**World Teachers’ Day**

**Michelle Pipe**

**Urangan State High School**

**Announcer:** This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** World Teachers’ Day is a special day on the Education calendar. It’s a day we celebrate and acknowledge the hard work of our teachers. As part of our World Teachers’ Day celebration this year, we ask teachers throughout the state to share some memorable moments. Moments that make them think, I made a difference.

I’m Virginia Bowdidge and today I’m talking to Michelle Pipe from Urangan State High School. Michelle is a history teacher and is Head of Department for Humanities.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Hi Michelle, thanks for joining me.

**Michelle**: Thank you, Virginia, for welcoming me here.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Can I start by asking, why did you decide to become a teacher?

**Michelle**: It’s a big question. I love the idea of sharing and learning, and particularly history was my favorite subject at school. But as I grew up, when I left home, I joined the Air Force after school, and I went on my way and I think something occurred to me, I think, when I think I had my first children. I thought about what do I want to do with the rest of my life? What do I want to do when I return to work? And I cared very, very deeply about the way, young people viewed the world around them. And I think I wanted to be part of a journey where I can empower young people to plan amazing futures for themselves.

I think I was inspired by a quote that Nelson Mandala who said that *‘Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world’,* and when I looked around, I looked at you know my nieces and nephews, I looked at my own children (I thought) how can I be part of empowering that? And I think that’s what inspired me in the beginning. And I think as I’ve gone on it’s stayed true to me, that empowering students with education, provides amazing futures for us all.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** ow long were you in the Air Force for?

**Michelle**: I was in for 6 ½ , 7 years. I probably would have still been there for some time but it was, you know it puts that pressure on young families, moving around all the time. So, I made the decision to discharge and I followed my husband then around with his career for the next 30 years essentially but, I joined straight up from school my family has a very long history of military service and I felt a strong pull sort of to go in that direction and I joined the Royal Australian Air Force and was posted at many bases around Australia.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** It sounds to me like it would be quite different from teaching.

**Michelle**: It’s institutionalised in that regard, so I think there are some connections with teaching. [We’re very] We have a very definitive structure, like the military. Obviously, the discipline side of things, are very different but I think that the discipline side also gave me a measure of self-regulation as well and the capacity to be able to power through and the resilience to keep moving on with particularly if days are tough. I sort of draw on some powers I built from those military days to just have a discipline in mind to keep moving forward. So different in the sense of the type of the work I guess that we are doing but in terms of that life of service, I feel there are similarities there.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And what is it that you love about teaching?

**Michelle**: What I love the most is, the unique prospective that you can have on the world in working with young people and being able to share experiences. For me the core fundamental part of what education is all about is experience. It’s experienced-based education. And I feel that watching students light up when they connect what they’re been learning in their classrooms with something that’s real and tangible out there in the world, it doesn’t get any better when you can share that with students and you watch the lightbulbs go on for them to see well it’s not just black and white words in a book. It’s real and it’s breathing and it’s something that they can experience out there in their communities and around the world.

This year I’ve had the most extraordinary opportunity to chaperone students to France and Belgium to the Western Front for the 2024 Queensland Premier’s Anzac Prize. We were able to share Anzac Day with them at Villers-Bretonneux at the National Memorial there.

For me I felt all the effort that I put into becoming a history teacher had culminated in that moment and it was so important to be there and sharing that moment with students. I don’t think it gets any better for a history teacher. Doesn’t get any better for a teacher in general to be able to watch how that learning you do in the classroom just comes to life for them in that kind of experience.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** That really does sound like it would be incredibly rewarding.

**Michelle**: It’s an enormous reward. It’s hard to put into words, how much it has impacted me. I think as a person and as a teacher and what I’ve brought back to my role, in my everyday teaching career, is just a spark to see, where can I embed these experiences for the kids I teach every single day? So, I’m always looking for those opportunities.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Congratulations, it sounds like you had a wonderful experience being the chaperone.

**Michelle**: It was, it was extraordinary. I met the most incredible students. They were the cream of the crop. The other chaperone that came with me as well, the pair of us were just like kids in a candy shop with these incredible young people being able to share and engage with the history learning out there. It was amazing.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What is it about your job that inspires you? What makes it rewarding?

**Michelle**: The kids. In terms of what inspires me every single day, the students themselves. They’re the ones that have shaped me into the type of teacher that I am and it’s like everyday listening with them, engaging with them, digging in on those hard days. Looking and seeing the actual person in front of me and not getting bogged down in too much in the, what comes around in with developing lesson plans and making sure the curriculum is done and you’re creating assessments. Always being sure to actually stop during the day to look at these young people that are in front of me and connect with them.

It means the world to me to hear when the kids, students, say to me that they know that I care about them. They know that I see that little person in front of me in the classroom. As much as I am trying to empower that learning and get that assessment done and move us onto the next unit of work. They know that I see them at the same time as I’m pushing them through to work. Being able to engage them as well with these experiences as those connections build it creates memories for a lifetime for them. I want to be remembered in when they think back on their school days, that was a teacher who cared. That’s what inspires me every day.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What do you think actually shaped the teacher you are today?

**Michelle**: Definitely the students. Who they are, what their ambitions are, the stories they want to tell us every day. I mean, I do spend quite a bit of time with my classes. They just want to share their stories with me, about what’s going on in their every day. We do, we put pens down and we chat and we talk. We have those moments of sharing and that connection about what is going on in their lives.

It’s the students themselves that shape you as a teacher. If you let them and if you listen and if you adjust and change and reflect to the person that you have in front of you, it shapes into an all-round teacher. It gives you that capacity to be able to cope when those days are tough, when there are tough days you are having to deal with lots of different things, competing priorities, behaviour management, all those things that go into being a teacher in a classroom. When you can lean on the positive relationships you’ve built with the students, that’s what shapes you into the type of teacher that you want to be.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Were there any teachers that inspired you when you were growing up and went through school?

**Michelle**: Sure was. It’s funny to think back. I think very very early on, my dad was in the army so we moved around a lot. We moved from Queensland to Melbourne. When we moved to Melbourne, I was supposed to go into Year 3 but they weren’t sure I was up for the work. I had a beautiful teacher, her name was Mrs Canoski. For the first term of work she had kept me back into the Grade 2 but I think they quickly realised I was capable of the Year 3 work, and boom. They had a big ceremony in class where they put me up to Year 3 and I just remember the joy that she had in being able to tell me, *‘yes, we’re going to move you forward’*. She had a composite class, so I was able to stay in the same class with her. She was just a genuinly caring, loving, type of person that really cared about the little people that she had in front of her.

She stayed in my heart for my whole life. And then it was my Modern History teacher in year 11 and 12 at Caboolture State High School, Mr O’Brien. His passion for history and his passion for teaching history, I think is what instilled in me, a possibility for a future career.

I got very sick when I was in Year 11 and I took an enormous amount of time off but he was right there the whole way, making sure that I was keeping up with work if I wasn’t at school. Then when I came back, he would go through, one to one and show me where I wasn’t getting certain things right.

I like to change history. It was quite a funny thing. We used to have a joke about it. I used to see things, the way things should be. But he’d say, *‘if that’s it, where’s your evidence to show that?’* And, I’d say, *‘don’t worry about the evidence, this is the way it should have turned out.’* He was very, very patient to show me how you do history writing. How you write essays. I found, that that’s part of what’s come into what I share, is exercising that patience with students as well, when they don’t quite know. I mean I wasn’t the top level achieving history student but with his patience I learned how to develop my writing and that stayed with me. His passion for history has stayed with me all this time.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What advice would you give students thinking of studying teaching or career changers moving into teaching?

**Michelle**: Now, I was a mature-aged student when I went back to school, when I decided to, after I got out of the Air Force and raised my family and wanted to go into teaching. I was matured- aged when I went back. I spent quite a bit of time, I think it was ten years, basically worth of study, doing an under graduate and then a post graduate. So, as a mature-aged student, it’s never too late, is what I say.

What I think people need to be clear about is that, it’s that it’s not an easy job. It’s not just something you can walk into, there are so many competing priorities that go into your every day, that you really do need to have that emotional resilience. It can be very, very challenging, it’s demanding on your time, it’s physical, it’s mental, so you’ve got to be very resilient in being able to go in, and you’ve got to have purpose. Why do you want to be a teacher? And, I think that’s what you have in your mind, that when things become overwhelming, when it does become very busy you remember the human side of who you are in this profession and you take the time to appreciate the value and what young people can contribute to the learning in the classroom. Because it can be hard to see it on some days, when you are under that pump, and under that pressure. So, you’ve just got to have your why. Why do you want to do this and then sticking with it. And showing that resilience and being strong in terms of pushing through with your studies and experiencing teaching out there in the classroom for the first time. Making sure that your ‘Why’, is always at the forefront of your thinking. And, I think it’s an incredibly rewarding career, but it’s hard work and you do need to put in an enormous amount of effort into building your resilience for it.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Thank you Michelle, it’s such a privilege to talk to someone so dedicated to teaching.

**Michelle**: Thank you. I hope that comes across because it is where you have to devote yourself. A lot of people say it’s not what I do, it’s who I am but for me it’s a combination of, yes, it’s who I am, and yes, it is what I do but ultimately, it’s for a bigger purpose. I’m dedicated to a bigger purpose for what we do.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Thank you, that’s really lovely to hear.

**Michelle**: Thank you.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** The Department of Education acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the Elders, past and present, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.