

TRIBUTE TO A FINE EDUCATOR

Mr Tom Bourquin passed away on 13 October at age 81.



He served both PBHS and the wider educational field over a period of more than 60 years with aplomb. He enjoyed successful teaching spells at our School and King Edward V11, and then went on to St Stithians, where he was a committed and popular teacher and coach.

He lived on the property there with his gracious wife, Sheila, and their toddlers, Lynn and Jeanette.

His next teaching post was at Sandringham High where he was made Deputy Head. This was followed by his appointment as Deputy Principal of Sandown High and he soon became its Headmaster.

“It was at Sandown where I believe my Dad did his best work”, remarked his son Roger in a eulogy at a recent memorial service in Parkview, Johannesburg. Roger followed his father into education and is currently Head of the Mathematics Department at Roedean Girls School in Johannesburg.

Roger’s further comments:

Sandown was one of the biggest and most successful schools in Johannesburg at the time. They had about 1 300 pupils when he was Head there. Being a Headmaster of any school is an extremely difficult and demanding job. Gaining the respect and affection of staff, students and parents is almost unheard of.

From everything I have heard, my father managed to achieve this, and more. It has been moving to hear the glowing tributes paid to him by colleagues, students and parents from his time at Sandown.

In a letter to the Bourquin family after Tom’s death, his Deputy at Sandown High, Mr Brian Wilkinson, expressed similar praise:

I regarded him as some kind of hero. I worked under, and with, several talented and highly respected headmasters in my life. And Tom stood head and shoulders above all of them.

His ability to care about and empathise with those who worked under him, even at times of great personal suffering, brought out the best in everyone. He was free of the kind of arrogance which is present in so many people in positions of power.

He also had a wicked sense of fun that made him such enjoyable company. When faced with tricky situations in my years in senior positions, I would always ask myself what Tom would have done. I admired and loved Tom, and am proud to have been able to call him my friend.

Values and philosophy of life

Never had he seen anyone who more epitomised a ‘value-driven’ school head than Tom had been when he led Sandown High, Mr Wilkinson added.

Mr Ben Brooks, son of the legendary Mr Willy Brooks, had this to say about Tom a decade ago in the publication *Independent Education*:

He was able to lead without affectation, tricks or formulas. He was true to his inner self.

He was also a renaissance man: a scholar, a liberal and a highly talented sportsman. His school reflected a harmony between the things of body, mind and spirit, and so much of this flowed from the balance of the man in charge.

“He was able to walk with kings without losing the ‘common touch’. He was usually among the first to arrive at the school and invariably the last to leave. Most of his Saturday morning was spent at school. Twelve hour working days were his norm and meetings would absorb further hours in the evenings.

Thus, he looked after the ‘big things’ when the school was empty: that’s when he wrestled with paper, policies and procedures. During the school day he worked with people: teachers and pupils and parents.

Tom believed in being ‘visible’, and made it his business to have at least one daily walkabout. This made us all feel secure as his loud,

ringing laugh could be heard from afar. We sensed that he was not checking on us. On the contrary, it was a celebration of all that was good about the school.

Tom furthermore had a unique ability to bring out the best in people. Without being naïve or abrogating his responsibilities, he trusted others and was able to delegate to the right people. He realised that a successful leader must know when to lead, when to follow, and when to get out of the way.

He often spoke about the need to 'keep a big school small and this is what he achieved through appointing wisely, delegating sensibly, setting clear parameters, trusting others, keeping in touch and setting an example...

Roger recounted the outstanding relationship he and his father enjoyed, spending many hours discussing world affairs and philosophising on the importance of life. Tom repeatedly emphasised the following:

*Care for **all** people deeply.*

Help the vulnerable.

Stand up for the exploited and oppressed.

Be passionate about your work, but remember that your work is not your life.

Go on holiday.

Always bat first.

Work on your friendships. They do not just happen and they require effort.

Deal with your issues and your tragedies. There is no excuse in this day and age of mental health awareness not to get help: And yes, even the men.

The affection of the masses is nice, but far more important is the love of those closest to you.

Treat your partner with kindness and respect.

Be grateful for your health.

Exercise.

Tell people you value them while they are alive.

“I believe that he gave of his very best, every day, in all his various jobs”, Roger said. “I also I think my Dad’s single greatest attribute was quite simply that he cared deeply about everyone”.

Post-Sandown

Tom was appointed an inspector of education when he left Sandown. He performed that role with distinction and was fortunate to be offered the

opportunity to start Dainfern College. He then completed his career as a Regional Director of ISASA and stopped working at the age 75.

His good friend, Mr Mark Henning, played a significant role in both the latter appointments. They had been close friends at JCE; Mr Henning was later appointed Vice Principal of Sandringham High and Head of St Stithians College respectively; also subsequently Director of ISASA; and was involved with the founding of Dainfern College.

“I was approached by several prominent Dainfern College parents and asked to recommend a Head”, Mr Henning recalled. “I replied that Tom Bourquin had just resigned at ISASA and would make an ideal appointment. They accepted my recommendation and Tom spent several very happy years there. They also, incidentally, asked me to lay the foundation stone, which I did”.

Keetmanshoop

Tom was born in the isolated little village of Keetmanshoop in the southern stretches of the former SWA (Namibia) on 30 October 1936

His full name was Emmanuel Herbert Thomas Bourquin. “Once, you’re given a name of this nature, it’s almost guaranteed that your life will be grandiose, never boring, and somewhat complicated”, remarked Roger.

A magistrate by training and also an Old Boy, Tom’s father was ‘Native Commissioner’ in southern Namibia and by all accounts was loved by all. A man of missionary zeal, he had an amazing influence for good in people’s lives. Tom’s mother Molly (Veale) was a prominent Springbok hockey player and also an impressive person in her own right.

The Bourquin family subsequently relocated to Ovamboland capital, Ondangwa, in the most northerly part of Namibia, bounded in the north by Angola, in the east by Kavango, in the south by the Etosha Game Reserve, and in the west by the Kaokoveld.

“It was wild and remote and as a small boy Tom had a little antelope for a pet, and his best friend was an Ovambo boy, also named ‘Tom’, Roger recounted of his father.

“This was an era in which people either didn’t know, or didn’t care about skin cancer, and he seemed to spend his days running around half naked in the sweltering African sun. The result was a rich ebony complexion, which made it virtually impossible to identify the one Tom from the other in the photos that we have from that time”.

The family then transferred to the relative 'metropolis' of Barberton in the former Eastern Transvaal where Tom completed his primary school education.

But life wasn't easy for him and his two siblings. His parents divorced when he was nine, a traumatic experience for the family. Besides, the children had to cope with its stigma and the headwinds that arose in the face of their educational attainment.

Said Roger: "In 1945, great shame was attached to divorced families. My father told me that he went through his whole high school career without telling anyone that his parents were divorced. His mother moved to Natal, and she, for whatever reason, hardly ever saw her three children. One doesn't need to be a psychologist to understand the mental scars that this alienation from their mother must have caused".

Boys High

Two years later at the tender age of 11, Tom's father enrolled him as a boarder at School House. This, significantly, enhanced his confidence, stability and care. Passionate housemasters at the time, most notably Messrs Stuart Hendry and Peter Bantock, became his mentors, not policemen, and enabled him to team up and identify with others who wanted to be there. Both engendered his interest in History.

Naturally, he was also afforded the School's amazing libraries, sports facilities and a host of extracurricular activities.

Tom thrived in this environment, got on well with others, became honour-bound, disciplined and well-directed, all of which created a solid foundation for successful adulthood. He did well academically, excelled as an all-round sportsman, and was appointed a prefect in 1952 along with Tim Hill, later a longstanding PBHS teacher.

He made it into the 1st Cricket XI in 1951 at age 15, and was a regular member of the 1952 side along with Messrs Keith Gibbs and Roger Petty, also later teachers at the School. Former contemporaries remembered him furthermore as an above-average tennis player and table tennis player.

Tom was selected for the 1st Rugby XV in 1952, coached by Messrs Wil Hofmeyr and Piet Moerdyk.

Being willing to work hard in class and play hard on the field was all part of the package. "Most of all, I believe, sport was my Dad's big salvation", Roger commented.

Career choice and university

Tom matriculated at 16, and, probably influenced by his father's environment, considered law. Very wisely, he spent a year in a legal office to get a feel of it, and then opted out completely in favour of a teaching career.

He enrolled at Wits University and the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE) and with his close friend David Quail, did 10 out of 11 courses for his BA degree, majoring in Latin and History. He then went on to read History Honours at Wits under eminent history professor JS Marais.

Mr Quail later rose to Headmaster of Jeppe Boys High School.

Said Roger: "My Dad always told me that if one taught Latin one would never be out of a job. This made me rather nervous, as I had repeatedly been given the same advice with regards to the teaching of Mathematics".



At Knockando and JCE Tom was always the life and soul of any party, Mr Quail recalled. "He was attractive to girls and a natural leader among men. His infectious laugh cheered up any party, whether it was a dance or going to the Dev (pub) in nearby Braamfontein".

Tom's sporting prowess continued at Wits and JCE. He played scrumhalf for the Wits 1st XV and captained the JCE side. No mean tennis and table tennis partners, he and David Quail won the Knockando and JCE championships on several occasions.

Moral decisions at great cost

In June 1960, when already a teacher at Boys High and Assistant Housemaster at School House, one of Tom's proudest moments was his selection in the Northern Transvaal rugby side against the All Blacks.

However, the Bulls were pummeled 27-3 that afternoon. Interesting though is that Natal had drawn 6-6 and the Springboks won two of four tests, drew one, and lost one. Tom's local club in Pretoria was Harlequins.

But SA took little comfort from the Springboks overall win over the All Blacks because the then Apartheid government had imposed a ban on the inclusion of Maori and Samoan players in the New Zealand side. The NZ Rugby Union then refused any other All Black Tours to SA for the ensuing decade.

Added to that, the 'Springbok' had long been regarded as representing both the exclusion of players who were not designated white under apartheid legislation and, by extension, of apartheid itself. Although the Springbok emblem was adopted briefly by the first coloured national rugby team in 1939 and by their first black counterparts in 1950, it became exclusively associated with segregated sporting codes afterwards.

South African rugby officials in particular, and the national rugby team itself, had an historical association with racism from 1906 on. The first rugby Springboks initially refused to play against a Devon side that included Jimmy Peters, the first black player to represent England.

Legendary official, national coach and Springbok scrumhalf, Danie Craven, had also indicated that the 'Springbok' was exclusively tied to the white identity of the national rugby team.

"On reflecting on these matters years later, my father expressed mixed feelings", Roger recounted. "On the one hand, he acknowledged the honour of being selected into the Northern Transvaal squad. On the other, he felt that Northerns Rugby was and had been too close to the National Party establishment for his comfort".

Politically liberal by inclination, he exhibited strong principles, and was passionate about what was right and fair. Recalled one teaching contemporary: "Had Tom witnessed a boy being mercilessly mauled in a school match, he would have said, 'This is not the way we play rugby', insisted that the perpetrator leave the field, and may even have terminated the match".

Morality of this kind played out in another dimension when Tom taught at St Stithians College in Johannesburg in the late 1960s. The then Headmaster, Mr Steyn Krige, was forced out for reasons that are not quite apparent. Be that as it may, Tom Bourquin protested vehemently and resigned from the School Staff as well.

“My Dad was outraged at the way the school had treated this man”, Roger recounted. “After consulting with my Mom, he decided to resign. He had no job to go to, and no home to move into. My parents made a moral decision at great personal cost. You have no idea how proud that story makes me. It was one of the many times that my mother and father took a strong stand when they thought people were being wronged”.

Sheila Bourquin



Tom ended his rugby career prematurely in order to spend a few years teaching in the UK. “His departure to that part of the world did have some positive spin offs”, Roger noted. “That’s where he met my mother. They met primarily because of my

mother’s expediency. She had been at college with my Dad, but as she was a few years younger than him, they had hardly spoken”.

One day outside Earls Court Post Office in London, Sheila noticed Tom near the front of a long queue to post mail, sidled up to him to make some small talk, even got him to do her ‘dirty work’, and then trotted off into the London crowd.

“It seems that my father was quite struck by her, and being a cunning fox, he copied her address from the back of the envelope before posting her mail. He then essentially stalked her under the pretence of needing to borrow an educational book. The rest, as they say, is history. But without any shadow of a doubt, that’s the best decision my Dad ever made”.

Mr Henning agreed. “Sheila was extremely supportive of Tom and showed terrific resilience in tragic circumstances. She was also immensely supportive of a husband who was engaged in difficult jobs and too often left reeling with shock”.

These events included the death of two children, Tom’s sister, Margie, and brother, Mickey. “They were staggered and given no time by society to grieve these monstrous losses”, Roger noted. “That they became successful, caring, functioning adults is a miracle and testament to their strength of character”.

Tom Bourquin indeed will be remembered as one who had the robustness of mind and spirit to cope with the headwinds he faced. He inspired great loyalty in those who got to know him, and he in turn gave great loyalty to them. He instilled confidence, in fact, among most who interacted with him because he led by example rather more than precept. People found his quiet strength comforting.

LEON KOK