

Keith Gibbs: A tribute

(With thanks to John Illsley, Paul Ewart-Phipps and Geoff Meyer for their input and assistance)

It was almost exactly a year ago that we acknowledged Keith Gibbs' 70 years of association with Pretoria Boys High School. This was done at a Friday assembly and it was fitting that his beloved wife Di was there by his side as the school rose to acknowledge this remarkable achievement – firstly as a Form I boy who rode to school on his bicycle from Riveira and later Sunnyside, ducking through a hole in the fence to gain access, then as a master where many a boy was brought to a shuddering halt by the words “That Boy”, as an Old Boy and finally as the first curator of our school museum, a position he held for 13 years and one he loved so much.

Mr Gibbs was one of the first staff members I met, along with my family, as we walked around the school for the first of many times. He was tasked as part of a welcome to the new Headmaster and his family to show us round the school. This would be the 6th Headmaster he had worked with. He took us into his special place, the museum, where he explained as he had many times over, the history of the school and, what the school meant to him and to so many thousands of people. It was very clear how much it meant to him but this was also the first indication I had of the man himself and his special, caring nature as he showed me a photograph of my father in the Sunnyside U15 tennis team and the register entry of my father from 1951 which he had taken the trouble to find. This was important to him that I felt part of his school.

From the time when Keith first entered these gates in January 1947 to last week, when, despite being terribly ill and in great pain, he asked to see his beloved school again and was driven round as per his request with his family, Keith described Boys High as his own happy place, a place where he felt home and where he felt he belonged. It is going to be hard to imagine Boys High without Keith.

After his time as a schoolboy and master and, indeed after his retirement, Keith was asked to assist John Illsley in the creation of a completely new school museum, the opening of which coincided with the centenary of the school buildings. That huge undertaking in 2008/2009 involved the gathering, framing and displaying of hundreds of images and artefacts. Keith was in his element. To be involved with the preservation and presentation of the school's heritage was a huge privilege for him. But the school was itself privileged to have someone whose knowledge of the school stretched back over most of its history. His insights played a valuable role in shaping the museum and its archival collection by providing invaluable background. His seemingly endless store of anecdotes, drawn it must be said from a remarkable memory, could make even the most mundane artefact have an interesting context or twist.

After its opening, it was only right that Keith should take on the role of museum curator. His greatest joy in this regard was showing groups or individuals around the museum. Groups of current school boys, particularly Form Is; old boys reunion

groups; past pupils and staff and their families visiting the school from overseas, would all receive Keith's full attention and, if you had the time, he could regale you with many a wonderful story from several decades. Before any reunion group visited, and it didn't matter of *what* vintage they were, Keith would chuckle and say that he would have to get out what he called the "trouser duster", (by which he meant one of the canes in the museum) and use it to maintain order when the old boys visited the museum! And then he would host groups with his usual mix of charm and knowledge to make their visit that much more special. His love for the history of the school was singled out by the matric speaker at last year's Valediction as a special moment in his schooling career.

Keith loved attending Friday assemblies. This would be the time to chat to him as he sat resplendent in Old Boy tie and blazer or his Harris tweed jacket and listen to the events of the past week. He would, without fail, find me, and look at me in that way – almost with sadness in his eyes, as he shook his head and tell me he couldn't believe how lucky he was to be at a school like this. He would thank me for the day's message and then stand in the staffroom drinking tea and catching up, usually about the boys and what they had achieved or chatting about cricket. He loved the continuity of tradition; he loved the talents of the boys and was very supportive of the school as it strove to come to terms with the changing times. As the person on stage taking assembly, it was always comforting to know that Keith was in the gallery and his being there will be greatly missed.

Keith has meant so much to so many of us from his beloved Di (aka Badger – we are not sure why, whether she displayed the qualities of one of Africa's toughest, intelligent and courageous animals or someone who constantly badgered and annoyed him!) to his children and grandchildren and rest of the family, including his fourth "child" and surrogate son Geoff Meyer and to those with whom he worked.

In talking to a number of people in preparing this eulogy, he is described universally as the quintessential gentleman with old world values and standards and yet a gentle man, one who was considerate of others, one who was kind. Keith has kind eyes – for those who knew him. Yes he was "old school" but he believed in doing the right thing. He was hardly ever cross or ill tempered, never complained and had endless patience, particularly with Di and Geoff and their countless visits to the Kruger park where every sighting of a tree or a bird would require Keith to stop and back up so its particular characteristics could be discussed at length!

Keith's rather dry sense of humour was loved by us all although it was good to get one over on him once. We embarked on a project in 2011 and 2012 to clear the alien vegetation on the koppie which entailed removing a number of bluegum trees. Keith understood and approved of the project but his face was a picture when I told him that the two Norfolk pines in front of the school would also have to go as they were not indigenous! It was only after I smiled that a look of relief crossed his face as he had seen the planting of those two trees take place.

It was only fitting and right that, apart from his friend Margie Prinsen bringing him Boys High roses, his other friend Paul Ewart-Phipps, who visited him every day when he was ill, once brought Keith a piece of each pine tree, the East and the

West. These pieces were placed in a vase next to his bed and I am convinced he knew they were there. They now reside in Di's flat where they, remarkably, have shown signs of roots! If they do, in fact, take root, there can be no better cenotaph for Keith than these two trees planted near a cricket field at Boys High.

Keith's love for the school and for Di and his family was only marginally greater than his love for what I teased him was the second-best game in the world – cricket. He was an integral part of Boys High cricket for decades, through the years of the masters league to the days of coaching U14s and umpiring when he was no longer a coach, Indeed it was only two years ago that he stopped standing as an umpire in the annual Old Boy games. He loved to discuss the game and its nuances – provided you played in the right way - and would have been most approving of the latest Protea victory.

Keith Ernest Gibbs was one of a kind and will be sorely missed. His devotion to duty was acknowledged not only at Boys High but also at King Edwards Prep where he taught for 23 years. When he retired from there, his parting gift bore the inscription "Beyond the call of duty". Our memorial plaque which will be placed on our wall of remembrance will bear the same inscription.

For the past year or so, Keith was often in agony as he fought cancer bravely, without complaint, always with a smile on his face. He was determined to be on duty at his beloved school. He was a truly remarkable man whose presence will live on in the corridors of the school he loved so dearly and in the museum in particular. To the love of his life and partner for 38 years, Di, we offer all our love and support and thank her for sharing this special person with us. To his family Kerith, Charles and Loren and his grandchildren and to his close friends we offer our comfort too. You can be most proud of Keith and all he has done. Keith Gibbs was a special man indeed and I leave you with words he once commented upon to me when I shared then with the boys one assembly:

"Being male is a matter of birth. Being a man is a matter of age. But being a gentleman is a matter of choice."

Keith made that choice.

Mr Reeler
HEADMASTER