

Distinguished guests, your worships the mayors, ladies & gentlemen, honoured alumni and friends of Makoura College

We should begin with Noel Scott, our school's foundation principal who died one month ago and whose impact on the initial identity of Makoura College was clearly immense.

Two teachers who worked with him in those early years, Colleen Douglas and Roger Somerville, noted in tribute letters how, at a time when the traditional know-thy-place approach dominated mainstream schooling, Noel's influence was progressive and liberal: unstreamed classes, seniors wearing mufti, adults in class enjoying second chance qualification opportunities, recognition that the length of male students' hair had nothing to do with learning success, personal opposition to corporal punishment, staff and students bringing their babies into school; how there was a strong emphasis on the egalitarian: an embracing of Te Ao Maori, a deliberate growing of leaders, and a sense that anyone, regardless of natural ability, could win a Strive award if they wholeheartedly committed themselves – that attitude and positive attributes were as important as academic pedigree.

Noel's wife observed "Of all the things that he did, Makoura was the one, emotionally, he felt most strongly about". She added with a smile that you could 'hear' on the other end of the line – "He didn't want his children to go to Makoura, so they had to go to another secondary school in town – and they never forgave him".

One of those children, his daughter Mandy, sent these lines through a couple of days ago –

"Dad was incredibly passionate about the opportunities that education could provide. He was young and liberal, and very excited about breaking ground for a new school. His history of growing up in an orphanage and his personal

experiences were undoubtedly the reason that he battled always for what he saw as the underdog or those disadvantaged in any way. He spent his life committed to changing things for the better where he could. He was a warrior and over his lifetime, there were many battles, both private and professional. He was never afraid to take the lead and stand up, and lived a big and generous life.

As Makoura College celebrates its 50th anniversary, I feel sadness that he is not there to celebrate with you all, but know that for him, it started as his 'baby'. He nurtured, supported and loved the school, staff and students always- glowing with pride and pleasure at all its successes.

On behalf of the Scott family, thank you Makoura, for your place in our hearts and lives. May you continue to make a positive difference in the lives of young people”.

Such were the key values influencing the early identity of the school, and this blueprint laid down by Noel Scott was, of course, in turn developed and enhanced by Noel Preston, Noel's deputy who went on to lead the school until 1986. (And Noel, I only met you for the first time a year ago, at a time when you were quick to point out the closing grip of age with which we all must live; but I love that picture of you from back in the 70s at a school swimming gala punching the air in triumph, maybe after taking on students in a race – a prime time). Your successor Allen Chang continued the spirit of commitment to the school community. He is no longer with us and we have been unable to establish contact with his successor Paul Towers. But it's great that we are joined for this Reunion celebration by the man who served as Deputy both with Allen and Paul and became the school's fifth principal in 1997: Chris Scott, leading for a decade with a warmth and empathy that continued to typify the Makoura way. Unfortunately, we are unable to be joined this evening by the man who served this school with such courage, compassion and conviction until the end of 2015: Tom Hullena.

A school has to be led, but the leadership and investment of self extends to all staff across the years – and the story of this school should naturally include extensive biographical acknowledgment of the determined contribution and sincere commitment of everyone who has worked here and given of their best in the classrooms and around and beyond the school site – whether that was for a few weeks or, in the venerable ‘special mention’ cases of Don Miller, Clare Colville and Rae McKenzie, a few decades.

And we must also rightly recognise the vast contribution to our school’s culture of the students – te putake o te kaupapa, the heart of the matter. Over the five decades, the infusion of a host of hours of hard mahi, connection, aspiration and inspiration by hundreds of young people is truly the ultimate outcome of the school’s existence.

When I asked colleagues a short while ago what it was that made Makoura different, one staff member replied: “As a child I heard the stories. I didn’t know what the school looked like, had never been to that part of town. My parents would not let me go to that school”.

*That* school looms large in the hearts and minds of all of us.

If you are a past student, its formative impact dates back to those teenaged years when so much character was shaped – when you navigated a way through, loosening the early moulding of family and home, studying with deepening insight the flaws and ironies of the world, finding some balance, tackling the difficult questions, getting well on the way to becoming who you are now, years further on.

As a past staff member or community friend of the school, you’re here this evening because you were deeply engaged during a significant part of your life with what the school was trying to achieve, as it too negotiated its own growth

phases and forged its identity through a multitude of agendas and interactions, decisions and driven forces.

So half a century on from when it all began, as we still seek to define, to confirm who we are, we are inevitably drawn into trying to put a finger on what it was about the school that helped shape us.

That question of what makes Makoura College different prompted a lot of very different people to give a lot of very similar answers –

A school accepting of difference, inclusive, no matter how much you might vary from the stereotyped norms.

A school focusing on the individual: getting to know who each person is (their needs, interests, strengths) and where they're hoping to go.

A school respecting and celebrating cultural identity, mana, heritage, and recognising the importance of whanaungatanga – the inter-personal linking that needs to precede the systems talk.

A school caring about relationships, taking time to listen and connect, supporting the spirit of tuakana teina, being ready to forgive and move forward.

This is what it was, most of the time – and is still, most of the time.

Loyal, friendly, staunch, maverick, resilient.

Determined to commit to those who have committed to it.

If it has properly worked, it has wholeheartedly supported all of us who have passed through towards being the best version of yourself at work, as a parent, as a partner, as a friend, and as an individual always willing to strive with courage and compassion to find fulfilment and help others along the way.

Above all, Makoura College is a school community embodying a full cross-section of the wider world, not a select fraction. We know that it takes all sorts,

that variety is the spice, that strength lies in difference and diversity, that individual uniqueness is precious. Here the flawed and wondrous spectrum of humanity in our society come together again and again to learn, share, give, grow, struggle, and find ways forward.

Makoura College is a school *of* the community *with* the community – where everyone counts. This is what we came for; where our stories are part of others' stories; where we belong, richly inter-connected. This is who we are and what we have built – and what we will continue to build.

Kia manawanui.

