

ARCHIVE

Saint Mary MacKillop Colleges, Wagga

Wagga: progress report 2012

by Charles Morton

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Regular readers of this journal will be familiar with the foundation and progress of Saint Mary MacKillop Colleges, Wagga Wagga: how over six years ago, the founders of the colleges decided to put words into action.

Bill and Jo Andrews had educated their four children in Catholic primary schools, home schooled for years 7-10, and finally re-entered the Catholic system for Years 11 and 12. Both parents were concerned at the level of religious knowledge their children had acquired from the Catholic systemic schools.

Approximately seven years ago Bill advised me that as he and Jo had been blessed with just four children he felt the need to assist a wider Catholic community through a sound religious education of more young Catholics.

The Dominican Sisters, a teaching and contemplative order, were fortunately situated in nearby Ganmain. The Sisters were well aware of the statistics surrounding the retention of faith in the youth immediately after leaving secondary school and wanted to assist when they heard of the Andrews' plan.

Student numbers

The initial roll call on day one was seven students, growing to fifteen by the end of the year. There has been a steady increase over the years as word has spread. Now at the beginning of the sixth year of operation of the school, there are one hundred and fifteen students.

Catholic teachers from far afield have responded to this Riverina phenomenon. Mr Obeid and Mrs Chigwidden are the Principals of the secondary and primary schools respectively and it is edifying to hear them speak at school assemblies. Their dedication and the dedication of the other teachers and the Dominican Nuns are also uplifting.

Families from around Australia are now moving to Wagga Wagga responding to what is happening in this school which caters for classes from Kindergarten to Year 12.

Three years ago in the Naplan test, Saint Mary MacKillop Colleges came in 42 in the state of New South Wales – the highest outside Metropolitan Sydney and Newcastle. While it was with limited student numbers it is truly evident of a commitment to academic excellence.

The 2011 Naplan results have also been extremely pleasing with Saint Mary MacKillop Colleges ranking second in the nation among country schools. Over the last two years the students who have sat for the School Certificate have also done exceptionally well.

The philosophy has been simple: First teach the Faith, have rules that encourage self-discipline and engender respect from a Catholic perspective and involve the parents. The school constantly invites Catholic priests and lay people to speak to students and their parents.

A chapel is part of the school with regular weekday Masses and Mass whenever there are visiting priests. Both the ordinary and extraordinary forms of Mass are celebrated.

An endeavour of this magnitude does not come without its challenges. By the providence of God the location of the current school has been a vacated two-story club with an attached sports oval.

Unfortunately this tenure is coming to an end as the developers of the site want to make way for apartments.

Various sites for a possible relocation of the Colleges have been considered but funds remain the road-block. With few understanding that a private school needs to hit a critical mass of between 150 and 200 students before it can become financially self-sufficient, there has always been a shortfall that needed to be met annually to confirm the schools' viability. There have been generous people who responded to this annual predicament, with some coming out of left field.

However, the school now faces its greatest challenge, namely the massive capital cost of buying further schoolrooms and relocating existing and new classrooms on land obtained either by a long-term lease or a capital purchase.

Meanwhile the founders have located a preferred site and students and parents alike are saying novenas with an unerring belief that God will provide. Of course He does so by touching the hearts of people who know that by their donations they are quite literally saving souls and similarly know their reward is not of this world.

During morning prayers the students and teachers pray for the benefactors of the schools and Masses are regularly said for their intentions and good health.

Patron saint

Saint Mary MacKillop Colleges truly enjoy the support of Australia's first canonised Saint. She is the school's patron and endured much hardship herself. She was committed to the Catholic education of children and through prayer, persistence and hard work Mary of the Cross went on to prevail. Her Wagga Wagga Colleges will also prevail.

Wagga Wagga's Bishop Gerard Hanna initially expressed concern as to the financial viability of such a small school some six years ago. However, he added that if the Holy Spirit wanted the school to succeed it would. Our Bishop has attended all the annual functions of the school over the years and we are indeed fortunate to enjoy his pastoral support.

If anyone can find it in their hearts to make a donation, or perhaps bequeath something in a will, they can be confident in the knowledge that all funds will be enlisted in the work of our Lord. Any gift, large or small, will be gratefully received.

Please feel free to visit the School's web site and know that you are welcome to come and visit this blessed school.

Charles Morton LLB is a Founding Board Member of Saint Mary MacKillop Colleges and the father of one past and seven current students.