



High School Herald

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NOT ALL SUPERHEROES WEAR CAPES

Today three local superheroes retire their capes and lanyards after a collective 100 years at Port Lincoln High School. On Friday 16th December, the three English-teaching greats, Peter Jolley, Greg Fitzgerald and Jo Tiffen, join Sam Othams to make four chalkies in total who have turned their back on a dwindling faculty this year. Flailing faculty leader Holly Dufek said that after these four 2022 retirements, the English and HASS faculty would be down 150 years of teaching experience than the same time last year. *'We will certainly miss these well-respected heroes, both as teachers of our students and as valuable colleagues of our work site'.*

Othams started at PLHS in 1980 under the leadership of Gary Nicol, the Principal. Othams has mostly taught English 8 – 12, but with some Year 9 History, a little bit of Geography, and Australian Studies a few times. *'I taught Yr 9 Drama back in the day and one year filled in for the final term of Year 12 Drama as their teacher was ill. I directed the pantomime Pinocchio in the mid-80s'.*

Fitzgerald also arrived at the school in 1983 under Principal Nicol. He taught a broad range of subjects but primarily encompassing English from 8 to 12, including each of the three-stage 2 courses and HASS across 8 to 10 and History at Stages 1 and 2, including three of the stage 2 History courses, as well as the cross-disciplinary subjects over the last ten years being the Research Project and the PLP. Fitzzy says, *'I like the RP because you operate as a facilitator for the students learning, but I hate the PLP because it is as dry as a burnt steak.'* Fitzgerald also taught stage 1 and 2 Aboriginal Studies several times. He says, *'My favourite course would be stage 2 Modern History.'* Fitzzy also did a stint as a stage 2 English Moderator from 1987 to 1999. *'Those white plastic bags were a nightmare, especially when you saw all of them piled up and wondered how in the hell are we going to work through all of those in a week'.*



Caption: Jo Tiffen and Peter Jolley in 1993.



Caption: Greg Fitzgerald and Sam Othams in 1987.

Tiffen started at PLHS in 1990 with Jim Davies as principal, but she doesn't remember seeing much of him. Before beginning work at PLHS, she taught at Kadina Memorial High, Leigh Creek area and briefly at Elizabeth City High. Like many English and HASS-trained staff, Tiffen has been gifted various courses under various names, including Year 12 English under different titles, Legal Studies, Research Project, Aboriginal Studies, Tourism, Literacy, and, as an emergency fill-in for a term, Business Studies. *'Thank goodness Wayne arrived that year to put the class and me out of our misery.'* Tiffen shudders.

Jolley (PJ) started at Port Lincoln High School in 1993 after previous years at Lamerook Regional Community School, Suneden School for Intellectually Disabled Children in Mitchell Park and at the Autistic Clinic School in Wattle Park. Over PJ's 30 years at PLHS, he was involved in a plethora of courses and education realms, including all courses of English 8-12, Accelerated Literacy, Health and PE, HASS, Australian Studies, Hospitality (PLHS' first VET course, with Rosemary Holden), Care and Health Industry Pathways in Schools (CHIPS: aged care, disability care and child-care), Year 12 Psychology (introducing the course to PLHS), ESL (working with kids from overseas with no English), Counsellor/ Well-Being Leader over the past 14 years, Co-ordinator of English/LOTE, Special Education Co-ordinator, Co-ordinator of SSO's, Member of Finance Committee, PAC representative and Sub-Branch Secretary of AEU.

'It is definitely important to have a "life" outside of school, and have a positive way of de-stressing every day. For me, that was often through running and friendships.'

Othams

All four teachers quoted their genuine engagement with people- colleagues and students- as their reason for surviving so long in the profession. PJ says, *'It has kept me young at heart for many years, but I genuinely like the people I work with and the kids with whom I have worked, and I want to help them navigate what is for many kids a really challenging time in their lives.'* Othams adds, *'I think to stay in the profession a long time you have to enjoy working with teenagers and genuinely want to help them with their learning. It is important to have some fun.'* Jo reveals that she has had many happy memories of teaching, but some of the best moments have been when she has team-taught. *'I loved teaching Legal Studies with three different and inspiring peers. We had different strengths, and I think our students benefitted from our different approaches.'*

Fitzy, Othams, PJ and Tiffen all expressed the importance of the human role within teaching. *'Besides the content in the classroom, probably the most important thing I can share with younger teachers is that the kids learn from you, by the way you carry yourself and the way you treat them individually and as a group,'* says PJ. Fitzy agrees. *'With kids... be calm. Don't yell at them because they will stop listening, and you will achieve nothing. Get to know them, their names especially quickly because they notice things like that and if you acknowledge and recognise them, they will reciprocate. Build the relationships.'* Othams links a strong teacher to the ideologies of famous dog trainer Cesar Millan. *'They don't really want chaos, they need a good-hearted, strong leader who is firm but fair and consistent. A leader who helps them to reach their potential and express themselves in positive ways.'* Tiffen also adds the importance of using your voice. *'Don't suffer in silence. I recommend a lot of swearing! Sorry to those who have been in hearing distance.'*

'The thing is you never know how much of an influence you have had on a student's life, simply because you shared a kind word of encouragement, helped them work through a problem that was consuming their every waking moment, or simply showing that you care.' PJ

The experienced teachers rebutted the notion that students are becoming worse over the years but pointed out the added complexities that today's modern society brings. *'Kids haven't really changed but some aspects of society have affected some of them. I think that resilience is an issue as the pace of life can become a bit overwhelming for them, and the Covid fallout is still very much unknown in terms of its psychological impact moving forward.'* Fitzy states. Othams points out, *'Overall I believe teenagers have been teenagers throughout history, with all that that brings - think of Romeo & Juliet!'* PJ adds *'There is a genuine belief that children do not change over time, and I hold that to be true. They are predictable in their behaviour patterns and regularly make the same mistakes that their past generations have made.'*

Tiffen comments, *'Students have changed in many ways but in other ways not at all.'* Othams highlights that social problems such as poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, gambling and associated domestic violence impact more households these days, and teachers see that through student behaviours pretty much every day. *'Phones and social media are great tools but also amplify these issues and exacerbate bullying.'* Tiffen points out a small difference. *'They used to have a longer attention span. Gone are the days when we could watch a feature film together; now it's a 6-minute clip if you're lucky.'*

All of them can recall being challenged at different times by different 'characters' with PJ likening teaching a particular Year 9 English class to going to war. *'Initially, I shuddered when I knew their lessons were coming up, and I had to go in with full body armour to endure them.'* Through adamant persistence that they would not break him, eventually, 'an unwritten, unspoken understanding emerged that we were enjoying each other's company and for the rest of that year it was my favourite class to go into.' Fitzy is more direct. *'Brats? Well there's always a couple every year, but a bloke by the name of Glen Ormsby would be up there. He even drove Judy Freeman to lose her temper on a number of occasions which is a feat in itself.'* Sam also has names to drop. *'The first to come to mind would be Bruce Forrest from back around 2012. He was loud, a little bit wild, a serial pest, but also fun to have in the class. I remember one day, he was being particularly annoying and getting in everyone's faces so with the help of the rest of the class I gaffer taped him to his chair with most of a roll of tape. It did not help. He was very resilient in his ability to annoy'.*

'This is not an easy gig, but your best support is each other.' Fitzy

While the students have not changed too much, arguably, education has changed a lot through the addition of technology, though Tiffen is quick to highlight its shortcomings. *'Unfortunately, much of it is unreliable so teaching students to be critical thinkers has become even more vital. Fake news was always a thing but now there's a never-ending torrent.'* Fitzy also reflects, *'When I think about it, the 1980's were about blackboards, the 1990's about whiteboards and the 21st century about smart TV and wireless technology. A lot has changed.'* Meanwhile, PJ directs the biggest change to the level of 'sanitisation' each level of Government has enforced. *'The paperwork that has to be lodged to run a course is ridiculous. It has had the impact of corralling really innovative and creative teachers.'* Othams reflects on the ever-changing cohort. *'There was maybe a greater proportion of really "academic" students in the '80s, '90s and early 2000s, This was before the trend for sending high school students to private schools became a real "thing" in Port Lincoln'.* Jo reflects about the addition of the Year 7's to an already big campus as another big change. *'Teaching 7B this year (most of them for 3 different subjects) has been, at different times, a challenging learning curve, highly frustrating and extremely enjoyable. I'm glad I didn't miss that one.'*

'Another contributing factor to being able to cope with teaching is my ability to laugh, even on the most stressful day. Well, mostly. Lessons sometimes completely fall apart but you always get another chance to make it better tomorrow.' Tiffen

As teachers of English, the trio reflected on some of their most powerful texts to share with students. PJ states that his favourite film was *The Colour Purple* as *'I loved the diverse range of issues and messages that existed within the movie as a teaching resource'* but also used Schindler's List as an excellent resource to *'examine the heart of man and the cruelty we are capable of inflicting upon one another when the rules are ignored or changed to suit our own agenda.'* Unsurprisingly, Fitzy is a fan of the classics. *'As a film that students have engaged with over the decades, Stand By Me never fails because they get it - the risk, the adventure and the importance of friendship.'* As an English Studies teacher for many years, he discusses that *'Ulysses by James Joyce may have been rated the number 1 book of the 20th century, but I have always found the number 2 never fails with students, To Kill a Mockingbird. Personally, I think that Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath is superior to both of them.'* Othams also adds *Mockingbird* to the list. *'To Kill A Mockingbird is a bit of a slog for many students these days, however by the end, most come around to enjoying it.'* Othams lists his favourites as both regular Shakespeare texts (*R&J* and *Macbeth*) and, more recently *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* and *All I Ever Wanted* with Year 9s. Tiffen reflects, *'I ever had a shred of credibility as an English teacher, I might be about to lose it because S.E. Hinton's The Outsiders was my "never fail" novel for quite a while. It may not have any literary merit, but year 9 students always loved it. More recently, Taika Waititi's Boy has been a complete winner.'*

When asked about their longevity in teaching, all of them spanning teaching careers over at least five different decades, they all struggle to identify a single reason but list various groups of people. *'I'm not sure if I have the answer as to why I have survived so long in the profession other than I have loved the engagement'* says PJ. Fitzy reveals that *'There was a year 12 group a few years ago that was very good, or perhaps I just got lucky but I had the opportunity to teach them both Modern History and English Literary Studies and that's all I had to do because they were self-motivated.'* Othams also lists the connections he built with students. *'There was a group of students I had as a home class from Yr 8 through to Yr 12 a few years ago. For several of those years, I taught most of them English, too. Molly Wright, Holly Rowett, Eyerus Curtis, Maddii Baj were some of the students in that group. There were a lot of great classes over the years'.* Tiffen is all about her colleagues and support from home. *'When I think back to all the dead-set legends I have worked with over the three decades, I know how lucky I have been. Having a top-notch chef and fabulous listener at home didn't hurt either. Rod's been my own personal cheer squad.'* She also thanks the *'wonderful SSO's'* who have been in her class. *'They were often the only thing that stopped me from losing my mind. That quick exchange of an eye roll or a smile was enough to remind me not to take things too seriously.'*

The retiring quartet are looking forward to seeing what treats a post-Covid, post-school schedule life brings. Jo says, *'I'm really looking forward to spending more time with Rod. We are keen to travel, work on our block together and keep learning about local native plants, permaculture, and sustainable living.'* Having already enjoyed some time off, PJ notes that he has been playing the guitar, walking, reading and watching Netflix daily. *'I am going to enjoy my retirement by not missing words like "pedagogy"'. We have purchased a new caravan that will be an integral part of retirement as we travel to different parts of South Australia and interstate.'* Retired since April, Othams says there's so much to do, but no rush. *'He has been busy reading, gardening, walking the dogs, having naps, house/shed maintenance and improvements, enjoying nature, going to the beach and reminiscing about the good old days. Fitzy has also been able to begin enjoying life away from school 'The most striking thing I have noticed in the last 5 months is time. I have been able to use my time as I choose, rather than being driven by schedules, timetables, meetings, deadlines and so forth. And when you are outside the education bubble you notice via the Teams messages, how busy this place is and how hard people work in schools. Fitzy also has plans to travel. 'I now get to plan some adventures and see some places that I haven't previously had time to explore.*

And I think that's about it for the time being.'

