

St Patrick's College Old Collegians Podcast

Episode 3 Transcript

Episode recorded on October 20, 2020 at 2pm.

Interview: Mr Paul Nolan, Director of Community Development

Interviewee: Mr Steven O'Connor – incoming College Principal

Producer: Mr Gavin Nash, Mulcahy & Co.

Paul Nolan

Welcome to the official St Patrick's College podcast as we continue a journey into discovering some of the all-time great stories from one of Ballarat's most famous institutions.

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I am Paul Nolan, the director of community development at St Patrick's and I am excited that you are joining me in this third episode as we take the opportunity to introduce someone who is certain to have a big impact on the College in the coming years.

Steven O'Connor is a former deputy principal of the College who will return at the start of 2021 as our new principal – replacing John Crowley who departed earlier this and following on from Acting Principal Stephen Hill who has led the College since February.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and border closures Steven O'Connor has been unable to visit the College since his appointment as he is currently based in Sydney.

However, we thought it important to find a way to introduce him to our community at this time and welcome him now as we start our journey towards getting to know him a bit better.

Steven, thank you for joining us. My understanding is you were in your car and driving on the highway on your way to Ballarat a few months ago when it was announced the New South Wales / Victoria border was about to close?

Steven O'Connor

Hello Paul, it is great to be here and yes, you are absolutely right. I was in the vehicle and we were heading south on the Hume Freeway. Thankfully, we didn't get too far down the road – I think we got to just past Goulburn, so it was only about two and half hours down the road. Then we were very disappointed to hear that the decision was taken to close the borders and to put in place restrictions about people travelling in and out of Victoria and New South Wales. So, reluctantly and very sadly we turned around and headed back home. We were very much looking forward to getting down to Ballarat and meeting up with some people from the College community and from the broader community but we know that that will happen all in good time.

Paul Nolan

Now you will arrive at St Patrick's College as someone already with a strong connection to the College, having spent two years here in the mid-2000s in the role as Deputy Headmaster. Tell us about your experience at the College at that time and what aspects of that time still resonate strongly with you.



Steven O'Connor

Yes, that is right, I was two years there as Deputy Head. Look, I remember most clearly an enormous sense of pride that so many people had in St Pat's and, in particular, the boys. There was a genuine appreciation, I think, of the really significant history of the College and the massive contribution that past students and staff have made to the broader community by their professional roles and all sorts of other pursuits. So, that sense of community, joy and purpose was really strong, you know, in terms of my experience. It is certainly what I took away for me and these were certainly some of the reasons why I eagerly applied for the role at the beginning of this year. On top of that I guess it is important to state from the outset that I have always sought a significant leadership role in an all-boys' school. I've worked in all boys' schools for 18 years out of my 31 years working in

education and am very much looking forward to returning to that all boys' setting at St Pat's from next year.

Paul Nolan

Yeah, that's fantastic. What it is about an all boys' school that has such an allure for you?

Steven O'Connor

I just think the sheer enthusiasm, energy, the sense of fun, the sense of joy, the diversity that I think is very much part of an all boys' school and that very much plays out I think in the really broad range of opportunities that are offered to the young men at St Pat's. So, you know, I think all of those elements are things that I find really exciting and rewarding and, of course, you know, I guess on reflection across my whole career I feel that I have the greatest impact and make the most significant contribution in an all boys' setting.

Paul Nolan

Now, outside of St Pat's, thinking back to your time in Ballarat, what was it about Ballarat that, you know, is an attraction to you? What are some of your favourites memories about living in the goldfields city?

Steven O'Connor

Yeah, sure. Well Ballarat is one of those wonderful regional cities in Australia that I have certainly grown to love and I have experienced a number of them. A city like Ballarat has everything that

anyone could want, I guess less the challenges of living in the big smoke. You know, I have lived in places like Toowoomba, Albury and Bathurst and they are all very similar with their own unique characteristics. But they are certainly all great places. I love that Ballarat has four distinct seasons, I just kind of really enjoy that rotation through the different seasons and then enjoyment of a good, decent summer and then the contrast of a bracing winter. I really love that kind of roll through the seasons. I love the lake and the wonderful, kind of, centrepiece that that is of a place like Ballarat and I remember with a smile on my face back in 2007 when people were able to pay to walk across the lake when it was empty following, I think, an initiative from student leaders at St Pat's. It was marketed as a "once in a lifetime opportunity". So, I love that the lake is such a beautiful central part of Ballarat. I love that it is really easy to get down into Melbourne and, of course, I am an historian so I love the history of Ballarat and how so much of that history is reflected in different parts of the city. So, I am really excited about returning to Ballarat next year and, of course, the people who live in Ballarat are just fantastic people and I am very much looking forward to reconnecting with some old friends and making lots of new friends next year and beyond.

Paul Nolan

Now you mentioned some of the other towns that you have lived in so where has you career taken you since you left Ballarat in I think it was 2007?

Steven O'Connor

At the end of 2008, I left. So, I left St Pat's and I took up my first principalship in Albury which was at a new school, quite a new small school called Trinity College. To say that leading Trinity was a major challenge was a bit of an understatement but it was something that I really relished and I was there as principal for seven and a half years. I really enjoyed leading, I guess, what I would classify as the transformation of Trinity from a school of about 560 students to a school of just on 1200 when I left in 2016. And, you know, the school became the best performing school in the region based on our Year 12 results and our NAPLAN results and I had the joy of overseeing about \$21m worth of capital development. So, it was a really significant period of growth and achievement for the school and I was very proud of what was achieved during my time as principal there.

From there, I moved on to take on the role as Headmaster at All Saints College in Bathurst. All Saints is one of the oldest boarding schools in New South Wales and has a wonderful sense of community and that, to me, is something that is really important about any school. By this stage our son, Patrick, had moved to become a boarding student at St Ignatius College (Riverview) in Sydney and for us, as a family, Bathurst was a lot closer to Sydney than Albury so that was another reason to consider the move from Albury up into Bathurst.

At the end of 2017 All Saints had to be sold and it was time for me to move on. I was appointed to my current role — Deputy Principal and Head of Senior School at Santa Sabina College in Strathfield, which is in the inner west of Sydney. I took up this role at the beginning of 2018. Santa is a Catholic school in the Dominican tradition and has been educating young women since 1894, which I think makes it one year younger that St Pat's.

Paul Nolan

Yes, that's correct. What first inspired you to apply for the position as Principal at St Patrick's College when it became available earlier this year?

Steven O'Connor

Oh, lots of things Paul. Certainly a really genuine desire to come back to such a wonderful community and the opportunity and the prospect of contributing to story of St Pat's and contributing to the community in the senior leadership role was very enticing and exciting for me. I feel like I have been preparing for this role for my entire life and really see it as a lifetime opportunity and a lifetime role. It is certainly my hope to be Principal at St Patrick's College for a long time and to contribute to the community via the role well into the future. And, of course, having had that insight and that experience at St Pat's about 12 years ago, I knew that it was a great community. I knew that it is a grand school with a really proud history and that it is well placed to continue to strive to achieve excellence for every boy well into the future. So, I'm really excited about the opportunity and I really can't wait to get back to Ballarat and to get started in the role at the beginning of next year.

Paul Nolan

What is your dream vision for the College and what will be your priorities when you arrive here at the start of 2021?

Steven O'Connor

Well look, they're some really big questions and certainly I am very conscious of the fact St Pat's really does enjoy a well-earned and terrific reputation across Victoria and across the nation certainly through the EREA network as a fantastic school, and certainly as Ballarat's only single-sex boys' school, in the Edmund Rice tradition. Of course, there are very few schools that can boast the number of community leaders in the form of past students who have gone on to really important roles and great success in their chosen fields whether that is in a particular profession, or whether it is in their sporting career, through vocations to the Church, or via trades – so, the contribution St Pat's has made to the community through its 127 years is really immense.

Look, I think, Paul my priority when I arrive will be to get to know as many people in the St Pat's community as quickly as I can. I will plan to meet with and walk alongside as many boys as possible as they go about their journeys at the College. That might be in the form of dropping by in the classrooms, being in the classrooms with them, being on the sidelines at sporting games, watching them perform in music and drama ensembles or even just working with them in student leadership groups. It is really important for me to get to know the boys because that is pretty much what the school exists for. It is for our young men.

Of course, I will be very keen to meet with every member of staff and to talk with them so I can get to know who they are, what their roles is at the College and how they contribute to the life and success of the College. That is another really important connection that I am very keen to see as one of my important and early priorities.

And, of course, I look forward to every opportunity to meet parents and, of course, Old Collegians as I understand how important these people are to the community – that they have such a strong connection to the College and their contribution to the College is really, really important. We want to make sure that we value and honour that. I think, for me Paul, you know schools are very much communities so therefore my greatest priority will be to build connections with the St Pat's community and, through these, be able to lead it with a more authentic kind of style and a more informed way of leadership. So, they will certainly be my priorities – to really look for opportunities and to maximise those opportunities to build those connections with all of those important people and all of those important stakeholders in the College community.

Paul Nolan

I was going to ask you how you would define your style of leadership. I think you have probably just answered a lot of it – it is based around authenticity?

Steven O'Connor

Yes, absolutely. That, I think, always for me has always been a hard question for me to answer. But look I always do try to get to know everyone in a school community. Successful schools – the most successful schools in my experience and in my view, for many reasons, are built on the foundation of the quality of their relationships. So, I always strive to be relational and to be collaborative in my leadership style too. You know, it is important for a leader to be able to speak the vision, but to speak the vision with authenticity, I think leaders also have to be really good listeners. They have to listen to what is happening and listen to those people who play important roles in the community. So, it is important for me to set the tone in my school, to articulate clearly and positively its vision and standards and to foster and nurture constructive relationships with everyone who contributes and who plays a role in the community. So, I do see my role as being based also on service leadership. I see myself as being there to serve students, to serve staff, serve the parents, serve the board, and in the context of St Pat's, to work alongside and to serve EREA. Hopefully, through doing that effectively and authentically, leading to continuous improvement for the school.

Paul Nolan

I guess now while we're on the topic of community and leadership - from afar, you would have taken a keen interest in the College's response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the steps it has taken towards healing with victims and survivors, including the decision to remove honours previously bestowed upon people historically associated with the College. How have you judged the College's response during this period and what future do you envisage for the College in this area?

Steven O'Connor

Look, I am very aware that the College faced significant challenges via the Royal Commission. Certainly, from a distance, the strong and decisive leadership of Mr Crowley as the Principal at that time was really significant in leading the College through all of that. So, you know, for this I absolutely acknowledge and thank Mr Crowley for his leadership and for his clear position of standing with the victims of abuse. I can only imagine how challenging it was for everyone associated with the St Pat's community and, you know, I am very keen to assure everyone in the community from the outset that it is my ambition and intention to lead the College in that vein – to make sure that we are being just in our stance and being there to support and to stand beside any victims of abuse. But also to – in the context of the wounds and the challenges – to be there to support the community and to rebuild that sense of pride in the College community in the future.

Paul Nolan

At St Patrick's College we are proud of our mission to "raise fine boys to the status of great men". What is your definition of what it means to be a great man?

Steven O'Connor

Yeah, that's a really good question and the mission statement is so strong and it is such a powerful statement and it has really stood the test of time which is terrific. I have always been a great supporter of a genuinely holistic education and a strong believer that the best schools educate the

whole person – body and heart, mind and soul. And St Pat's, I think, certainly has a great history of providing a rich and diverse education along these lines to its boys and, in turn, that has certainly helped to shape them as great men. For me, I think there are numerous characteristics of being a great man. In my view great men are men of character. They have a strong and a genuine sense of compassion. They display courage appropriately. They are creative. They are also great communicators and they are committed to any worthwhile activity or cause. So, great men, to me, have a strong moral compass and certainly, I think, one which is grounded in the Gospel values and, in the context of St Pat's, espoused in the touchstones of the Edmund Rice tradition.

But it is important to make a small, but important, distinction in this context because I believe, and I hope, that the young men who graduate from St Patrick's College into the future are not merely, for example, doing social justice but rather are living a just life. So that small but signification distinction is really important about the value that they take away with them – the values that helped to form them as values-based great men.

And, look, over the years I have been fortunate enough to engage with some terrific, some really innovative professionals and professional learning and, I think I would encapsulate some of this by saying that I believe that it is important for schools to make sure that they are future-proofing and making students future-ready. So, for example, the Foundation for Young Australians promotes the importance of young men talking to each other about mental health and this is vital in a place like St Pat's in the formation of young men who hopefully will develop a strong and genuine sense of emotional intelligence. It is also very clear from their research, that is the Foundation for Young Australians, that the skills required for the future success of our young men include entrepreneurial skills such as presentation skills, creativity, collaboration, creative thinking and digital literacy. So, you know, it comes back to that kind of holistic approach to education. It comes back to, you know, the strong characteristics of being a great man and, certainly, St Pat's has a great tradition in that context and it sits very comfortably with my view of working with the young boys who come to us in Year 7, through the years and helping to form them into great young men by the time they leave us.

Paul Nolan

So, I guess, drilling down into that a little bit, who would be some of the people you look up to as exemplars or role models or examples of great men that we should be aspiring towards?

Steven O'Connor

Yeah, sure. I think there have been some great men but also some great women who have really helped to, you know, certainly influenced me and formed me both personally and as a professional.

So, from a personal point of view, without doubt my parents have been hugely influential and my paternal grandmother and probably, she was probably the most influential person from a personal point of view and that was because Nan was so balanced. She was so gentle. She was so generous. And she was completely non-judgmental about people and always encouraged me, as I grew up (and I spent a lot of time with Nan on school holidays and things like that), and she certainly encouraged me to look at people's strengths and to look at the good points and the good aspects of their personality and their character rather than to look critically or judgmentally at people. That is certainly something that, I think, has helped shape me as a person.

Professionally – look, I have been blessed to work alongside and under some great people in my career. There is no doubt about that. But I think, probably, thinking back through, you know, there has been a couple of really strong influencers. One would be Father Greg O'Kelly who was the

Headmaster at St Ignatius College at Riverview in Sydney. He appointed me to his staff there in 1991 when I was a very young teacher. Of course Greg is now Bishop O'Kelly in South Australia. It was from Fr O'Kelly that I first heard the phrase: "The heart of education is the education of the heart". This is something that has really stayed with me for many years and still rings true on so many levels and I think is reflected in my strong commitment and history to a genuinely holistic education and those characteristics of being a great man.

Another really influential person, professionally, was Mr Hugh Rose. He was the Headmaster at Toowoomba Grammar School which was a fantastic boys' school in south-east Queensland. It's a little bit older than St Pat's. I think, from memory, 1874 was when Toowoomba Grammar opened. It's a big boarding school, a big GPS school up there in south-east Queensland. Hugh was a great relational leader and he also brought a significant element of humility to his leadership. He took me under his wing and he taught me a lot as I served him and the school as a member of the executive as Director of Sport and Activities at Toowoomba Grammar.

So, there has been others along the way but certainly, from a personal and a professional point of view, those people stand out in terms of significant influences.

Paul Nolan

All in our community have endured an incredibly turbulent year, most notably with the disruptions inflicted by the COVID-19 crisis. However, every crisis also presents opportunity. What opportunities brought about by this extraordinary year do you think St Patrick's College is ideally placed to capitalise upon?

Steven O'Connor

Yeah, that's a good question and I have to say, Paul, I have really watched with significant interest all the impact on Ballarat and, more broadly, on Victoria where COVID has been, you know, far more significant that what is has been up here in New South Wales. We certainly had one period of remote learning which lasted about five weeks and then kind of rolled back into bringing our students back onto campus and life has pretty well reverted to normal up here which has been terrific for us.

But I think the whole experience of 2020, and certainly I would imagine for St Pat's as well, has provided opportunities for us to be far more creative in our approach. To be more innovative with how we approach the use of digital literacy and digital devices and IT platforms and also our pedagogy. I think at the beginning, certainly, from my context here at Santa Sabina the prospect of presenting things via our remote learning platform caused great concern amongst staff here. But once we got into the swing of things we realised that it was very achievable and, in fact, you could do all sorts of creative things along the way. So, I think the opportunity which was forced upon us to think creatively about our use of IT and our approaches, in terms of pedagogy, is something that we can take away as a positive from the experience of 2020.

I think, also, and I hope, we have a stronger sense and appreciation of resilience and, you know, I think certainly that that is evident in the school community up here in Santa Sabina and I am very confident that would be the same at St Patrick's as well. So, that sense of resilience, we need to learn to manage the setbacks and the disappointments and to remain positive and optimistic about the future. So, I think resilience is something that we will take away from this year as well.

And, of course, contributing to the sense of community. Again, we do experience quite often disappointments which can really impact on a community but strong communities, like St Pat's,

really have a great skill in terms of turning that around and making that a strength and taking away some positive aspects. So, I think those elements are things that St Patrick's will be able to capitalise on moving into 2021 and beyond.

Paul Nolan

In what is an increasingly secular society, what do you see as the role of a Catholic school in the Edmund Rice tradition in leading our young people towards a faith-filled life?

Steven O'Connor

The role that a place like St Pat's is playing in this context is vital. Certainly, all the evidence suggests that the role that a Catholic school, like St Pat's is playing in providing opportunities for students to consider faith relation and opportunities to dive into that and to embrace that is really, really important. So, the connection to Church – we are certainly conscious that for many students coming to a school like St Pat's is probably their only connection to church. That is a reality of the 21st century that, as people who work in the mission of the Catholic school, we certainly need to be open to and embrace. So, those opportunities for faith development really highlight the importance of Religious Education and other opportunities along the way for that faith formation to be central, to play important roles and to provide the opportunities for our young men as they make their way through the years at St Pat's. I think one of the great things about EREA and the touchstones that are central to the mission of Edmund Rice Education Australia is that it is really an authentic expression of the ministry of the Church. It is a wonderful platform for raising boys into the status of great men. That certainly was my impression when I was there as Deputy Headmaster – that the expression of faith formation and the opportunities that surrounded that were genuinely accepted and embraced by the young men at the school at the time and I anticipate, and hope that that is the case still at St Pat's at the moment.

Paul Nolan

Coming into this new role how much contact have you had with the likes of Acting Principal Stephen Hill and former Principal John Crowley, who had been in the role over the past few years, and what would you like to say about their contributions to the College?

Steven O'Connor

Well, look it has been an extraordinary year in so many ways for all of us. I think, given the impact, and the demands of COVID-19 the contact that I have had with Mr Crowley and Mr Hill hasn't been all that regular and that has been for a number of reasons. But I am looking forward to making more significant contact with them in the weeks ahead as we get towards the end of the school year.

Being a leader in a school is really both very rewarding and also very challenging in normal circumstances but given what St Pat's has been through in the past few years through the Royal Commission and then the impact of the events at the beginning of this year down at St Kevin's and then of course the impact of COVID-19 on all of us — I absolutely acknowledge both Mr Crowley, for his courage during some really trying times and his strong leadership in leading the community in those times, and also importantly to Mr Hill for his generosity in taking up the mantle as Acting Principal as he has done on a number of occasions in recent years. Particularly through a really challenging 2020. So, I am really grateful for the contributions of both Mr Crowley and Mr Hill and, of course, the legacy of these two educational leaders and I look forward to being able to express that thanks to them in person when the opportunity comes about.

Paul Nolan

At the end of a working day, or on the weekends, what activities do you engage in to help you relax and forget about work for a while?

Steven O'Connor

Yeah, that's another good question. There are a number of things that I really enjoy doing. I enjoy maintaining a regular exercise routine so I like going cycling. I like walking and I am looking forward to doing both of those things around the lake and other parts. I also like swimming too so, you know, getting in and doing a couple of k's of laps if I can. So, I am looking forward to making sure that is part of my routine next year. I also love cooking. I love to cook for family and friends. I just find that really relaxing — the prospect of producing a meal that is really appreciated and nice to eat is something I find really rewarding and very enjoyable. And, Paul, I also really enjoying also listening to music. I have got a real love of music and I love listening to music at every opportunity. There is a really eclectic kind of broad range of artists and styles of music that I really enjoy. As well as that I enjoy playing the piano when I have the time to do that and I will be bringing my piano down and am looking forward to being able to play the piano and relax through that.

Paul Nolan

Fantastic. We look forward to hearing it.

Steven O'Connor

That might be debatable but it is something that I enjoy doing and it is very relaxing.

Paul Nolan

Maybe I might fire a few sort of, rapid answer questions at you so we can get to know you a little bit better. So, what is your favourite sport?

Steven O'Connor

I would have to say rugby union because it is the game they play in heaven.

Paul Nolan

Which AFL team do you barrack for then?

Steven O'Connor

Geelong.

Paul Nolan

What is your favourite holiday destination?

Steven O'Connor

I would have to say the beach or somewhere in Ireland.

Paul Nolan

Ok. What is your favourite movie?

Steven O'Connor

A movie called "Shadowlands" which is the true story of C. S. Lewis.

Paul Nolan

Favourite book?

Steven O'Connor

To Kill a Mockingbird

Paul Nolan

Favourite song?

Steven O'Connor

This one is really hard for me to answer but I have to say Dreams by Fleetwood Mac.

Paul Nolan

That has become very popular in recent times I think due to some Tik Tok memes. Your favourite tv show of all time?

Steven O'Connor

Again, really difficult to say, but I have to say, at the moment, Family Guy.

Paul Nolan

Ok and what show are you streaming at the moment?

Steven O'Connor

David Attenborough's Life On Our Planet – it is really, really beautifully produced and really interesting.

Paul Nolan

Your favourite meal?

Steven O'Connor

Barbecued rib-eye steak with potato bake and a nice salad.

Paul Nolan

Your favourite superhero?

Steven O'Connor

Spiderman

Paul Nolan

You have to choose five people to come to one of your house dinner parties, which I hope you will cook for. Who gets invited and why?

Steven O'Connor

Yeah, again really hard but look – Mahatma Ghandi, Barack Obama, John Eales, Jacinda Ardern and Rosa Parks, all because I consider these people to be amazing role models and they were great servant leaders in their own right and contributed so much to their professions, to their communities and to their nations.

Paul Nolan

Can you tell us your favourite dad joke?

Steven O'Connor

I can see my children rolling their eyes and going "Oh Dad, do you really have to do this?"

Paul Nolan

Yes you do.

Steven O'Connor

Too many to choose but let me try this one. Did you hear about the Italian chef who died? He passed away.

Paul Nolan

It's sad that I am laughing at that. Finally, on a more serious note, what message would you like to convey to our students, our staff and our parents about what they should expect when you commence at St Patrick's College in 2021?

Steven O'Connor

Look, I want everyone at St Patrick's College to know how honoured and excited I am that I have been appointed as Principal from 2021. I absolutely appreciate that there have been some tough times for the St Pat's community in recent years and I am really looking forward to taking up the role, getting to know the community and walking with and leading the community well into the future. You know, St Pat's is a wonderful school with a rich history but it is important that we all remember that it has got a really exciting future. I see that it is really well placed in terms of its resources and I am really excited to hear the news of the new capital developments which will hopefully commence next year and the news of capital grants to assist in recent days. So all of those things are really, really important. So, I think that the St Pat's community should expect someone who is going to be very keen to get to know people individually and collectively to get to know the community and to be there for a long period of time. And to really work with the school to ensure that we continue to achieve some fantastic outcomes with and for our young men starting in 2021 and continuing for many years to come.

Paul Nolan

Well thank you very much for joining us today and hopefully this medium is the first step on that long journey towards our community getting to know you and you getting to know our community and I am sure that when you do finally arrive in Victoria hopefully after some of these restrictions are eased that we can give you a fitting welcome.

Steven O'Connor

Yeah, thanks Paul. I am very pleased to see in the news feeds in the last 24, 32 hours news stories in The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald about the possibility of those border restrictions,

particularly into regional Victoria and back into New South Wales being lifted. Hopefully as soon as within a week or ten days. So, if that happens, I would certainly love to get down there before the end of the term but, if not, it is our intention to get down there before Christmas and I will be very pleased and delighted to see people return from the summer holiday in January if I don't get to meet people beforehand.

Paul Nolan

Terrific Steven, thanks again and we look forward to catching up soon.

Steven O'Connor

Thanks Paul. Pleasure.

Paul Nolan

We aim to produce two of these each term and will distribute the Green, White and Blue enewsletter which is emailed to all Old Collegians twice a term. If you're not receiving it and want to sign up for it make sure you get in contact the College and give us your details. We look forward to seeing you again when the next episode airs.

