

Glad tributes abound for revered figure

Casey's grand SPC legacy reverberates

PETER Casey's presence continues to linger throughout the St Patrick's College grounds, even though the man himself physically departed the sizable property in 2014.

To those in the know, Dr Casey's impact on the place was astronomical.

To this day, close colleagues and confidants talk passionately about how Dr Casey dragged the school up from the depths of despair.

Respected Ballarat accountant and former school board member Dennis Foley remembers the situation facing the college at the time of Dr Casey's appointment.

"The morale at the college was at a very low ebb as there had been a lot of adverse publicity about bullying claims (and) the buildings were in a very poor state," Mr Foley said.

"The college desperately needed a leader with vision and a passion to get things done."

Long-standing staff member John Richards has little doubt about Dr Casey's credentials and what he brought to the demanding role.

"When Peter came in 2002, it was but a smouldering ruin," Mr Richards said of the school.

"Peter was the kind of headmaster who had a singular view of life and that view was St Patrick's College."

"He knew exactly what his vision was for the school."

According to Mr Richards, Dr Casey went about implementing his vision and did so with aplomb.

"One of his great strengths was his ability to identify the personnel he required to achieve his vision," Mr Richards said.

"He surrounded himself with some eminently capable people."

"Everything seemed to gel at that time."

Current principal, former colleague, and good friend of Dr Casey, Steven O'Connor, supports the notion his mentor harboured noble ambitions.

"Peter sought to lift educational standards from the outset," Mr O'Connor said.

"He led a strong evidence-based approach to the education of the boys at St Patrick's College."

Former deputy headmaster Robert Brennan witnessed the fundamental cultural change brought about by Dr Casey.

"There was nothing drastically wrong, (but) there was a lack of expectations and a lack of pride," Mr Brennan said.

"He brought back the pride in the college."

"He was able to instil in the kids they were in a special place."

"He made them feel special."

Mr Richards feels Dr Casey's obvious presence around the school illustrated the headmaster's commitment to it and the people who populated it.

"Every day, he'd walk a lap of the college grounds at about 7am with his dog," Mr Richards said.

"At that time, he'd notice if a branch had fallen down or some graffiti; he'd be the first person to notice it and let the groundsmen know."

"(In addition,) every day, without fail, at about 3.40pm, he'd go for a walk around the grounds (to see) band practice, sport, whatever was going on."

Mr Richards asserts the reintroduction of academic regalia at assemblies and the return of some pomp and circumstance at speech nights were also essential actions of the Casey reign.

"Peter was a great one for formality," Mr Richards said.

"It adds a certain tone to a place."

Mr Richards, himself a past student of St Patrick's College, is quick to point out another idiosyncratic Dr Casey trait crucial to reinvigorating his alma mater: perfectionism.

"Peter had a great eye for detail," Mr Richards said.

"There are certain things you leave to chance, but most



LOVE STORY: Peter Casey fell in love with the idea of St Patrick's College many years ago. **Picture:** Adam Trafford.

things in life come down to good preparation and fine detail is important."

When serving as president of the Old Collegians, Mr Richards experienced Dr Casey's obsessiveness firsthand.

"My very first (Old Collegians) evening, I'd been there, I'd been setting up, the kitchen staff were all organised," Mr Richards said.

"Peter came in; (he said) the tablecloths were of the wrong length."

"From that point on, I learnt to always leave one obvious thing for him to find."

"That would often take the attention from something else that I had perhaps slipped up on!"

Mr Brennan is another fully aware of Dr Casey's fastidious nature.

"Peter was huge on, every time we presented, we presented immaculately, whether that was the staff, his leadership team, the kids," Mr Brennan said.

"A lot of it was the little things. If you take care of the little things, the big things will take care of themselves. His eye for detail was extraordinary."

"He taught me to see everything."

One occasion stands out for Mr Brennan.

"I walked into a hall which we had set up for an assembly," Mr Brennan said.

"Peter said, 'Rob, what's wrong with this setting?' I

looked. All the chairs were in rows; they were all set out. What he had picked out was there were mixtures of chair colours. He said, 'Rob, I want all the chairs of the same colour together'."

"The (set-up) was not as pristine as he would have liked."

The devotion to fine presentation had invaluable ramifications, according to Mr Brennan.

"All of a sudden (the students) felt this was a good place; look what it looks like," he said.

Elizabeth Till, who herself served as a deputy under Dr Casey, remains indebted to him for his rare touch.

"I was the only female on leadership when I started," Ms Till said.

"He was really supportive of me in whatever I did. He gave me free rein to do what I wanted to do within the realms of my job. He never micromanaged, (but) he was there if I needed him."

"He was a fabulous support."

"He let people shine."

"If you fell over, he'd be there to pick you up and say have another go; how would you do it differently?"

Ms Till always appreciated knowing where she stood when engaging with Dr Casey.

"I used to say to him, 'Peter, I accept your decision, but can you explain to me why so I can learn and for my



own growth?" Ms Till said.

"He would sit down and tell me. He always had the door open and he always took the time to explain. It was a really admirable trait."

Mr Richards feels similarly about Dr Casey's openness.

"If you went to him with a question, he'd give you an answer," Mr Richards said.

"It might not have necessarily been the one you wanted to hear, but you knew where you stood."

The Casey regime brought with it a willingness to improve the school's finances and its physical structure.

Mr Brennan is able to recollect St Patrick's College's fiscal plight two decades ago.

"Financially, the school was in a little bit of a hole," Mr Brennan said.

"It was certainly in need of someone with wherewithal to get it back on track."

Chris Caldwell, who joined Dr Casey's leadership team after the headmaster's arrival, was made aware of the challenges faced in the early

days of the new tenure.

"Student enrolment was less than 800 when Peter took over," Mr Caldwell said, referring to disastrous numbers for a school of St Patrick's College's standing.

The school's decline was also a concern for iconic football coach, Howard Clark.

"Student numbers were down, boarding was being phased out, and the facilities were substandard," Mr Clark said.

Mr Clark feels the external perception of the school was a contributing factor to its gradual demise.

"Within the community, the name of St Patrick's College was quite negative and this was reflected in the declining student population," he said.

Embarking on an extensive construction scheme was part of the reinvigoration strategy.

"Peter was determined to see the students have the best facilities," Mr Foley said.

"The college embarked