

SIMON'S TOWN SCHOOL

THE BIRTH OF LAWHILL

By

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The Voyage Begins

When I received the call from Prof Mike Inggs, towards the end of 1993, little did I know how significant our conversation would be. I recall feeling deeply honoured that he should ask whether I would be interested in applying for the post of principal at Simon's Town School. Having moved to Alexander Road High School in Port Elizabeth from Simon's Town three years earlier, never in my wildest dreams did I think that I would return as principal.

This is where the school's Maritime story began.

Prof Inggs shared his ideas of starting a sea-based subject at the school. Dwindling numbers, a pending new curriculum design (OBE), the exciting opportunity to become a truly integrated, all-inclusive new South African school and the challenge to create a unique educational opportunity were the triggers that were like manor from heaven. I simply could not resist and I was duly appointed as principal at Simon's Town School.

Navigating the Rough Seas

And so with a Governing Body that was fully supportive of the maritime concept, our vision drove the strategy and we began in earnest to investigate the possibility of introducing a new subject that combined education and training to equip school leavers with shore based and sea going maritime skills, necessary to ensure future employment in the maritime industry.

We had no money, I had zero knowledge of anything remotely connected to the maritime world, there was no curriculum and certainly no hostel facilities to accommodate out-of-town pupils who may be interested in the non-existent subject. But what I did have was a passion for education development and meaningful change; and unbeknown to me at the time, the fanaticism of people associated with the maritime world.

At the heart of our dream, was a desire to offer previously disadvantaged pupils an opportunity to aspire to a world that was, to say the least, nautical miles away from their current reality.

First Port of Call

It was certainly a case of what Michael Fullan describes as the 'ready, fire, aim' approach, although I recall not knowing what being ready actually meant in this instance.

My first port-of-call was to meet with officials from the then Cape Education Department curriculum section to find out what one needed to do in order to design a new choice subject that could be approved and included in the National curriculum.

The looks and initial cold shoulder I received clearly indicated that I was not being taken seriously. Undeterred, I badgered them constantly until I became such a nuisance that I began to receive the attention of the head of the provincial curriculum section. He pointed me in the direction of Dr Louis Kriel from the national department of education. Dr Kriel was an inspiration. He made a special trip from Pretoria and met with me at the school. He was

genuinely excited by the idea. Throughout the development of the maritime curriculum he was our mentor and ensured that the design met the OBE criteria and departmental requirements in terms of structure, assessment criteria and presentation.

Assembling the Crew

From the outset I was convinced that if we were to create a curriculum that was going to be of benefit to the maritime industry, then we needed to include influential experts from the industry to lead the design teams.

Mr Brian Ingpen, the then principal of Pinelands High School and a previous principal of Simon's Town School, met with me on numerous occasions. His love of maritime history, extensive knowledge of the maritime world and his obvious excitement about the concept were unparalleled.

His ideas of who I should see, where I should go and what I should ask were invaluable. We assembled the design teams comprising of high ranking officers from the SA Navy, key personnel from the maritime industry past and present (both shore based and sea going) and set to work under the watchful eye of Dr Kriel.

Two maritime subjects were submitted for approval at the end of 1994. Maritime studies A and Maritime Studies B received a thumbs up and were included as approved subjects for grade 10 in 1995, grade 11 in 1996 and grade 12 in 1997. We had achieved what many had warned was impossible!

Meeting the Mates

There were two initial meetings that would ultimately prove to be the anchors that held the concept together.

The first was a visit to the SAFMARINE offices in Cape Town. It was here that I first met Mr Peter James and Mr Tony Farr. These renowned leaders of SAFMARINE were generous with their time and gave me an opportunity to share the school's vision of the maritime concept.

I had my foot in the door, and wasn't about to let it close. I was introduced to their social responsibility team and was given an opportunity to learn of the many projects that they were involved in. SAFMARINE's stance was clear. They would support the maritime project as long as it catered for previously disadvantaged learners from the townships, and young people from similar circumstances from other provinces.

It was clearly non-negotiable; the school needed to provide a boarding facility for these learners. If we offered that, then SAFMARINE would come on board. I recall leaving their offices after umpteen visits, juggling the chicken and egg conundrum. I learned some years later that Mr James referred to me as 'Bulldog'. I hope that was because of my tenacity and not my looks!

The second meeting was with the DG Murray Trust. I sold the maritime concept to them and was given approval to submit a written motivation for funding. I needed money to equip a non-existent hostel, a non-existent kitchen, employ non-existent staff and purchase resources for what at the time was a non-existent subject. I think it was the influence of both the wing and the prayer that somehow persuaded the trustees to support the venture. A significant sum of money was deposited into Standard Bank for the school to use for its intended purpose. The bank manager was the designated curator of the fund. All we needed now was a hostel and pupils to fill it!

Setting Sail

The Simon's Town harbour (not the naval one) is a small, but active recreational space. Moored on the far side of the harbour was a ship known as the Cable Restorer.

Interestingly it was originally named the Bullfrog (a synergy of names perhaps) and later the Retriever. My wife and I were invited to a dinner function on board one evening and we were taken on a tour of the ship. It was during the tour that I had a crazy but strangely prophetic idea; perhaps I had found a hostel. The cabins were comfortable, it was clean and the connection to things maritime was extraordinary. I arranged to meet with the Simon's Town Museum who owned the ship and shared my thoughts regarding the hostel. A week later I was given the go-ahead. The first floating hostel in the country was launched. The SGB agreed that the school hall could suffice as a temporary dining facility for the yet-to-be enrolled grade 10 maritime studies group.

Securing the Passengers

I visited numerous township schools and cadet detachments in various provinces. By September 1994, we had enrolled 40 new grade 10 pupils as the school's first maritime studies pupils and the school's first boarders. We also employed the services of two full time teachers and two, part time maritime lecturers. We had also secured a partnership with SAFMARINE. The voyage had begun.

The school's woodwork room was no longer being used, so during the course of 1995, with relatively minimal renovation, but with extensive catering equipment, we created our hostel kitchen and dining facility. The walk from the Cable Restorer to school and back and to school and back again for supper, was fairly onerous, thus at the beginning of 1996 we created a hostel facility at the school itself. It was, to say the least, inadequate but comfortable. The school classrooms were used in the evenings as a study venue. We also employed a hostel master and catering staff.

Moving with the Tide

My visits to SAFMARINE continued, and I expressed my desire to create a hostel facility that offered comfort and space in a safe environment.

After numerous tours with SAFMARINE staff, it was agreed that we would build a hostel out of shipping containers. The relatively conservative neighbours and townsfolk were horrified to say the least, as they conjured up pictures of rusty, sea-worn containers piled on top of each other, being filled with people who were 'not white'. I recall presenting a talk in the town library where we unveiled the architect's model of the proposed hostel. There was much vociferous and hostile debate. Ultimately though, the plans were passed and the building of the hostel began. SAFMARINE orchestrated the donation of the containers, and procured the funding for the building of the hostel.

The Ship's Pilot

With the support of SAFMARINE, we procured the services of Mr Brian Ingpen to assume the position of head of the Maritime department at Lawhill. He assumed the position in April 1997. Under his guidance, passion and care the humble beginnings blossomed and bloomed into what you see today. Many young lives have found their purpose and the maritime industry has been blessed with the services of graduates from this outstanding, world class facility. Perhaps there will be others who will be brave enough to create new educational horizons and opportunities so that more South Africans can benefit from an education that is relevant, beneficial and socially uplifting.

A New Port

At the end of 1996 I was offered the principal post at Alexander Road High School in Port Elizabeth. A new vision awaited with new, exciting and innovative education possibilities that included the development and eventual introduction of Tourism and CAT into the National curriculum and the development of an extensive arts programme at the school. I arrived back in Port Elizabeth in April 1997 and remained as principal of Alex until my retirement in 2019.

Two roads diverged....
