



Alice Miller school makes two

At 65 years, when most educators are looking forward to retiring, John Marsden has founded his second school, **Bill Minnis**

To meet John Marsden, you have first to find Candlebark School. And that's not easy... he sends first time visitors a detailed instruction sheet on how to get there – from Melbourne, Ballarat, Woodend, Romsey, Geelong, coming down the Hume and by train – the last line reads 'If you get lost, ring the number above'... a bit like *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe's* 'Don't Panic', really.

I used Google Maps instead of following instructions, ignored the 'you have arrived at your destination' message and toured a scenic 17 km route to get back to where I should have turned left in the first place.

Assuming that there would be a Candlebark School sign where I went astray. There's a discreet notice that reads: 'Tye Estate. Private do not enter J. L. Marsden' but nothing to suggest

that there's a school up the unsealed track.

The school buildings are set on two levels carved out of a steep wooded hillside; classrooms and the dining hall look down on the library, which is buried in the hillside and is lit by skylights that poke out of the grassed over roof.

I had spent the previous two days at the Teach Tech Play Conference at Ivanhoe Grammar School's superb Ivanhoe Campus and the contrast could not have been greater. Ivanhoe is a showcase – big, beautiful, wonderfully equipped buildings set in manicured grounds.

Candlebark, on the other hand, looked like a cheerfully untidy bush camp. There was a pile of bikes, a tepee, sports gear scattered around, a vegetable patch, random sheds and outbuildings. My inner kid loved it.

There were cars and a couple of school buses in the car parking area but the only person I could find was a man up a ladder fixing something, he introduced himself as Marsden's estate manager, showed me into the dining hall, offered to make me a cup of tea and told me that "John is in the end of term staff meeting" and he would let him know that I had arrived.

Everything about Candlebark is different, but then so too is John Marsden, best selling author of children's books, including the teen years *Tomorrow* series which started in 1993 with *Tomorrow, When the War Began*. It won a swag of awards and was recently made into the highly successful TV series. His books have sold more than 2.5 million copies in Australia alone and have been translated into 11 languages.

Educated at The King's School in Sydney,



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which he hated for its then ‘army boot camp’ approach to educating boys, he started a double degree in Law and Arts at Sydney University and dropped out; was treated in hospital for depression; tried 32 different jobs in his 20s and finally discovered what he was looking for as a life-long career when he started teacher training in 1978.

His first teaching job was in Bathurst, followed by two years as Head of English at Geelong Grammar Highton Campus and then four years at the school’s Timbertop Campus, also as Head of English.

“Timbertop was a life changing time for me,” Marsden said. “I was stunned by how much kids can do when they are challenged and what the right principal can achieve through inclusive leadership.”

He juggled full time teaching, writing one popular book after another

and visited “thousands of schools” to give give talks and lectures until, in 1998, he bought a huge parcel of hilly, densely treed bush and set about establishing a P–10 school where “I could practice what I had learned over the years about teaching children to become successful adults.”

Why ‘Candlebark School’?

“...no real reason, couldn’t think of a better name at the time.”

The early years were tough – start-up costs were high and enrolled numbers were low. “I didn’t take a salary for several years and I lent the school a lot of money. It’s easier now, but we still run very lean. Other than the teaching staff, we have two people in administration – our administration manager and me.”

No cleaners, no PA, no receptionist?



None of the above. The children do quite a lot of the cooking, wash up, clean the classrooms and even the toilets [there are detailed instructions on the wall in the toilets that list step by step how to clean a loo, starting with 'First, put on rubber gloves'].

"Playtime is sacrosanct," Marsden says firmly. "Children learn through play, they are free to run up and down the hills and through the trees... occasionally we have to send out a search party, but not often.

"Before we accept a new student, we give the parents a very long and detailed list of what might happen to a child... fall into the creek, get bitten by snake. We require a signed blanket permission that includes excursions, camps and photographs.

"As they read down the list, some turn white and change their minds about trusting their child to Candlebark and that's OK because this school is not right for every child and every family."

It all sounds like great fun, but what about literacy, and numeracy, how do the children do when compared to similar schools as defined by ACARA on the mySchool website?

Marsden isn't big on NAPLAN, confessing that the last test day had slipped his mind – until one of the students put a hand up at the end of the morning meeting and asked: "Are we not doing NAPLAN today?"

"...so it is, you had better go off and do it then."

Casual Marsden may be about NAPLAN's league tables but based on the 2014 Year 7 numbers for similar schools, Candlebark



children are travelling well – out in front on reading, persuasive writing, equal third in spelling, a close second in grammar and punctuation, and respectably in the middle in numeracy.

The school's 1112 ICSEA value tells part of the story... 30 per cent in the upper middle quarter and 55 per cent in the top quarter but Marsden is very firm about the vital role that teachers play.



“Every Candlebark teacher is here because they want to be. I would receive up to 250 applications every year from teachers desperate to get away from the bureaucracy of a big school.

“Any application that includes ‘KPI’ or any other buzzword doesn’t warrant a second look... I want teachers that can demonstrate they have gone out and done things, paddled a canoe around the coast of Africa, that sort of thing.

“Very few of our teachers leave the school, and when they do, it’s almost always to do something worthwhile.”

Marsden is not quite sure if he is the only educator to own a school “there was another man in New South Wales years ago” but, when the Alice Miller School opened for Term 1 this year, he earned the distinction of being the only Australian to own two.

The new school, which is named in honour of the Swiss psychoanalyst and writer, is in Macedon, around 20 minutes by car from Candlebark in Romsey. It has been established as a 7–12 secondary school [to Year 11 this year] and will offer the VCE in Years 11 and 12 but with the emphasis on creativity, Drama, Art, Writing, Music and Dance. Entrance to these courses is by audition or by presentation of a portfolio of work.

One group’s misfortune became Marsden’s opportunity when a small Christian school closed leaving vacant its well-equipped buildings, set on 32 hectares of bushland. There are 15 classrooms, dedicated science laboratories, a professional standard gymnasium, a 10-metre indoor

heated pool, and tennis and basketball courts.

“It cost me a lot of money to buy,” Marsden says “but it was worth it because everything was there, the buildings the desks and chairs, right down to the pencils and paper.”

Based on Marsden’s deep understanding of how teens function, classes start at 10.30 am when their circadian rhythm has them fully awake and continue until 5.00 pm, though the doors are open from 09.00 am for students that want to study or work on a project.

Candlebark’s self sufficiency philosophy is continued at Alice Miller with students cooking lunch, washing up and cleaning the school at the end of the day.

A conservative financial analyst looking at Alice Miller as an investment prospect would most likely have asked: ‘where are the students to come from?’ But for Marsden it wasn’t an overly risky step... and he was right. Almost every one of the Year 7 through 10 students at Candlebark re-enrolled at the secondary school and some students who had gone elsewhere for Years 11 and 12 have returned to the fold.

“We could take up to 200 students at each school,” Marsden concludes “but that would be tops. When we had 180 at Candlebark last year, it felt a bit tight so maybe we’ll settle for around 160.”

Clearly, Marsden loves what he is doing... many a tired teacher might think to to themselves ‘nice work, if you can get it.’

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