

# PBC 50 years: Where and stay

KEITH WOODS

MONDAY January 24, 1972, was a bright, sunny day on the Gold Coast. A perfect day for fresh beginnings.

Children aged between 12 and 15 walked through the gates of a new high school.

A lot had been done to prepare for the occasion, but there was plenty more to come. Work had yet to begin on the sports oval. Foundations were still being laid for new classrooms.

What nobody knew, least of all those 329 children, was that the real foundations being laid were not made of sand and concrete. Something far stronger was in the mix. Something that would bond future generations together as one.

The foundations of Team Red – Palm Beach Currumbin.

**'THIS IS PBC - DON'T STUFF IT UP'**

When Chris Capra first walked

through the PBC gates as executive principal, 45 years later, he was given simple advice.

Advice passed down from one principal to the next.

"I knew from day one when I walked into this school that it is an important part of the community," Mr Capra says.

"The outgoing principal, Stephen Loggie, said it was the hardest job, but the most rewarding job he had done in his career.

"And he said to me, the only advice he got when he was given this school was, 'This is PBC, you can't afford to stuff it up.'"

In the decades since it first opened, something special had been built. Something treasured. Something to be protected.

From those first 329 students, the school has grown to serve 2650. It's the fourth-largest, stand-alone high school in Australia.

It keeps growing. Three years ago a stunning new \$11m

library building opened. In just a few weeks, work will begin on a \$10m indoor sports centre.

"I've just come back from Canada and I was speaking to somebody there from the north-west territory, a principal in I think it was Yellowknife," Mr Capra says.

"He was saying to me, 'your school, with its staff, is actually the size of the fourth-biggest town in our territory.'"

Being big has advantages. PBC offers extraordinary opportunities for children to excel in sports, in trades or studies, in creative arts.

"You get to culmination nights for the instrumental music program or drama program, or academic awards night or the sports night, and you just think, 'jeez, these students'," Mr Capra says.

"The sports kids are nearly semi-professional as 17-year-olds.

"The academic kids could



have finished Year 12 a year earlier. Sheldon Riley in Eurovision, a former PBC student."

The record is astonishing. But even so, it may not be what's most remarkable about this school. What makes those red shirts iconic. What has really girded its place at the heart of the community.

Behind the success, the strong foundations upon which it is built.

"Even though we are a massive school on the southern end of the Gold Coast, it's still got a country mindset, the idea that everybody gets in and makes sure that these kids are successful," Mr Capra says.

"We've got so many second generation kids at this school whose parents came here. We've got second generation staff whose parents worked here. And so many staff who came here as students.

"It's still got a big country town mentality to it that I think you just don't find any more."

**A DESTINATION SCHOOL**

In 1972 those first children who walked through the front gate at PBC were all in grades 8 and 9.

Today, Wendy Wise is deputy principal at those same year levels.

Ms Wise has been a teacher at the school for 33 years.

"I was here when Elanora (High School) had just started and then the excellence program started so we could try and get more students to PBC," she says.

"Bill Bondfield, the (then) principal, really wanted to promote state schooling.

"We became an area here where it was a complete reverse trend from Australia, where private school students (left to) come to the state school, which still continues

with the excellence programs."

It made PBC what is termed "a destination school" – one that attracts students from far and wide.

One also that caters for every part of the community, from rich to poor.

"In the community PBC is held in high esteem," Wendy says. "We deliver some great opportunities for young people to be successful at all levels.

"The pathway programs are fantastic for students with traineeships, so that's right up there. It goes back to Bill Bondfield's vision, of where he wanted us to have extra enrolments.

"They're the big key ticket items, the excellence and pathway programs, but I do believe we are, from very poor to very wealthy, a cross section of society.

"(It's) a real privilege just to see so many students be successful. I really think it's a privilege to be at PBC."

The school is not so much a second home, as a first, Wendy says. It's family. She sent her own daughter to PBC. Now she sees children she taught, coming back as parents, sending their children too.

"I've been here so long students I taught now have their children coming through," she says. "It's nice to see the next generation coming through again."

Among the former students to in turn send their children to the school is Kellie Trigger, who first walked through the gates in 1985.

Kellie remembers the school as one that broadened her horizons in ways she never could have imagined.

"I remember when I started in Grade 8 we were in a brand-new building with a science room. I remember just being amazed that there was all this equipment to do fun science

experiments," she says.

Most extraordinary was a chance to see science and nature in action in a way few students ever experience.

"We went to Japan in Grade 11," Kellie says. "It was a really big step for us. I don't think any of us had been overseas at that stage.

"We went to Tokyo and we stayed on an island with an active volcano, which was so far outside our experience on the Gold Coast."

Familiar faces don't just return as parents, Wendy says. Some former students are now among her valued colleagues.

"There's young ones that have come back teaching now," she says. "Students that I taught, that are now teachers here."

**'NOTHING BUT THE BEST'**

Among the former students who Ms Wise taught is Mitch Kennedy.

Mitch is now also one of the school's deputy principals, in his case overseeing years 11 and 12.

For Mitch, returning as a teacher, working with people who taught him, never felt odd. Not even slightly.

"It never felt like I was coming back to teach with the people who taught me," he says.

"It felt like you were returning home to a part of your family. That is what it always has felt like."

What Mitch remembers most about his time as a student at the school was the sense of belonging, of being a vital member of "Team Red".

A determination to be, as the school's Nil Sed Optima slogan states, "nothing but the best."

"What changed my life around was I was in the first cohort of music excellence," Mitch says. "When I first started Benny Ikin was the king, we were known for football.

"But when creative arts ex-

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# champions are made



Wendy Wise, principal Chris Capra, Michelle Alchin and deputy principal Mitch Kennedy are pivotal to the culture and standing of the Palm Beach Currumbin State High School, which has been at the heart of the community for 50 years. (Inset top right) The first month in 1972 and (bottom right) an aerial view in 1982. Main picture: Tertius Pickard



## Community invited to gala

PALM BEACH Currumbin State High School is holding a major event to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary.

Members of the community are invited to attend a special Gala Day at 3pm on Saturday, June 11 which will have displays of school memorabilia from every decade, food trucks, artworks and student performances.

Participants will be able to go on a self-guided tour through the school to see how it has grown in the fifty years since it welcomed its first students in January 1972.

Later the same day PBC is hosting a "Sunset Soiree Ultimate Reunion" at its new library precinct, offering past pupils and other friends of the school an opportunity to reconnect with friends and teachers.

The night will feature guest speakers, performances and videos from throughout the school's history.

Entry to the Sunset Soiree is \$30 and includes food and one free drink on entry. Tickets are available at [eventbrite.com.au](http://eventbrite.com.au).

The Gala Day takes place 3-5pm, while the Sunset Soiree runs from 5-8pm.

excellence came, for those of us that weren't great at sport, that was our team. That was our family. And we genuinely believed when we were doing musicals and we were working every weekend that we were a team of Reds.

"Now, 20 years later, you can see that transcend into all sorts of different pockets of kids. So I really love that concept."

Mitch first walked in the PBC gates as a student in 1999, 27 years after the first cohort. The first person he met on that day was a person who had followed in their footsteps much sooner, in 1977. Someone every student for the last 24 years

has met on their first day at PBC – although Mitch first met her much earlier. Someone he describes as "the heart" of the school.

"I started 23 years ago," he says. "Michelle's the first person that I met. You meet Michelle at the book shop the first day you come, or the day before you start school."

"I met Michelle and then Mum says, 'Michelle used to babysit you Mitch', and that was my first introduction to the school."

**THE REAL FOUNDATIONS**  
Michelle Alchin's life story is

steeped in red. As a student in the late '70s, Michelle used to hang out with her friends in front of B Block during break time.

Michelle, who is the school's textbook co-ordinator, now returns every day to that exact same spot. It's where she has her office.

"Where the book room is, and the book room has been there from day dot, just outside there is where we all hung out."

Because of her role, Michelle is usually the first staff member students meet on day one. She is also the last to say goodbye when they leave.

"Michelle always comes and talks to the graduating co-

horts, kind of last," Mitch says. "She always writes a poem. It gives nice closure because Michelle's always the first person to meet them and the last person to address them."

Among those she has farewelled over the years have been many students who have gone on to great things. She likes to follow their progress, their successes. And sometimes there are surprises.

"Many, many years ago Joel Parkinson and Mick Fanning came in the middle of the day with their textbooks," she says.

"They've come up and said, 'Hi Miss, we're leaving' and I said, 'oh, are ya'. I didn't really

know who they were.

"I said: 'Oh OK love, you're leaving are you? You've handed back all your books, you're right to go? I said 'what are you going to do', because I like to talk to the kids, what are you doing, what are your plans. 'Oh, we're going off to surf' they said and I was, 'OK, good luck with that! And now look!'"

Michelle has seen many changes in the school over the years. But she says some things have been hallmarks from the start: the opportunities it offers students, and the sense of belonging it fosters.

As the school celebrates its 50th year, it continues to grow.

As in 1972, more building work is planned. More wonderful facilities to help the students achieve their best.

But Michelle, like her colleagues, is in no doubt what has really made the place great. And it's not made from bricks and mortar.

"The biggest change is, we always talk about infrastructure, there's beautiful amazing multimillion-dollar libraries and you can have all of that in place," she says.

"It's amazing the kids have all these opportunities. But it's the people that stay, that doesn't change. They're the real foundations."



Wendy Wise, principal Chris Capra, Michelle Alchin and deputy principal Mitch Kennedy are pivotal to the culture and standing of the Palm Beach Currumbin State High School, which has been at the heart of the community for 50 years. (Inset top right) The first month in 1972 and (bottom right) an aerial view in 1982. Main picture: Tertius Pickard