

St Benedict's School Edgeworth, NSW

“For the Love of the Game”



One of my very first school visits as a musician was to St Benedict's school in Edgeworth, in the Maitland-Newcastle Diocese, in November 2001. A lovely single stream school, led by the music-loving and all round “good bloke” Michael Gore.

During one of the morning workshops I got chatting to the Year 3/4 students and after they'd asked me a few questions I asked them a couple. One of the questions was, “So what's good about your school?” The response from one of the groups was almost unanimous and totally unprompted, “Mr Smith”.

The Year 4 teacher in question, Noel Smith, visibly cringed at this response, which only added to its genuine-ness. These kids obviously loved their teacher. Really interested, I asked them why and I received a range of answers, to Mr Smith's anguished embarrassment. “He's fun to be with”, “He makes learning fun”, “He loves being a teacher”. It was that last comment that I can still hear in my memory today.

Over a cup of coffee at morning tea I investigated further. Noel had been a typically talented teacher who had risen rapidly through the ranks of administration to the position of principal. Competence and giftedness and natural leadership qualities had taken him there. But above all, John always loved teaching.

John recalled the story of walking along the beach with his wife one day in the school holidays. A principal of some experience he felt quite unsatisfied with the life of a school administrator and its inherent stresses and the conversation led him to the point where he said that he missed the life and joy and love of the classroom teacher. And his wife replied that there was nothing to stop him from returning to that love. And so he did. And he's never, for one minute, regretted the decision. Even to a visiting observer, this seemed to be a man at peace with his world.

I remember a conversation I had on bus duty one day with one of the teachers at St Joseph's, Moorebank, Margaret Austin. She commented that the reality of family life meant that many female teachers experienced a natural career break with the birth of children, but that others, men and women, missed out on this. As a result, she theorised, many of these people often took on positions of responsibility, either out of the need for change and challenge or financial need, but in doing so they often left their great love behind: teaching children.

My very good friend Sean Grace often said to me that it would be a waste of sorts if I were to become a principal. Initially, I think I found this comment a touch insulting as though it cast doubts upon my administrative skill. But now I know it was inherently true: my greatest love and joy is being with children and Sean just knew it well before I did.

And what an asset to any staff are people like John, who after many years still “love the game” as much now as they ever did.