Holy Name Wahroonga Parishioner News

‘Cleaning up the school are you?’
‘Well, Sir, actually…’
‘A bit late, eh?’
‘Well, Sir, it’s because I broke a rule.’
‘Why, what did you do?’
‘Well, you see, my friends and I were mucking about in on the field and I lifted my friend and he fell and was hurt.’
‘What rule did you break?’
‘Don’t put your hands on another person.’
‘Why is that a rule?’
‘Because someone might get hurt.’

The principal then asks the boy his name, gives his hand a warm shake saying, ‘Well done. You learnt a valuable lesson today.’ Tony Gleeson, principal of St Leo’s College at Wahroonga, is a big man. The Year 7 boy looks taller too as he walks off.

I am visiting St Leo’s to learn more about Tony Gleeson, a man who has taught for a total of 32 years and always in Christian Brothers schools. A graduate of Waverley College, where his grandfather was among its founding students, Tony began his teaching career there as well. He taught most subjects and held a range of senior positions at Waverley College before taking the Assistant Principal role at St Paul’s Manly. He became Principal at St Leo’s in 2010. The College is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year and is in the middle of an ambitious building and refurbishment program. As we duck and weave our way around orange plastic barrier fencing, Tony speaks proudly of what has been achieved and what is still on the drawing board in terms of facilities. What is it about being principal that most engages him, I ask.

‘The kids,’ he replies without hesitation. ‘I enjoy the staff too, watching them develop. They give so many extra hours out of school without thinking of being paid. It’s not about the money, for them. Well, you wouldn’t be in schools if it were about the money. But most of all, it’s the kids. Seeing them arrive in Year 7 and watching them grow through the school until they come back for their Year 12 graduation assembly. There’s nothing like it.’

Tony is a man unafraid to speak his mind. ‘The HSC is getting past its use-by date,’ he says now. ‘It isn’t able to measure the things we think are most important. Of course we take academic achievement seriously. This morning we had a special assembly to honour our High Achievers in the HSC. I am very proud of them all. But I told them a story that to me highlights what we value most.’ He proceeded to regale me with an account of how a staff member had reported seeing a Year 10 boy from St Leo’s go to the aid of a student from nearby Barker College. It was on the train and the Barker boy was being hit about the head by a group of students from a high school down the line. The St Leo’s student called on the boys to stop and then took the Barker College boy to sit next to him for the rest of the journey. ‘That’s what we aim for in our students,’ Tony says as he finishes the story, his face alight with pride. ‘I rang his mother to tell her what a great son she was raising. The boy didn’t want me to mention the incident or give him any acknowledgement.’
I ask him what future changes he thinks will be most important for schools. ‘I think technological change is key,’ he says. ‘We are at a point, like the meniscus of a liquid in a cup just before it breaks the surface tension and runs out everywhere. The impact of technology isn’t being fully felt yet because long-standing teachers are struggling to master and make use of the opportunities it gives. But it will come very soon. I’m very hopeful about the potential of social media, its unsocial side. Things like Twitter give kids access to people who are doing the latest research, they’re able to contact the authors of seminal articles on topics that won’t be in textbooks for another ten years. That’s incredibly powerful. It’s going to make learning something altogether different.’ He also speaks of the role of TAFE, which he sees as becoming a credible competitor with universities.

I comment on how optimistic he sounds, unlike many commentators on education and schools today. ‘Oh yes,’ he says. ‘I don’t lose sleep any more. I used to. But now I accept that that’s how the world is. Schools are made up of human beings. We are going to see the best and the worst. I expect every day to produce its own surprises.’ What then is the secret to being a good principal, I wonder. ‘Keeping your finger on the pulse,’ Tony answers. ‘Getting out of the office and going for a walk at recess or lunch. Talking to students.’ It occurs to me how well Tony Gleeson embodies Bishop Peter’s notion of evangelisation. As though I had spoken out loud, he continues, ‘I tell the students evangelisation is putting your faith into action, making a positive difference. We are put on earth to make other lives better as much as we can.’