

From “Beach to Bush”

June 12, 2018

A “beach to bush” change has proved a challenging but rewarding year for newly appointed principal at Pilliga Public School Seonid Stewart.

Ms Stewart had spent the year before her appointment to Pilliga as relieving principal at Quambone Public School after spending seven years as head teacher (support unit) at Brisbane Waters Secondary College and three years as assistant principal at the A.P. George Anderson Walpole School, both on the Central Coast.

Born in Scotland, Ms Stewart had spent time as deputy principal in two schools in Lincolnshire, England, before moving to Australia.

“However, the ‘beach to bush’ move appeared to be a natural move for me and my husband, Keith,” Ms Stewart said, “It was a reversal of what we had previously been doing, which was living on the coast and holidaying inland.

“What was my motivation? Well, the Pilliga position was a substantive position and I was keen to undertake the role of teaching principal as the previous year at Quambone had whet my appetite.”

What does she see as the advantages and challenges of a small rural and remote community school such as Pilliga?

Ms Stewart concentrated on the advantages first including being:

able to maintain teacher expertise and skills while in the position

given the opportunity to lead staff, students and the community

able to work closely with the students in order to develop authentic personalised learning situations

part of the community and meeting members on a daily basis including Anzac Day ceremonies, bingo evenings, pub raffle nights where the school is the beneficiary.

On the other hand, she concedes that there are some challenges such as:

meeting the requirements of a K-6 syllabus



ensuring students receive similar opportunities to those of urban-based students and hence the importance of the school's digital technology project

access to coding using up-to-date equipment

providing students with an awareness of the diversity of cultures given that the Pilliga region is a predominantly Indigenous community with some members having limited life experiences causing limited aspirations because they are not aware of the opportunities available in other locations, particularly those urban-based areas.

"However, my early impressions of the school and the community are that it is a great school with a very supportive staff," she said. "And with the P&C re-instigated after a five-year gap and plenty of resources, we hope to utilise the Robotics Technology Project as a key to improving the outcomes for all students and the wider community."

The project is designed to provide a program to meet the outcomes of the Design and Digital Technologies curriculum. It will mean Pilliga is the base school providing robotic resources and professional development for other small schools in the district.

Pilliga Public School will purchase a number of LEGO robotic resources in order to develop students knowledge and understanding of the digital technologies and design and technology curriculum culminating in two teams of upper primary students competing in the First LEGO League Competition 2018-19.

At the Term 3 staff development day, teachers will disseminate what they learned at a professional learning course in Sydney in term 2, which focused upon the Lego WeDo2.0 Robotics for Early years and Lego MindstormsEV3 robotics for middle years, to teachers in other schools.

The schools have agreed to share the purchased resources over 2018 and 2019 so that every school has the opportunity to use the equipment.

The priority for 2018 is that upper primary students will have the opportunity to use the EV3 equipment to develop their skills in problem solving and collaboration and partake in the First Lego League competitions where students build, program and compete with a robot, while also learning about a modern problem in science and engineering and developing solutions for it.

Younger students will use the WeDo robotics package. This resource links strongly to the new digital technologies curriculum, which encourages coding and computational thinking across the school curriculum and also provides the foundations to be able to effectively use the EV3 resources to further enhance their skills and understanding.

"This active learning process enables students to ask questions, construct their own understanding and explain their ideas to others," Ms Stewart said. "These strategies in learning serve as a foundation for life long learning.

"Students at Pilliga will be given the opportunity to access the Australian digital technology curriculum at the same level as students who don't experience rural and remote isolation.

"As 30 per cent of the jobs as we know them will not exist in the future — and this is already evident in places like Pilliga— the ability to use digital technologies will be invaluable for our students to ensure that they have future career opportunities."