

A school of her own

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Many people find fulfilling careers in the education sector, but very few can lay claim to have successfully founded their own school. Yet that is exactly what Dr Lyn Bishop has achieved. Established in 1997, Sheldon College in Brisbane's southeast suburbs now boasts 1600 students from preschool to year 12, and embodies Bishop's vision for an educational environment that embraces "life, love and learning."

Like Sheldon College itself, Bishop started from humble beginnings. She openly recounts the story of her early life in *The journey begins*, a chronicle of the school's history and her motivation for setting it up. Raised by a single mother and her grandparents, Bishop learned early that, "...there is a difference in life between fate and destiny. Fate is what happens to you. Destiny is what you create" (Bishop, 2013).

Fuelled by this mantra, she defied the school guidance officer who told her that she didn't have the ability to become a teacher.

Bishop held a variety of positions spanning 30 years in the teaching profession, including classroom teacher, principal, and a number of administrative roles with Education Queensland before making the decision to start her own school. "The further up the hierarchy I went, the less I had to do with children," she explains. The desire to get back to the fundamentals of teaching, and to have what she terms "first class interactions" inspired her to resign from Education Queensland and strike out on her own.

From the beginning, Bishop met with obstacles. "Moving into the area of private education was a challenge," she concedes. She was unable to attract funding from big business, and had to rely on family and friends, as well as her own savings to seed the school's

establishment. Finding a suitable site was also difficult, but eventually she settled on 56 acres in Sheldon in the Redland Shire.

But Bishop was surprised to find that the greatest obstacle was, "the degree of opposition [we] had to face... I would have thought people would be happy to have a new school in the area," she muses. Her initial New Schools Commission application was rejected, largely due to formal objections raised by neighbouring state and private schools. Her perseverance and sound research into the viability of opening another school in the Redland Shire won out at a Federal appeal, where the first ruling was overturned and approval for the school was finally granted.

The early days of Sheldon College were unique, to say the least. The 116 foundation students were housed in the Pine Lodge Equestrian Centre when the school opened, a result of repeated delays during the approval



process that postponed settlement of the land. Bishop reminisces about the fact that the school was kept in the boot of staff members' cars. "We had to set up in the Equestrian Centre on Sunday and pack it all up on Friday afternoon so that it was available for functions," she explains.

The fact that 116 students were enrolled on day one despite the school not yet having permanent premises speaks volumes about Bishop's determination and clarity of vision. Built on strong values and beliefs, the College, which is non-denominational, puts a strong emphasis on aspects such as dress, appearance, behaviour, conduct, scholarship and excellence. "Teachers model these values," she says.

Setting clear boundaries is a hallmark of the school. The four Cs – "courtesy, consideration, cooperation and common sense" – are expected of staff and students alike and are backed by what Bishop describes as a two-step behaviour

management process based on simplicity and consistency. "Teachers do not ever raise their voices," she asserts. "They ask students, which of the four Cs are you not following and what do you need to be doing? Students then self correct."

Bishop also returns several times to the theme of effective relationship building. She stresses that the philosophy of "love, laughter and learning" needs to permeate every interaction, every day with every student, and emphasises the importance of building a close community. "I have a good working relationship with parents," she says. "Parents can sit in on any class at any time."

Over the years, the curriculum at Sheldon College has developed to offer specialist courses in sport and the arts. In late 2012, the school announced a partnership with Triathlon Australia that will give students access to Australia's first Triathlon School of

Excellence. In a joint press release, Triathlon Australia indicated that it was attracted to both Sheldon College's facilities, and what Triathlon Australia's CEO Anne Gripper terms its "entrepreneurial spirit and the traditional values" (Sheldon College & Triathlon Australia, 2012). The school boasts a 25-metre swimming pool, a fully equipped fitness centre, a running track and cross-country course, all of which made it an attractive proposition for Triathlon Australia. According to Bishop, "The facilities and disciplined nature of the school made it a good match with elite athletes."

Bishop also supported the development of the Australian School of the Arts (ASTA) on the Sheldon College campus. "I'm an avid believer in the arts. All students should be exposed to them for self confidence," she says. Every student at the school studies Arts to Year 8, a practice that she believes develops their capacity to



L to R: Principal Dr Lyn Bishop, Vice-Captains, Kodey Brims and Christopher Copley, Captains, Scott Miller and Madina Mohmood, Chairman Mr Don Seccombe



as noteworthy. “It’s all about the people who align with your value system and help you achieve your vision,” she adds.

Despite all that she has accomplished, Bishop is not resting on her laurels. Government funding is one aspect that she is monitoring in her mission to ensure the ongoing viability of Sheldon College. With several independent schools such as Melbourne’s Mowbray and Acacia Colleges recently closing due to financial issues, she is mindful of the importance of funding certainty.

Ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared to deal with intergenerational changes is another area that the College will continue to focus on as it goes forward. Bishop also identifies changes in technology as one of the biggest challenges for education in the future. “How can you predict how education will be delivered in the future?” she ponders. “Will there be a place for school as it is today?”

For the present though, the blend of traditional values with contemporary curriculum and a wide variety of options for students is ensuring that Sheldon College remains a popular option for families in the Redland Shire.

perform for a crowd, a skill of lifelong relevance. “Students have no problem getting up in front of an audience of 1500 people,” she explains.

There is also an audition-based ASTA Professionals Program that nurtures talent and creativity while still placing value on academic pursuits. Combined performing arts (acting, dance and voice), visual art, music, and film and TV are all on offer, which as the College website states, are supported by “specialist teachers and tertiary and industry experienced artists” (Sheldon College, 2013).

To top it all off, Sheldon College is also a registered training organisation, allowing students the opportunity to complete accredited

courses such as the Certificate II in Information, Digital Media and Technology and Certificate I in Hospitality.

Bishop’s achievements have not gone unnoticed. In July this year, she was presented with the Queensland University of Technology’s Outstanding Alumni Award for the Faculty of Education. Her other accolades include the Australian Institute of Management’s Professional Manager of the Year in 2000 and the Queensland and Australian Entrepreneur of the Year for a Social, Community and Not-for-Profit Organisation in 2002. However, more than the awards, it is the support from a team of like-minded individuals that Bishop highlights

Further reading

Bishop, Dr. L (2013) *The journey begins...* Available from the Sheldon College website at: <http://www.sheldoncollege.com/src/pdf/The-Sheldon-College-Journey.pdf>. Accessed 8 September 2013.

Sheldon College (2013) ASTA Professionals page available from the Sheldon College website at: <http://www.sheldoncollege.com/performance-visual-arts/asta-professionals/>. Accessed 9 September 2013.

Sheldon College & Triathlon Australia (2012) Joint press release “Triathlon Australia Announces Historic Partnership with Sheldon College”. Available from: <http://www.sheldoncollege.com/triathlon/pdf/PRESSRELEASE-SheldonCollegeandTriathlonAustralia.pdf>. Accessed 9 September 2013. **ET**