LIFE LESSONS
Teaching our children well
WORD OF MOUTH

STRIKING A BALANCE
A Bonsai enthusiast provides clues about what works and what doesn’t.

DINING

THE BOATSHED
Judith Whitfield enjoys divine food in a romantic setting.

TRAVEL

CAPE TOWN
Chris Pritchard goes off the beaten track in South Africa.

ENTERTAINMENT

THE MASTER
Joaquin Phoenix is back with a bang, combining with Phillip Seymour Hoffman and Paul Thomas Anderson.

COVER STORY

LIFE LESSONS
Kahibah Public School, led by principal Pam Richardson, has an unwavering commitment to using Choice Theory.

FEATURES

DUN DEAL
Photographers Simone De Poa and Peter Stoop captured the essence of Mumford & Sons’ Gentlemen of the Road tour at Dungog last month.

CLAWS OUT
Fingernail fashion is soaring in popularity, led by hip celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Rihanna and Katy Perry.

Q & A

ROB HIRST
The drummer from Midnight Oil shares some memories and chats about the Essential Oils compilation.

Editors
Alyson Watson
Jim Keilar
Gina Cranson

Writers
Rosemarie Mills
Helen Gregory
Jade Lazarevic
Lisa Rockman

Editorial inquiries
49795974, 49795934
weekly@theherald.com.au

Advertising inquiries
Nadine Bidner 49795322
nbidner@newcastle.fairfax.com.au

COVER

Jack Watson, by Marina Neil.
Reading, writing and arithmetic are important but peace, love and understanding are paramount at Kahibah Public School. GINA CRANSON writes.

As I walk through the leafy school grounds snuggled into a quiet Kahibah cul-de-sac, a burly middle-aged man carrying something heavy a fair distance off bids me, unnecessarily, a very pleasant good day.

I reach the demountable office to find a chatter of ladies, all smiles and positivity, despite one of them in the midst of negotiating a (vegetable) "oil spill" — a generous quantity of said substance has just been used to free a child's finger from the clutches of a classroom chair and a mop-up job is necessary.

Not a molecule of exasperation in the young, spring air; just an "all good, lovely kid, let me show you to Pam's office".

Pam Richardson, or Mrs Richo as she is universally known, is the Kahibah Public School principal. A stylish mother of three and grandmother of 10, the softly spoken 69-year-old is sporting a relaxed ensemble of black flowing pants and blouse, open-toed shoes and understated silver jewellery that indicate elegance and functionality. But there's an ethereal quality, too, that is quite clearly sprinkling its wisdom and magic through mainstream education.

The door to her inauspicious office is open — as always, I am told — and I am warmly invited to sit on one of the comfortable armchairs for a chat and a cuppa if I would like.

I had only spoken briefly to Pam on the phone a few hours earlier to tee up an interview and was amazed that government protocol or unflinching school schedules had not somehow stood in the way of us meeting so freely and so soon.

It is only when we sit down and only by way of kick-starting conversation that Pam feels the need to ask why Weekender is even here. Quiet confidence has a beautiful way of negating restraint or suspicion.

Weekender has heard that Kahibah is doing things differently, beautifully, thoughtfully, and with great success. Pam is chuffed but insists I later ask the children and not just take her word for it.

CHEEKY GRIN: Aaron Handscomb, year 1, hams it up in the Kahibah Public School playground.

WEEKENDER PAGE
Before Kahlia, Pam was an assistant principal at a Lake Macquarie school where William Glasser’s Choice Theory and Reality Therapy had been introduced as a matter of necessity.

At one point there were 283 entries in the detention book in one term and teachers had identified 28 children as being capable of “turning the school upside down.” Something had to change.

The then principal and Pam attended a Choice Theory course in Newcastle and Pam shared this new knowledge with any member of staff who were interested to learn about the philosophy. After 18 months the changes were significant. The school had just 45 entries (most were multiple offenders) in what was now called the “planning room” and staff recognised only one child as being extremely difficult to manage.

“It was just amazing,” Pam says. “I arranged for two of the children to speak at a huge conference of executives (with parental approval and parents present). These children answered questions from the executives, but most poignant for me was when they explained detention. They said they were angry when they came out than when they went in. These were their words, not mine. They learnt nothing from the detention experience.

“They actually said that no one listened and then they compared it with the Choice Theory approach. They explained in quite some detail how they were now listened to and how they learnt new and different behaviours from discussion and how they felt they mattered.”

Thoughtful conversation and gentle guidance were succeeding where “crime and punishment” had failed miserably.

“I knew this approach was the best approach I had ever seen or practiced, and after 49 years in the teaching service I still believe it to be true,” says Pam, who has been an integral part of Newcastle Hockey Association for 45 years and has employed Glasser’s philosophy to great effect in various aspects of sports administration.

“When people are empowered to carry out their responsibility without interference they almost always do a mighty job. Same goes for kids.”

When Pam arrived at Kahlia as principal in 1997 it had been touted as a Choice Theory school, and while there were some elements of the philosophy working well, Pam was eager to have the whole school community on board, in every facet of its days-to-day business.

“When I first came here, everything was locked up,” she remembers. “I unlocked everything and said ‘Guys, this is what we’ve got, you are welcome to the resources, just let the office know if we run out of anything’.

“In a nutshell, we believe that if you don’t get the relationships right, nothing else will work. Teachers are professionals and need to be treated like professionals.

“We run the place as a team of equals. I’m no more important than anyone else, we just have different jobs to do. Everybody has the power to make decisions and all relationships in our school are based on trust.”

A core component of Glasser’s Choice Theory is recognising the basic needs of all. They are:

- Survival (food, drink, safety, clothing, shelter).
- Love and belonging: “Every person needs to be loved by at least one significant other to be successful,” Pam says.
- Power: “Not over people, but the power to do things, the self-confidence, strength and courage to take risks.”
- Fun: “Not just the ‘ha ha’ type but fun in learning.
- Freedom: “Not from something but the freedom to make choices.”

LEADING BY EXAMPLE: Kinder’s Saffron Francis, Joel Bancroft and Zoe Jones with principal Pam Richardson. Opposite page, Paul Seardon’s kindergarten class. PICTURES: MARINA NEIL
We actually have children teaching their parents how to become better problem solvers.

Having completed her teacher training in 1979, she moved to Newcastle from the Lithgow-Mudgee area to train in special education in 1989.

"My main area of interest was behaviour and I worked for eight years with kids with severe emotional disturbance. It was in this setting that I first encountered Choice Theory and Reality Therapy (CT/RT) and became passionate about the way we deal with children in schools," she says.

"When I came to Kahlia and met Pam (who also had a passion for Choice Theory) I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I knew that if CT/RT worked with the most difficult kids in the system, it was going to produce more successful outcomes with normal children.

"As most of my teacher training had revolved around stimulus-response theory (punishment/rewards) I never really felt comfortable with the kinds of behaviour management being practised in the schools at which I had taught.

Choice Theory fitted like a glove: we could actually teach kids (and grown-ups) how to get more of what they want and expect them to do the right thing simply because it is the right thing to do, not because they would get something.

Kahlia may appear from the outside as just another NSW public school but Maggie pinpoints a key difference.

"Probably what sets us apart from some other educators is that we believe that relationships are the core of what we do (as opposed to the curriculum).

"I remember one day a very agitated woman came up to the school asking, 'What have you been teaching my son?'

"She said that she had been yelling at him for his unacceptable behaviour. He had looked at her and said, 'Mum, I don't like it when you yell at me. I feel scared. I want you to talk to me in a calm voice.'

"My response? 'How good is that!' "We actually have children teaching their parents how to become better problem solvers."

There are parents who like to think of Maggie, strikingly outside the square with that flame-orange hair and those brilliant eyes, as a "child whisperer".

She puts this into perspective.

"I think what I am good at is helping kids (even very young ones) to have a say about the things which affect them, to learn how to manage their own behaviour to get more of what they want, to solve problems creatively and peacefully, and to have a go at the things that they need to want to do."

"Having said that, there could be plenty of kids who think I'm crap."

Lean on me: Kahlia’s Friendly Children (KFC) members Mason Weary, Joel Curtis and Nicholas Andrews (from left in yellow vests), all in year 6, with kindergarten pupils Noah Harris, left, and Luke Douglas.

Picture: Marina Neil
PARENTAL GUIDANCE RECOMMENDED

Lindee Hahn’s first experience of Kahibah Public School was when she attended a six-week Peaceful Parenting course there when her daughter, Hannah, was four and the family was living in Hamilton.

“At that stage we were looking at a number of different schools throughout Newcastle. Attending the course and hearing Pam’s philosophy upon which she leads the school was an absolute clincher,” Lindee says.

“Pam runs the course each year. It is such a wonderful bridge to support parents in understanding Glasser’s Choice Theory and our needs for love and belonging, power, freedom and fun – and how these are such powerful drivers for our children’s, and our, behaviour and motivations and happiness.”

Lindee, husband Adam Gregory, and children Hannah and Manning have returned to Kahibah after spending a sea-change year on a remote island in the Philippines.

“Hannah transitioned back into year 5 beautifully,” Lindee says.

“Pam and her teachers celebrated and shared the learning and experiences of her year in the Philippines within the school. There was such genuine kindness and concern for the academic ‘catching up’ she had to do, and flexibility and patience with Hannah as she returned back into a structured environment.”

Manning, who is in kindergarten, had in the Philippines thrived on a predominantly outdoor education in nature with practical materials (making bamboo boats and learning to tie knots with fishing line, building cubby houses and measuring materials, catching crabs and tending to roosters, carabaos etc) so a more conventional classroom education has been a little harder to take.

“However, the school’s understanding for his high needs for freedom and fun do help,” Lindee says. “He has a wonderful kindy teacher, Mr [Paul] Searant, who is very relaxed and extraordinarily calm and patient!”
“It is intrinsic, not extrinsic. It’s about being the type of person you want to be when no one else is looking.”

Is Choice Theory a part of Maggie’s life outside of school?
“I have one child (from whom I am currently estranged – her choice, and it breaks my heart) and five stepchildren. Choice Theory gets me through the heartache by understanding that we can’t control what other people do, we can only control how we react to it. That keeps me sane,” she says.
“Our kids range in age from 30 to 47. Each is a much loved and extraordinary individual. Although I think I did a pretty spectacular job as a parent, there would have been some things I may have done differently had I known this stuff earlier.”

Weekender leaves the school without having raised the subject of academics. It somehow seems, well, academic.

In a subsequent conversation Pam says NAPLAN results have been “very pleasing to us indeed”, with year 5 above the state and regional averages in every aspect of every test and year 3 likewise, apart from reading in which they were just below the state average and above the regional average.

“But I’m not so convinced that assessing a school’s value on the My School website is the be all and end all because there are so many contributing factors to what is perceived as success,” she says. “Results on this site are basically based on academic attainment in NAPLAN tests. From year to year a cohort of students can vary significantly with regard to academic prowess.

“What matters most is the social and emotional intelligence of students because these attributes (combined with academic ability) are really the key to success.

“No matter how intelligent one is, if one can’t relate to people, to customers, to clients or whoever, their employability is marginalised considerably.”

The nurturing approach at the school is all encompassing.
Each year the school runs Peaceful Parenting program for mums and dads of students attending primary schools in the area, as well as preschools and the local high school.
The course is held over six two-hour sessions and the content is aligned to the Choice Theory philosophy.
Pam, Maggie and retired principal Brian Collins conduct the sessions in their own time.
“Because we have seen first-hand the difference the course can make in the lives of the people who do it, I’m happy to share my knowledge and experiences with anyone who wants to come along for the ride,” Maggie says.
Pam has also run Choice Theory workshops in other schools within the region on request, and with Brian has run Choice Theory starter classes for about 20 primary schools in after-school staff meetings.
Reinforcing this approach, Kahibah has a values program in which a different value is treated in depth each semester. This semester’s buzzword is respect.
“Again this is used to help students understand what they are doing and how their behaviour affects others,” Pam says.
“It is intrinsic, not extrinsic. It’s about being the type of person you want to be when no one else is looking.”
In each Kahibah classroom is a plastic
THE SEVEN DESTRUCTIVE HABITS:
- Rewarding (bribing): "If you do this, then you'll get that."
- Blaming/shaming: "I'm so disappointed in you. I thought you could do better than that."
- Yelling: "I said, do it!"
- Threatening: "Do it or else."
- Criticising: "If you weren't so lazy, you'd do it."
- Punishing: "You can't watch TV for a month."
- Nagging: Being constantly on someone's back.

Weekender wonders, on behalf of parents everywhere, whether Kahlilah's gentle leaders ever feel like screaming. Is it really possible to go placidly all the time?

"We are all human," principal Pam Richardson reassures. "I'm not sure that I ever screamed but I know I would have used a strong voice at times, probably in my frustration. With Choice Theory, there is a belief that if you can be in control and patient, with many other positive characteristics 85 per cent of the time, you are doing well."

As a microcosm of society, though, the school does not function entirely without incident. A student has been suspended for 10 days in the week Weekender visits, and Pam is both candid and philosophical.

"There are times when suspension needs to happen," she says. "What is important is the resolution meeting that occurs each time a child returns from suspension.

"There needs to be a follow-up, either with a reconciliation, a restorative conference, social skilling lessons, or an anger management program run by our school chaplain. In some cases it may be multiple programs.

"We need to ensure that the child is strengthened through this process, that he or she doesn't feel alienated but rather feels connected through close and open conversation."

So back to the principal's insistence that Weekender asks the children whether the approach is working.

"School for me is a brilliant treasure trove," Tarryn (year 2) gushes.

"When I'm at school I feel happiness glowing inside me," Ella (year 2) reports.

"I love reading to the chickens. They are very good listeners - they always like your stories because they drink every time," Jasmine A. (year 6) offers.

"You go in hungry and come out full of knowledge," Eloise (year 3/4) notes.

"You go in as a Finch and come out as an owl," Dylan (year 3/4) observes.

"I think school is home," Bryce (year 2) says.

Hands down, kids. Enough said.