

Educational visionary

A principal with vision and purpose

BY JAMES COUZENS

HE WAS one of the best of men to take on a famous Ballarat institution at the worst of times. James Couzens takes an up-close look at the revered principal.

Although former St Patrick's College principal Peter Casey's health is far from what it once was, his love for the school is as powerful as ever.

In addition, his enviable legacy at the educational institution continues to echo across its immense grounds.

While Dr Casey's ascension to the principalship occurred in 2002, his admiration for the place formed well before he stepped into its hallowed halls. Indeed, Dr Casey's involvement with St Patrick's was almost inevitable.

"I fell in love with the idea of St Patrick's College a long, long time ago," Dr Casey said, reflecting on the formation of his passion.

"Growing up, I went to school at Christian Brothers schools; I went to a Christian Brothers teachers' college; I taught with the Christian Brothers. All the stories of St Patrick's College Ballarat made it out to be a significant place."

However, when Dr Casey surveyed his new surroundings, and what was unfolding within them, early in the millennium, he had cause for concern.

"Walking through the place, it was tired," Dr Casey recalled of the school's physical appearance.

"Walking down the main corridor, I heard four men shouting at classes. I thought something's got to change."

When it came to Dr Casey's list of priorities, the preeminent issue was clear.

"Cultural change (was) first," Dr Casey said. "It had to become a friendly, welcoming place."

Dr Casey remains aware implementing substantial reform is not easy work.

"I tried to win the hearts of the staff; I won some and lost some," he said.

"Stating (my vision) clearly so people could understand where I was coming from, and what I saw was the future (was essential, as was) sticking to my guns on those issues."

The towering figure

continues to be grateful of those who backed him.

"I was very fortunate at the time of my appointment; we had a new deputy, a new daily administrator," Dr Casey said. "A number of other people moved on, giving us a chance to have a new team coming in. They were very, very supportive."

"(Director of development and director of boarding) Mark Waddington was particularly supportive and a driving force."

While the immense architectural changes which occurred under Dr Casey's reign continue to be evident to passers-by and community members, the immensity of less-tangible developments cannot be underestimated.

One of these was having the school reconnect with old scholars.

"The Old Collegians were very strong, but very scattered in their ventures," Dr Casey observed.

"The formal Old Collegians association had a very small membership, but the Old Collegians gathered all around the world in the name of St Patrick's College. By going out to the highways and byways, we were telling them the school is there and the school is still theirs and always would be."

Dr Casey wanted to bring back parents into the school's fold, starting at a simple level, such as through running voluntary working bees.

"(We were) reminding them we all belong together in this venture," he said.

In what was an extraordinarily progressive move at the time, the learned leader offered a heartfelt apology to abuse survivors.

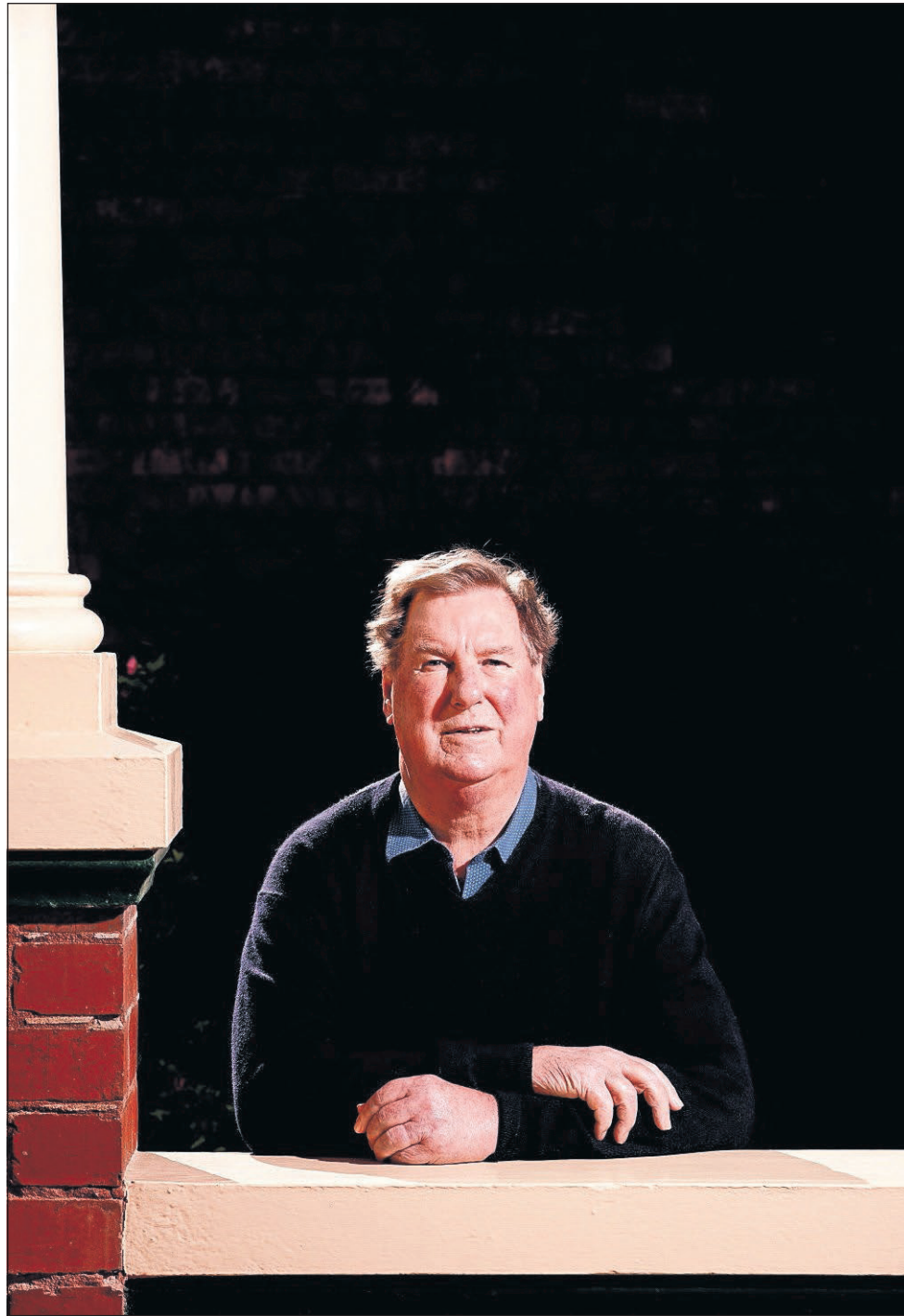
"It was there and it needed doing so I did it," Dr Casey said with great certainty.

"It was (progressive), but it went largely unnoticed. There was no fanfare for it."

Empathy was a hallmark of Dr Casey's tenure, but he required help from beyond the mortal realm to help him in his mission.

"On a daily basis, I would go to the chapel in the morning to seek God's help and, in the evening, I would go there to ask forgiveness for the people I'd hurt," Dr Casey revealed.

"There are pros and cons for all sorts of decisions and there's fallout. There are



TIME TO REFLECT: Peter Casey is facing challenging times during his retirement after a full and busy life spent in the service of Catholic education. **Pictures:** Luke Hemer.

those who are disaffected and we have to take them into account too."

When asked to outline what he believes to be his greatest impact on the school, Dr Casey's single-mindedness comes to the fore.

"It gives me heartburn when I think of the things I didn't get it done," he said, almost through gritted teeth.

However, Dr Casey does have the capacity to give himself some credit.

"(I was able to) reaffirm St Patrick's College as a good place to be for the boys particularly and the staff."

Peter Casey, past principal of St Patrick's College, was born on July 28, 1949, in Sacred Heart Hospital, Moreland.

His own education at St Leo's College, Box Hill, where he was under the influence of a number of notable teachers, was a formative experience for the future educator and school leader.

"I have very positive mem-

ories (of St Leo's College)," Dr Casey said.

"It was a demonstration school for the Christian Brothers attached to their teachers' college.

"Therefore, the staffing of the secondary college was very important to them. We were blessed with gifted teachers."

When Dr Casey left school, he signed up with the Christian Brothers.

"It meant leaving home and going off and doing a three-year period of training in theology, spirituality, and teacher education," Dr Casey said.

"I took vows as a member of the congregation of Christian Brothers and then went out teaching."

Dr Casey's fate was in the hands of others as the congregation decided where he would be based.

His first teaching appointment was at St Monica's School, Moonee Ponds, a boys' primary school, for 12 months.

"It was quite incredible,"

Dr Casey said.

"I think I had four lots of identical twins to start with and a class of 47."

Classroom management was not simple, but Dr Casey had a natural - and imposing - trait on his side.

"It was a challenge, (but) I was taller than they were," he said.

Tenures at Trinity Regional College, Brunswick, and St Bernard's College, Essendon, unfolded.

"It was a very multicultural school (and involved) learning the ways of secondary schooling," Dr Casey said of the former.

"I'd made the big time," he said of the latter, a place known for producing many renowned footballers for the Essendon Football Club, including towering ruckmen, the Madden brothers, and 300-gamer, Gary Foulds.

Yet, it was not all the proverbial plain sailing for the strong character who did not compromise on his beliefs.

"They were very turbulent times in the church and

society in 1972 and 1973," Dr Casey recalled.

"I had my differences of opinion with headquarters.

"(As a result,) I was moved over night to Warrnambool."

The period in Warrnambool was followed by two years at St Mary's Technical School, Geelong.

"(In Geelong,) it was a whole new experience again," Dr Casey said.

"In the two years there, I was never allowed to take an extra in the woodwork room or the machine shop.

"They didn't trust me.

"I was maths and science!"

In 1978 and 1979, when at St Joseph's College, Geelong, leadership opportunities arose and the roles of sports master and head of the religious education faculty were embraced.

A further move beckoned.

"I left the Christian Brothers at the end of 1979 and took up a position at St Kevin's College, Toorak, where I spent the next six years," Dr Casey said.

"There, I took on growing administrative responsibilities and leadership positions."

The mid-1980s saw Dr Casey take on his first principal role, moving to Kildare College, Traralgon.

"The reason I went for the interview was to get interview experience," Dr Casey said. "I was more interested in the deputyships on offer at the time, including at St Patrick's College, Ballarat."

A subsequent tenure of 12 years at Catholic College, Wodonga, to be closer to his parents continues to be warmly viewed.

"It was a spectacular time," Mr Casey said.

"There, I identified some of my strengths, which included community building as well as building buildings."

There was a contract on offer to stay at Wodonga, but the chance to fulfil a life-long dream of working at St Patrick's College arose.

"Brother Lawrie Collins, the outgoing (St Patrick's College) principal, told me it was coming on the market which was a little bit of a hint," Dr Casey said.

"I put in for it and was successful in the application. I don't think I was employed for the purpose (of being an agent for change).

"They were looking for someone to lead the school and I just happened to be the person who presented the best of those applicants."

The rest, as they say, is history.

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