

NBHS OBA ANNUAL LUNCHEON 2024
GUEST SPEAKER – PETER GITTENS
TRANSCRIPT



Before I start, I would like to thank Steve Ticehurst for giving me the opportunity to speak this afternoon.

I am humbled and hope that I can live up to his and your expectations.

Rest assured I will be short!

This is a significant year for the class of 1974 representing, as it does, fifty years since we left the school.

It is also an opportune time to remember those classmates who are no longer with us - each and every one of whom - is in our thoughts this afternoon.

As Anthony mentioned, my name is Peter Gittins.

I am a retired teacher and international School Principal and have led schools in Vietnam - twice - in Sri Lanka, Australia and Germany and before that taught briefly in Australia and then in PNG and Nepal.

My international career has brought with it some incredible experiences.

I have witnessed the overthrow of a divine monarch, experienced the raw tribalism of PNG, lived through five years of civil war, opened the first international school since 1975 in Saigon, Vietnam and facilitated a new school building project in Hamburg, Germany among other things.

I have been incredibly lucky to have been afforded such opportunities and put it down to being in the right place at the right time and to the values that formed part of the Boys High fabric that were instilled in me during my six years at the school.

It was the end of January 1969 and I was one of 140 odd boys standing in the quadrangle adjacent to Turton Road gearing up for my first day at a new school.

There was something Dickensian about the whole experience - students surrounded by a group of teachers on the lower level and towering above us on the steps was the imposing figure of the Deputy Principal Bill Maiden.

The teachers, predominantly male and dressed in dark suits were at that time nameless but as I soon learned were part of the Boys High story.

Nicknames such as Pop, Cat, Raz, Casper, Goofy, Slops, Keg, ... to name a few ... became the hallmarks of those who carried them and these had been passed on over many years - such was the importance of tradition at Boys' High.

In talking about tradition, the end of year celebrations for the departing Year 12 class in 1969 came around quickly and out of naivety many of my classmates - myself included - brought in a water pistol thinking that this day was a free for all.

Alas that was not to be.

Wally Kluctevitz started the ball rolling by throwing a water balloon that hit the Principal, Tom Richardson.

For that he was marched up to Bill's office and told in no uncertain terms that he would receive the maximum punishment - six of the best.

During the course of the morning Bill found out that many students in 7 Shortland had brought pistols with them.

His reaction was swift.

He stormed into the class, asked all who had such implements to declare them after which we were all marched outside the staffroom in the new building and given two each.

It was a long line but Bill certainly had a point to prove even though he must have had a sore shoulder after it.

We did things as a school - from watching the moon landing on a black and white television in the hall, which very few could see, to walking over to Waratah Oval to watch cricket and rugby league games and to attending the annual prize giving at the Town Hall - the whole school was involved.

Reflecting on this much later, this strong sense of community was special and the proud tradition of the NBHS Old Boys Association is yet another fine example so congratulations to Norm and your team.

My time at the school also taught me how impactful a great teacher can be.

We can all lay claim to one or two teachers who inspired us and my personal thanks go out to the late Vic Rooney and Brian Dellar who made learning fun in so many ways.

Moving on from Boys' High most of my career has been in international education.

Joined by my now wife Kerry, our first venture into the world of international schooling was in 1984 when we moved to PNG.

The raw tribalism of this country was incredible.

Playing golf in Goroka with our caddies dressed in arse grass and wearing penis gourds. I must admit that for the first few holes I did not spend much time looking at the golf ball !

For the history buffs PNG was a treasure trove and one such treat was walking the Kokoda Track with a group of students.

Flying into Efogi I let it slip that I had previously had some flying lessons.

So high, above the Owen Stanleys the pilot casually took his hands off the joystick and remarked there you go mate she's all yours.

Looking at the mountains on both sides and the students in the seats behind me, I politely declined the offer but I am certain to this day that he was serious.

And onto Nepal where the tribalism of PNG was replaced with a culture richly sophisticated and steeped in mysticism and religion.

At the time Nepal was ruled by a divine monarch. His power was absolute but with the tide of change turning after global events in 1989, he had failed to read the impact of a rising democratic movement.

April 1991.

We were locked into our house with tanks on the streets, a shoot to kill curfew in place and an evacuation plan on our wall. The BBC via a short-wave radio became our only contact with the outside world as a revolution unfolded outside.

Virtually overnight a divine monarch had been overthrown.

The first elections in the country's history then followed. Such was the low level of literacy the parties were designated by a symbol only and people voted accordingly - their fingers stained on blue ink so as to prevent them voting twice or more.

We loved Nepal and working in an American Embassy school brought with it some cultural nuances.

When Kerry asked one of her music students if she could borrow his rubber - a condom in the States - she was hauled over the coals for offensive language.

On a personal level Nepal is still with us as we adopted our daughter - then aged five months - at that time.

We were delighted but the real tragedy and desperation of the country was evident when a woman knocked on our gate shortly after we adopted and almost nonchalantly offered us her daughter which of course we could not accept.

A few years later I was working as a Senior Master at the International Grammar School, Sydney.

The acting Principal at that time was a bloke by the name of Edward Jones - now known as Eddie and a former coach of the Wallabies twice.

In the middle of 1992 Eddie called me into his office.

'Mate,' he said. ' You have had experience with international schools, haven't you?'

'Yes,' I replied somewhat bemused.

'Well, ' Eddie said ... we have just been approached by two people who want to establish a school in Ho Chi Minh City, and I think that we should give it a go.'

'OK,' then I said, not knowing where this was all heading.

Eddie's work ethic is incredible and his enthusiasm infectious.

Knowing very little but full of bravado we set to work and somehow managed to beat a rival bid from Singapore thus obtaining the license to open a n international school in Ho Chi Minh City - the first since 1975.

But this was always going to be a difficult undertaking.

The Vietnamese government saw the need for a school but were equally aware that this was something that could potentially challenge the regime, so it had to be tightly controlled.

Assuming the role of Principal in August 1993, I soon became aware just how carefully things were being monitored.

I was followed - as were the initial cohort of teachers, my phone calls were tapped, faxes intercepted and documents that I had shredded were laboriously reconstructed on the street directly opposite my office.

Nothing was left to chance.

Textbooks that were needed to support the curriculum had to be translated into Vietnamese and then checked by the Ministry of Culture who would challenge anything they thought was contrary to established dogma.

History and Geography were naturally targeted, and I remember one instance where an official stormed into my office armed with a Geography textbook and made one simple demand.

Mr Gittins, he said, through a translator. Tear out pages x, y and z.

'Why,' I asked, knowing that this was not a request.

'Well,' came the reply ... It is not the South China Sea - it is the South Sea and Kampuchea does not exist. 'Rip out the pages,' please.

Despite many travails, the International School Ho Chi Minh City was opened by Gareth Evans in December 1993 and now, with an enrolment of over 1800 students from over 50 nations is highly regarded locally and internationally.

And onto Sri Lanka.

When I arrived for an interview to lead the Overseas School of Colombo in April 1998, the country was in the middle of a prolonged civil war.

I was apprehensive to go there in the first place but when a bomb detonated during my last interview just a few kilometres away I was convinced that we would not be moving there if offered the job.

Hoping beyond hope that I would miss out, Murphy's law inevitably prevailed and I was offered the position to commence the following August.

'I am not taking it,' I said to Kerry pointedly.

Her response was just as emphatic. You are working as a casual teacher; we do not have a real income so you do not have a choice. Take it.

So, I did and then followed five incredible years.

Despite the ongoing tension we never felt threatened as we were under the constant eye of the Head of Security Lt Col Cjitranjan.

I wouldn't go there today; he would say when we told him of our plans as if he had some inside knowledge of what could happen and something inevitably did.

In a school community that contained over 40 nationalities and a broad mix of religions - Buddhist Christian, Hindu and Islam - events of 11 September 2001 had the potential to tear the school apart as sentiment was running high in an already fraught country.

But the community stood strong and our students rallied behind the school motto Unity in Diversity. This unity was incredible to watch and is indeed the highlight of my career.

At this time there followed an anthrax scare which meant all incoming mail could only be opened by the Head of Security and me.

In a special room clad in a full protective body kit we opened all incoming mail once every few days and in one instance got a huge shock when a white powder fell out of an envelope.

We naturally thought the worst but after testing it proved to be talcum powder ...an obvious prank but frightening all the same.

My time in Sri Lanka coincided with a wave of enthusiasm at the prospect of a peace treaty negotiated by the Norwegian's. The peace did not last long but it was welcome relief from the chaos of the past however brief it may have been.

So, it was onto Europe and to the Hanseatic port of Hamburg.

Coming from the fluidity of Asia where change was both a constant and a given, to the conservative and change resistant environment of Germany where the wheels turned ever so slowly was a huge learning for me.

Despite the innate conservatism, Hamburg was true to its Hanseatic roots. Business was done on the basis of a handshake and trust.

This was no more in evidence when, in the process of seeking funding to contract a new school, we met with the finance minister - Hamburg is a city state - in the presence of the US Consul General.

After explaining to him that we would require additional funding, he nodded approvingly. As we departed, he said that he did not know the school's bank details which we gave him on a piece of paper I pulled from my pocket.

True to form, the requested money - and it was a sizable sum - appeared into the school's bank account within a few days.

My time at Boys High provided me with a strong moral compass for which I am forever grateful.

With enrolment in the Preschool full, the owner of a large grocery chain in Germany - and recently reported the wealthiest person in Germany, wanted to enrol his grandchild.

When told that was not possible because the class was full, he demanded to meet with the Principal and Business Manager.

We explained the situation and then were handed a cheque for 150,000 euro as a donation.

Will this help, he asked?

Not at all we said in unison as we gave the cheque back. Your grandchild will have to wait like everyone else.

He got up and left angrily ... tail between his legs but we were elated in a funny kind of way.

I touched on being involved in building a new school earlier and one story springs to mind.

During the ground-breaking ceremony attended by the Mayor, an enthusiastic group of parents unleashed hundreds of balloons to celebrate the occasion. Up into the air they went and we all applauded the significance of the event.

All but a few I should say because within a few seconds the Mayor calmly walked over to me and in polite German simply said, ' Mr Gittins,' I hope you realise that this land is directly under the flightpath.

I literally froze but thankfully no planes were around at the time. And yes, parents can be over enthusiastic at times.

After stints in Switzerland and Australia where I worked as a consultant, we returned to Vietnam in 2017.

This was a relatively easy gig - the last before retirement I thought - and enjoyable as I was involved in building and designing two international bilingual schools to cater to the rising and increasingly affluent Vietnamese middle class.

But the advent of Covid turned everything on its head.

Vietnam avoided the first wave but the second wave that hit in early 2021 hit hard. The government's response was swift and brutal. If there was a case of covid in an apartment block it was immediately shut down and all those on that particular floor were shipped out to a quarantine facility - no questions asked.

Running three schools in a foreign country during this time was difficult but we managed somehow and after two weeks of hotel quarantine in Sydney we arrived back in Newcastle in July 2021.

So

We certainly have come a long way from those days in front of the school anticipating what the first day would bring and I am sure that all of that cohort who remain with us will have great stories to tell of their time at the school and after it.

Bill Maiden turned out to be inspirational and less feared as time went on. Indeed, he handles us well and instilled in us a solid set of values that remain close to our core even fifty years on.

Next year we will pass the torch to the class of 1975.

We are all not getting any younger so perhaps it is time to think about the future and contemplate how we can keep things going.

In closing many thanks for listening, many thanks to Norm and his team for organizing this annual event and long may the tradition continue.

Remis Velisque.