



OPINION

World needs more Mike Stanwells

When others were silent, Mike Stanwell stood up and confronted the evil in the church, writes Ross Kerridge

AFTER a chat some years ago, Michael said to me as we were parting "You can speak at my funeral". It is an unwanted and dreaded task, but it is also a privilege to attempt to honour someone I saw as a hero.

Michael and I first met at Newcastle Boys High School. We became close mates as the years went by, among other things in lunch-time games of 500 and other card games, the school debating team, and particularly when we became keen bushwalkers.

We walked initially with the legendary Selby Alley and Arthur ('Darby') Munro. We did some pretty tough walks but also just had fun weekends camping.

I think the toughest walk we ever did was a five-day walk through the Colo River wilderness from Putty Road across to Newnes prison farm. Among other things to save weight we didn't carry tents, sleeping mats or stoves. It was pretty minimalist, before the modern camping gear.

When I look at the maps of the route we took I find it hard to believe that we did it. We must've been tough - but Mike sometimes was a bit too enthusiastic in that department.

We did a long walk through the southern Blue Mountains past Kanangra Walls to Katoomba at Easter, and Mike decided to save weight by not carrying a jumper at all! He spent a lot of time shivering but it was a great walk.

Both of us completed the Gold Award in the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme. When the time came we were lucky to be part of a group of seven who received the award directly from Prince Philip, in a ceremony at Williamtown airport.

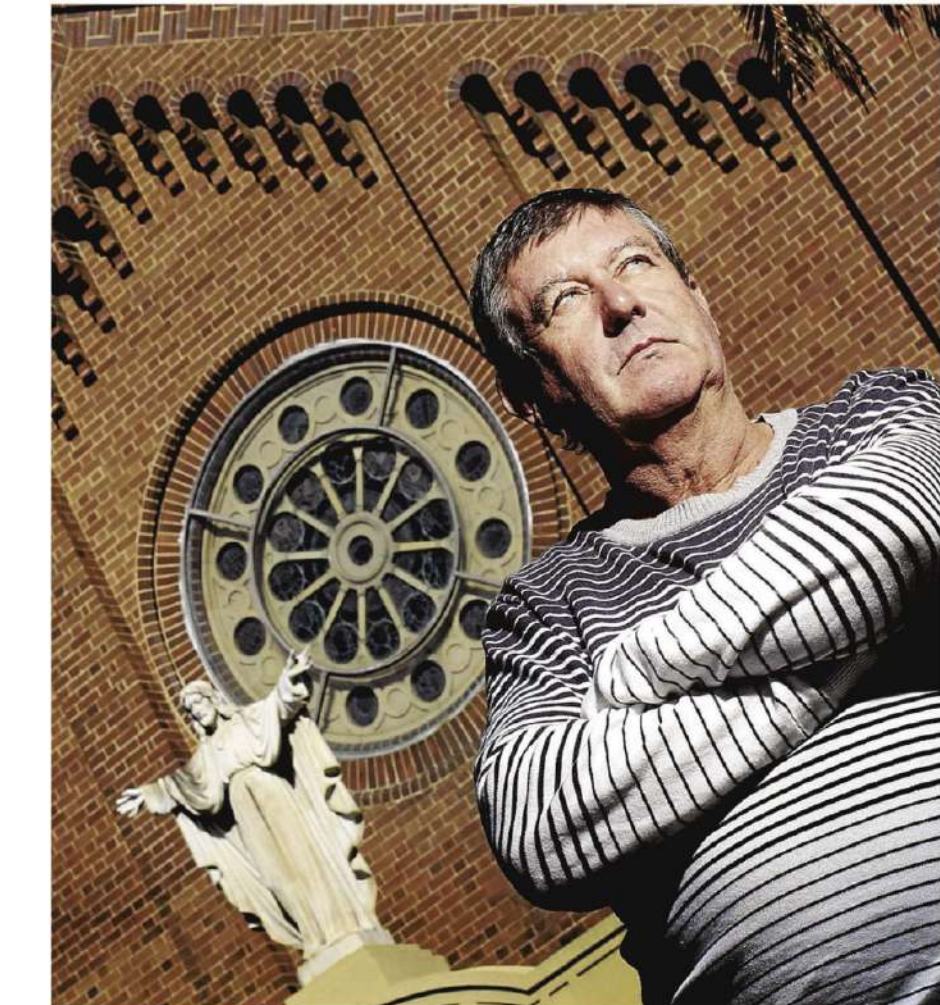
On the day, many other students taking part in the award scheme came to meet the Duke and put on a variety of displays. The Duke flew in (he actually flew the plane himself) and duly inspected all the displays and so on, and then presented the seven of us with our awards.

Michael was selected to give the vote of thanks on behalf of the awardees and indeed all those in attendance. Needless to say I was jealous but Michael was always better at those sorts of speeches.

Lots of people have given votes of thanks to royalty - but would Mike be able to do it properly? Michael went up to the microphone and started his speech... "On behalf of the awardees"... he then started thanking the various people who had been involved in putting on the day, those running the award scheme in Newcastle, the other students who had come along and put on displays, the base Commander from Williamtown air force for the venue, and those who made the sandwiches as well.

So everybody who was there had their mention and their moment of glory... but he made no mention of the Duke!! Mike then asked the crowd to show their appreciation by acclamation, and stepped down with everyone thinking 'Oh Dear'... My mother said she cringed...

But Mike then theatrically stopped, paused, and then stepped back to the microphone. He then said 'I'm sorry... I forgot one thing. None of this would have happened, Prince Philip, without your inspiration and leadership in setting up the scheme of which



I have been privileged to attain a gold award. So ultimately the main thanks for today is to you in establishing this program."

There was a sigh of relief across the crowd, then laughter and long applause. It was a brilliant trick to make sure that everybody else got their moment of glory before Prince Philip got his. I think the best vote of thanks I have ever seen. We later heard that as he was leaving Prince Philip said to the organizers how much he enjoyed the speech - that it was the highlight of the day.

After school we went our separate ways. I became a Doctor and Mike became a teacher, but we would meet every now and then and Mike would tell me all about his family and all they were doing. He was so proud - I was always struggling trying to remember who was who!

Some people do teaching as a job, a profession or even as a passion.

For Mike it was a vocation in the true sense of the word. Whenever we caught up and he would talk about what he was doing his commitment to his vocation was clear.

Mike understood that it wasn't 'just' teaching, and that pastoral care was integral to his role. Indeed sometimes I think that he saw education as a secondary task to the primary challenge of delivering pastoral care. I think any child who was taught by Mike, or was a pupil at his school when he

was principal would have been very lucky.

Unfortunately but inevitably, his commitment to his vocation as a teacher, and his deep faith, led him to confront the evil people and events that have become more publicly known in recent years.

In the story of the good Samaritan, we are told of the Priest and the Levite who looked the other way and passed by on the other side.

It was the Samaritan who helped the injured man, bound up his wounds and arranged for his care - at his own cost. For

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me the parallels with the awful situation that Mike was in are profound.

So many in our community have looked the other way and kept silent about their suspicions, and their knowledge of dreadful things that were happening, but Mike confronted them - to his own great cost.

We hear the word heroes used a lot these days in a whole lot of different contexts.

Sometimes it may be justified although a little exaggerated, and others such as sporting heroes are a complete misnomer. To fight for one's own rights, for your family, your community or for your country is entirely commendable and can be heroic.

But to fight against a wrong affecting others, when you could turn away and keep quiet is an altogether greater level of heroism.

All of this came at great cost. The last 10 years or more Mike has been in a difficult and awful place, and it has been terrible to watch.

It has been terrible for all the family, and I grieve that the children lost so much of their father and the grandchildren never saw him at his best.

Mike was a hero in every sense of the word. Never forget that. The world needs more Mike Stanwells.

Ross Kerridge delivered this eulogy at Mike Stanwell's funeral