perfect" thing in A's life."

I couldn't be happier with such an endorsement.

John Marsden
(Principal)

[Click here for 2011 statistics \(/official-stuff/2011-statutory-annual-report-appendix-2\)](#)
