

BARRY EBERLIN RUGBY AWARD : A HUMAN INTEREST STORY

William Gets | October 2016.

How to say “thank you!” after 30 years

That’s how long ago it was, when I stood in the KES quad for yet another assembly. It was a regular day with the usual prospect of classes, classes, classes ahead of me.

Mr. Bruce McMurray, the reigning monarch at the time, took to the podium and went through the assembly agenda with his usual solid thoroughness, conveyed in a tone set by years of granite authority.

Of course, my mind did wander. Heck, I was 17 years old, full of testosterone and standing in ... yet another assembly.

But then ...

The monarch used the word “rugby” and my testosterone radar picked up on it immediately. He was talking about a brand new rugby award. Interesting, I mused. An award that will be awarded to the scholar that showed the greatest dedication and enthusiasm to rugby but that was not in the first or second team.

“That’s a great idea,” I thought. “What a nice gesture.”

Also, the award was in honour of Barry Eberlin, a KES pupil, who died only 6 months ago (on 03/04/86) in a car accident.

Barry spent 12 years at King Edward Schools beginning at KEPS in 1971 and matriculating at KES in 1983.

He was a keen sportsman and represented both Schools at soccer, cricket and rugby. This was always with maximum effort and a great deal of pride in being a KES boy. His dad was a Parktown Boy's High boy and his brother Jeff was Highlands North Boy's High boy. You can well imagine the rivalry that this fact generated around their dinner table!

After matriculating, Barry was called upon to do his National Service and spent two years in an artillery regiment in the South African Defense Force.

Barry started work on the 3rd of March 1986 and was tragically killed in a motor accident one month later on the 3rd of April.

In an obituary in the King Edward School Magazine Barry was quoted as being a leader and sportsman in the true sense of the word.

A class mate earlier this year had this to say about him, "Barry always had a smile on his face, and was ready with a joke. Enjoyed his rugby and his football. A sad, sad loss at the age of 20."

It was with pride that the Eberlin Family presented this trophy, 30 years ago, in recognition of the spirit of enjoyment and team dedication; it was the way that Barry played his rugby at KES.

“That’s really special,” I thought.

“... and the first recipient of the award,” continued Bruce, “... goes to William Gets!”

Well!

I was so surprised, that with goggling eyes and much to the merriment of my nearby scholars, I let of a loud expletive that rhymes with ‘duck’! They patted me on the back as I made my way in a daze to the front.

In a daze? Yes!

Getting a rugby award at KES is a big deal. It is one of the most highly regarded recognitions a young lad can hope for and there I was in the spot light getting one. And a different kind of award. One with such meaning. One that I never would have thought I would get. I had no idea I was being noticed on the field.

I played hooker for the full 5 years that I played rugby at KES. Being slight of build to my uber-testosteroned rugby mates, I never made it into the higher teams but had a super time playing rugby anyway. And this joy was happily augmented by the fact that we seemed to win, practically all the time.

In my matric year, 1986, I was captain of the reverently nicknamed Fighting 5ths and we were a maverick team of misfits that fitted together into a formidable and feared team. We scored a total of 250 points against our opposing teams while they scored a combined, total of 50 points against us. The only team we lost to was Pretoria Boys. Respect.

So I loved rugby, I loved the Reds, I loved the war cry, the rapport and the team spirit! And to receive this award blew my mind.

And that’s just the thing ...

Standing on the podium were Stan and Nita Eberlin, parents of the recently deceased Barry Eberlin, there to personally hand over the trophy award. And me, in a daze, grabbed it awkwardly out of their hands. Stan said something to me that I did not actually hear while Mr. McMurray was telling me to raise the trophy above my head and the school was clapping and cheering. The moment is crystal clear in my mind, even after 30 years. It made a deep impact on me.

Next thing I knew, I was back amongst the pupils and staring at the trophy and then assembly was over and I was walking to first lesson and I guess Stan and Nita went home.

It was then that I realized that I had not made it clear to Stan and Nita how much this meant to me and a feeling a deep regret came over me. I should have given them loads of loving attention for being the catalyst of such a joyful incident in my life and from such a sorrowful incident in theirs.

But then life went on. Many a time I thought of that award and how much it meant to me and how I did not thank the parents enough. And life carried on going on.

Then years later I made the effort to attend the 30 year reunion of class '86. I live in the UK and decided to buy a flight and revisit my history at KES. What an experience! How astonishing to meet up with friends that you had not seen for 30 years and which, besides the paunch and grey hair, were still the same after all those darn years had gone by. For me, it was one of the best experiences of my life. Highly recommended.

During the chats and the beers and watching the Reds again, I happened to mention to Traci Gerber (wife of Johnny Gerber of class '86) that I was wondering what happened to the Barry Eberlin Award. Interestingly, it was very pleasing to hear how many people remembered the trophy and how many said that it was a very special award. But it seemed to have faded away in the mists of time. I mentioned to Traci that I had carried this regret of not thanking Barry's parents properly and was hoping to track them down to finally do just that.

It turned out Traci had used the same bus to get to her school as Barry Eberlin. This was the first coincidence in a string of coincidences. Traci took on the mission to track the parents down!

I then flew to Cape Town for a short visit there while Traci started her research.

Once I had returned to England I carried on doing my own research to find Barry's parents. After some time I came across a PDF for families that were suffering the loss of a child; a kind of support group, and saw Barry's name and the name of his parents. First contact made! But unfortunately I noted that the entry for Barry's mother was "late Nita". I was too late to thank Barry's mother.

Traci in the meantime discovered that Barry's brother Jeff had all these years worked for her brother-in-law's company. This was the second coincidence. Second contact made! Traci contacted Barry's brother and tracked down the sister too, Keren, on Facebook. Great news because I wanted to first scout the lay of the land; I did not want to pounce on Stan unannounced. Losing a child is no small thing, even after so many years.

With Keren's Facebook details from Traci, I contacted her, now living in Isreal, and we spoke. Keren was delighted that Traci and I were trying to track her father down. She knew that her father would be so pleased to discover how much this award meant to me. I suddenly felt very excited, sensing the possibility to finally talk to Stan.

I gave my Skype details to Keren and arranged a time to make a Skype call with Stan that next Monday.

Now I am not an overly formal person when it comes to dress, but before I called Stan, I felt compelled to dress appropriately and made sure I was well groomed and jacketed before I made the call.

I clicked on Stan's Skype name and there he was, father of Barry Eberlin, still resident in JHB and now on the screen, looking at me from 10 000km away. With my hairs rising on my

arms and neck and thanked him from the bottom of my heart for the award that was given to me, 30 years ago. What a moment!

A Keren predicted, Stan was delighted to meet me and we had a very long chat about KES, rugby, the trophy, Barry and the fun that Traci and I had had tracking him down. It turned out Barry also played hooker and that he was a team mate with my older brother. More coincidences. Stan sent through various images of Barry and the rugby team photos and sent photos of me holding the trophy, 30 years ago.

And you would think that that was enough of a story. But there's more.

I asked Stan about the actual trophy but he said that he had lost track of it himself. Traci went to find out at the school; her husband Johnny Gerber is after all the Chairman of the Governing Body! But the school said that they do not have the trophy anymore.

Maintaining her energy and enthusiasm, Traci took on Mission Two: Locate Trophy! She started out by contacting all the applicable KES groups on Facebook. Slowly and surely people came forward saying for which year they had won the trophy. 1987, 88, 89 and so on. Everybody said that they had returned the trophy to the school for the next recipient. I was again delighted to hear how many people expressed their deep feeling for the trophy, that it was such a 'cool' trophy to win.

Alas, the trophy, to date, has not been found but heart warmingly, many of the trophy winners offered to fund a new trophy, a bigger one too! Traci and I kept Stan up to date with developments and Stan insisted on being the one to fund the new trophy.

The new trophy has been made and those names that are known have been engraved again next to their applicable years. And so, the new Barry Eberlin Rugby Award was awarded to RICARDO DA SILVA at the Matric Valediction ceremony on the 18th October 2016.

May it continue to bring as much joy, as it did to me, all those years ago, and what a privilege to have been able to finally say 'Thank you'!