

Gary Zadkovich's immeasurable contribution to teachers' working lives acknowledged

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Family, friends, education officials and former students gathered to celebrate the remarkable career of Gary Zadkovich at his retirement function at the University of Sydney.

At the farewell dinner on Saturday, 17 February, President Maurie Mulheron backhandedly thanked Joh Bjelke-Petersen for delivering Gary and his skills and talent to NSW.

Mr Mulheron told guests Gary began teaching during the reign of Queensland Premier Bjelke-Petersen, who oversaw an "authoritarian, venal and incompetent government for decades ... it was never going to end well". Gary was transferred to an outback school weeks after he asked a question that the visiting education minister found very uncomfortable.



"I think, in a sense, Teachers Federation owes a debt of gratitude to Bjelke-Petersen because his act of bastardry delivered to NSW and to us, our teachers and activists, a contribution that is simply immeasurable," Mr Mulheron said.

Having served Federation in a variety of roles since 1991, as organiser, media officer, Senior Vice President, and Deputy President, Gary has led the way on a number of critical issues on behalf of the membership and public education, particularly in the areas of salaries and working conditions.

In 2017, he was involved in action that secured thousands of permanent teaching positions, with the NSW Industrial Relations Commission directing the NSW Department of Education to fill permanent positions that were being inappropriately held vacant and staffed by temporary and casual teachers.

"Gary was never going to be a run of the mill union official, he was always going to be out of the box, he was always going to be different," Mr Mulheron said. "He wears his heart on his sleeve, he's extraordinarily passionate, he never sits still, incredibly impatient ... impatient at the lack of change.

"As a union having Gary Zadkovich as an activist, as a classroom teacher, as an organiser, not so much as a media officer, but as a senior officer, we're going to live a long time before we see someone the likes of Gary Zadkovich in that position."

General Secretary John Dixon paid tribute to "a comrade, a colleague and friend" he had known for 25 years.

“After seeing and working with a few senior officers over the years, Gary is one of the best negotiator’s with the employer that I’ve ever seen. Because he can put an ideal position, he can negotiate around that ideal position but in the end he knows how to cut a deal.”

Gary’s lifelong passion for social justice was acknowledged by former students Louisa Raft and Adrian Condell, who each spoke of his role in helping them understand their own place in the world, particularly at a time when the last stages of the Cold War brought fears of nuclear conflict.

Former Westfield High School student Louisa said teachers such as Gary play a huge part in a young person’s development and their life story.

“As I reflected on Gary’s influence in my life I realise it is the connection he helped me make between my school learning and the outside world – a huge and diverse world with major issues and injustices outside of my sheltered western suburbs life with its typical teenage angst and insecurities,” she said.

“And from that time I developed an interest in making a difference to others, to things bigger and broader than the individual. I learnt the way to that was through community, focusing on our common unity to get things done and work for change for the benefit of the whole.”

Another Westfield alum Adrian Condell, now a head teacher of HSIE, said Gary had a profound influence on his life.

“To use his own words, Gary was a teacher who just happened to work for the union for a while,” he said.

“With his guidance I became a very politically aware young man, an unintended consequence was that I was quite possibly the 16-year-old most prepared for a nuclear apocalypse, the resulting nuclear winter and all-out global destruction.

“Gary was a little different in 1980s Fairfield, with his beard, his flannelette shirts, his sleeves rolled up, his boots; he looked like he’d just been sacked from his job as a blacksmith. But he was straight-talking, he was articulate, smart as hell but a little rough around the edges, he was never angry and God knows we tried to rile him.

“Gary walked and talked his values and he instilled in me that you are nothing if you don’t live by your values.”