

## **OBITUARY: Dr David James Stewart**

**30 October 1933 – 19 January 2013**

Based on the eulogy by Kay Tester, Principal, St Brigid's School, Wellington and Te Ariki Project Regional Director



Dr. David James Stewart dedicated his life to two great loves: his family and education. He was a man utterly devoted to his much loved wife Gaynor, was the cherished father of Craig, Kate and Tracey and adored grandfather of his ten grandchildren. David trained as a teacher and in due course became a primary school principal, academic, Education Centre Director, author of several books and researcher. Latterly, he initiated and developed the Te Ariki project, a professional development programme for school principals.

David was an inspiration to many, a mentor and a friend. As a member of his Te Ariki team I feel honoured to share a little of how he touched all of our lives and influenced our thinking as we worked with him on what would be his final major piece of work.

One might have thought that David had reached a point in his career where he could put his feet up a bit more but between the family engagements, delighting in the odd fine coffee and occasional excellent wine, going to the movies, reading widely and spending time looking after his treasured grandchildren, he still managed to keep up an astonishing level of input to school and principal development.

David was a man ahead of his time in many ways, not least of all in the area of IT. He left most of us in his technological wake. The ease with which he managed and used technology was captivating and I gather from studying his previous work, he's always had this aptitude. It wasn't just the way he operated the gadgets that enthralled us but the web design, the virtual learning communities and the web diaries he developed specifically for our Te Ariki project were mightily impressive.

David would sometimes arrive at a meeting with a new piece of equipment to try out. Not infrequently, the new gadget would originate from David's son Craig, an IT expert in his own right. He would take us on a whirlwind tutorial of how the new device worked and we'd do our best to keep up, but despite the clarity of his instructions and his infinite patience, it wasn't easy keeping up with David! He was senior to us all by a good couple of decades, yet he learned new technological skills like a 'digital native'.

His technological skills sat at the sharp end of the spectrum, alongside his acutely developed perceptual skills. I clearly recall the day when we were all having a telephone conference with David. We were on-line together and sharing the same computer screen. Wendy Bamford in Wanaka, Lyn Bird in Christchurch, Gary Punler in Palmerston North and Liz Millar and myself in our respective schools in Wellington. We were planning our Te Ariki presentation for a conference in Singapore. David had everything ready. He was midway talking us through how we could each take charge of the cursor and edit parts of the presentation, contribute new ideas and enrich our arguments when suddenly the cursor that had been firmly in David's control began to jump about wildly. David stopped and calmly said 'Oh I see someone's trying that out already, is that you Liz?' And of course it was!

We had a great time in Singapore and we were delighted that David's wife Gaynor was able to join us. By now, David had lost enthusiasm for the traditional 'talking head' style of presentation. He favoured the team approach, where we all did our bit. At the conclusion of our session he said, 'That was superb, just superb!' He had a special way of conveying the great joy he experienced from watching us present, seeing how we were interpreting his ideas, working with them and growing in our understanding.

After the conference David and Gaynor headed off to the UK to visit family followed by a trip to Spain and Spanish cooking classes that son Craig had organised for them. We were especially pleased about the cooking classes because at our next group meeting we were all invited for dinner. We got to taste the new Spanish dishes on the 'Stewart Menu' which were absolutely scrumptious and all served of course with the finest of wines.

Through Te Ariki David managed to pull together many threads of his previous work and we were the fortunate ones to share this journey with him over the last six years. He told me once that he enjoyed working with us because it reminded him of his days working with post-grad students. First there would be the group tutorial followed by the organised sessions where we would be allocated streams of work or special topics to present back to the group David would give himself sessions too. He once allocated himself the job of reviewing two important philosophically based books he was reading. I emailed David recently to say I had finally managed to read and then reread one of those books to make sure I could understand it. The book was entitled 'Apocalyptic religion and the death of utopia!' 'Fascinating stuff', he said. And of course it was once I could persuade my brain to do the necessary mental gymnastics to unravel the ideas.

The supreme gift David gave us as educators was the desire to take up an intellectual challenge and make sense of complex issues – to see education as an intellectual activity, where original ideas can still be created. To build a culture in our schools like the one he developed with us, empowering us to take his work and bring it alive in our own schools and with the teachers we worked with. This of course was the essence of his Te Ariki project. The underlying assumption was that teachers enjoy working together and interacting with one another so if we provide a context and a set of protocols which are supported by appropriate resources, we will get a higher quality of thinking applied to the work that teachers do.

David loved the energy and ideas that flow when like-minded people interact. He would facilitate our group with a twinkle in his eye and on the many occasions when we would veer off track, he would gently manoeuvre us back but always with a smile. It was a style unique to him and ever so endearing.

David was absolutely true to his beliefs about education. In his view school and principal development had to be achieved through liberal and democratic means. You could not be in David's presence without experiencing a sense that 'all's right with the world', and while there may be challenges they are not insurmountable. I was doing some reading recently and emailed David a quote that I said I was going to pin on my wall 'When facing strong winds, some build walls to protect themselves; others construct windmills'. My real message to David was to say that his work, his thinking, his writing is like that windmill for us – the right path to travel with a strong sense of hope and of moral and ethical purpose.

David was a good and very gentle man. To be in his company was an absolute joy. He will be so missed by us all but his ideas and his work will live on.