

Report on International Coalition of Boys' Schools Conference – Washington DC by George Harris

Briefly, for those of you who have not been to the United States, this trip was an eye-opener. The nationalism and allegiance to the flag is quite something to behold, unfortunately, it appears especially superficial and alarmingly dangerous in our world of tolerance and acceptance.

My observations on the conference are diverse. The arrangements were superb and the two schools' hosting was fantastic although it lacked a little 'decorating' and involvement from the boys at the schools (even though they were on holiday), I couldn't help comparing our Dukes to the St Albans choral group who performed on the last day, but there really is no comparison.

Our listening to Madeleine Albright was a rare privilege and especially insightful. Her ability to answer 'off the cuff' questions with an uncanny diplomacy and strength of wit I have not yet encountered before was especially memorable.

St Albans neighbours on the National Cathedral and it was *interesting* to note their 'allegiance' to this building, in many ways, it seemed. Georgetown Prep was quite something to behold, perhaps for many of the wrong reasons...? We happened upon their campus as they were 'reshaping' it to house their golf course, after being given a relatively healthy donation of about \$850 million. The classrooms and cloakrooms are from another world!

The choice of workshops presented was thorough and interesting. I attended one which appealed to my English teaching first, entitled "*Programming Culture: Analyzing Print Advertisements*". My objective was to learn possible different and new techniques to enhance our teaching of the subject here at Saints, and also to measure my knowledge in terms of teaching this subject, against that of an 'expert' from the States.

The presentation was superb and thorough. His knowledge of his subject was outstanding and his enthusiasm in communicating fantastic. My sense is that we are on a par, if not slightly ahead, in our teaching of this section of our work and more importantly, the model answers he presented to us from some of his students suggest that our boys would compete extremely favourably with his students of a similar age. In my listening to this presenter, John Adams, I was challenged by our need to foster many more experts in every subject field, in the classroom. His dynamic and interactive style of 'teaching' and facilitating surely enthuses many young people to discover for themselves and to 'study' further around his subject. We need to grow our passion for our various subjects.

Secondly, I attended a workshop entitled, *The House system as the 'Spine of the school'*, which reported on how this is being practised in a Canadian school. Unfortunately, but fortunately, this proved to be a relatively uninspiring session as I felt that in many cases we were on a par and possibly ahead in our practise here at the Boys' College.

Thirdly, I attended a workshop entitled “*School culture change: The key to credibility in the 21st century: Service*”, which was presented by a superbly credible man, Brother Damien Price, who leads the St Joseph’s College community Service program at this school. Once again, our efforts in this field are similar and perhaps more diverse although the intensity and long-term commitment to a particular initiative of theirs seems extraordinary, and deserves some airing.

This initiative is called “The Big Brekky Program” for the homeless in the city of Brisbane and here’s what happens:

“Monday to Friday (for 52 weeks of the year) teams of 5 students and several faculty, alumni and parents will gather at the College at 06:20. They butter the bread and load up ‘Eddie’s Van’. They set off for one of three inner city locations where homeless people gather for early morning breakfast. Upon arrival at the site two of the team cook the light breakfast while the others in the team spread out and chat to the homeless. As the program has been going since 1999 we are all well known to the homeless and them to us. The students are arranged over a three-week roster. This means that students will be able to serve on the Big Brekky van up to 12 times a year. The team arrives back at the College at around 07:45 and after clean up the students move off to class. A short pre-brief and de-brief time takes place each time the van goes out. Each team has a student leader responsible for welcoming any new team member and for reminding the team that they are on ‘Big Brekky’ the next morning. An adult leader takes on the overall ‘duty of care’ responsibilities.” Brother Damien Price

What was particularly striking to me was the perseverance and consistency of those serving and leading this initiative. ‘Eddie’s Van’ is also used in the evenings, twice a week where a soup kitchen and coffee and tea service are provided for the homeless. This is staffed by students and past students, which I thought was quite exceptional.

I have copies of Brother Damien’s report for those people who would like to read more of their ventures into Community Service programs.

The fourth workshop I attended was by Dr Jon Carnegie who was also a keynote speaker at the Conference, entitled: “*Leading from the back: The learning journey’s experience.*” Jon has established an outward bound kind of establishment and course which aims to get young people to throw off their ‘baggage’ and to believe in themselves and their capacity to do and be more.

His course is structured around a book he co-authored called: “*Heroes*”, which has used the stories of many contemporary Australian ‘heroes’ from all walks of life, to enthuse and encourage young people wherever they may find themselves. What I found particularly powerful was his use of music and dance to help young people face their fears and disappointments and then to take the first steps in overcoming those setbacks. At a point in the course,

young people are invited to dance in front of the whole group but the key aspect of this step is as much about the participant in the dance as it is about the rest of the group. The instruction to the group is not to judge and if they feel that they are passing judgement on the individual who is dancing, for whatever reason, they are to put their mask up – judgment is not allowed. This mask is a blindfold. Young people tell of fantastic release through this process and significant growth in their person seems to take place throughout the course.

The keynote speakers provided interesting food for thought on the American psyche and the condition of American society it seemed to me. Time Russert a popular American television journalist and talk show host, most famous for the program *“Meet the Press”* aired on Sunday mornings, gave some interesting insight into the characters and dilemmas of American politicians today, and some of the issues they are facing today. Possibly the most distressing point he made was that free and healthy debate in the American Senate seems to have been curbed or inhibited recently, and that this is a threat to an open democracy.

Richard Hawley, the founding President of the IBSC, spoke passionately and humanely about Boys’ Schools and their place in our world. Randall Kennedy gave an interesting, but academic lecture on the origins of the word *“nigger”* which provided an interesting vantage point for us as South Africans, but I fear we are significantly further in our understanding of race issues than a brief visit to the States would suggest the American people are.

H.G.Bissinger, the author of a book *“Friday night lights”* spoke effectively about the culture of sports in schools / Colleges and challenged those who would perpetuate the shallow practice of funding students for football only, instead of insisting on an holistic education for promising athletes, too.

Overall this was a worthwhile conference with a diverse range of topics covered. I would like to thank the Headmaster, Mr McLachlan, and the Staff Development fund for affording me the opportunity to attend this event. It has broadened my understanding and strengthened my resolve to see our school continue to develop young men who are leaders in this world, in all areas of society through our varied initiatives in educating them holistically.