

Cowandilla Interview Part 1

Tina: Today we are here at Cowandilla primary school, which is here in South Australia to talk to the principal, Ms Julie Hayes, the Resource and Network manager, Mark Herbert and Cassandra who is a student on the ThinkQuest team, Earth Stewards. ThinkQuest is the website design competition where groups of students collaborate together on designing a website for students around the world. Today, Cassandra will be interviewing Julie and Mark, with regards to ecosystems and sustainability which is the topic of our website. So I'll hand over to Cassandra, who will start the interview.

Cassandra: So please tell us a little about yourself and the school.

Julie: I grew up on the river Murray in times when we had to be very careful of resources in particular water. I suppose that was the start of my interest in living sustainably on the land but since then I have attended a lot of the "Festivals of ideas" that are run periodically in Adelaide. I have followed the environmental theme and listened to wonderful speakers like David Suzuki and Stephen Schneider who was a Thinker in Residence after that. I came to realise that the planet is in trouble, in particular in relation to climate change, which I see as an overarching problem under which fits population growth, and exploitation of natural resources and problem with water. Those are the reasons I've become more and more conscious of our need to do something about the environment.

Mark: I became interested in alternative technologies for a while but probably got more on board after reading the book "The weather makers" by Tim Flannery. This really got me focused on the issue.

Cassandra: You are a climate change focus school. Could you please explain what that means?

Julie: Our staff and Governing council, so parents and students, went to see the Al Gore presentation, "An inconvenient truth" and I think that in very simple terms explained the global situation and certainly Australia's part in treating the atmosphere as an "unpriced sewer" to quote Schneider and I think after that the passion for saving the environment slowly grew, amongst staff and parents and students, slowly. We declared ourself a Climate Change Focus School because we wanted to do more than was offered at the time and we wanted to state our beliefs publicly and to begin moving slowly towards practices that help the environment you know, especially around the things that we could do something about, around water, consumption, waste and certainly around educating kids about the issues, both social and technical issues around climate change.

Cassandra: How has being a climate change focus school influenced the staff, students and the community?

Julie: As I say, I think that there is not much doubt in their minds that the time for action is now and all of us understand that the window of opportunity to do something significant around climate change is in the next 10 years. Staff have taken on the mantle of instructing students in all classes from Reception to Year 7 on the social and science issues involved in climate change. We have been actively talking to the Premier who is going to give us a wind turbine to generate some electricity and Governing Council have decided to put solar panels on the roof. We have done lots of things around the yard in the school environment to cut down our use of water and to save on electricity and increase biodiversity. Do you want to say some of the things that we have done?

Mark: Sure we have taken the old sprinkler systems that we used to use and replaced them with sub soil irrigation across the oval. Put in rainwater tanks, all over the place. We have got lots of them now, big 22,000 litre tanks which we use to flush the toilets as well as for irrigation purposes and replacing all of the non-native trees, with not just native Australian trees and plants but indigenous plants to this area.

Cassandra: Have you had any successes as a climate change school?

Julie: Well, the solar cities congress has just been held in Adelaide, this month, and last year there was a solar cities schools competition that we were encouraged to enter and were happy to enter. With the help of a local company and Mario Andreacchio, the South Australian film maker, our kids, with the help of Mark put together a DVD which talked about the initiatives that we had at our schools to save water, energy and improve biodiversity. We won the junior section of the competition.

I think it was a great process in that children had to really think about what we had done and then make a vision for the future of this school. So that had to use some of the information that they had learnt over the past 12 months, 18 months and put it in really easy to understand and practical strategies for reducing our ecological footprint.

Mark: So it was really their vision of what they wanted to happen as well, not just what we've done so far and I think that that was great.

Cassandra: That is good.