Interview with the Premier

Why did you start the Premier’s Reading Challenge?
I just love books! In fact reading is probably one of my favourite pastimes. So many parents have said to me: “Our kids spend all their time in front of computers or watching videos”. Not that there’s anything wrong with watching videos or computers or doing computer games, but wouldn’t it be good if they could discover the magic of books?

So we thought about setting up a reading challenge. It was an Olympic year, the year of the Olympics in Athens. So we decided we’d produce an Olympic theme – a certificate for the first year, then a bronze medal, a silver medal, and a gold medal. An Olympics where everyone can be a winner.

Then we went further, and thought: “Wouldn’t it be great, because kids have sports heroes, if we could encourage our sports heroes to go out to schools and encourage kids to read and also to read to kids.” So we asked people like Che Cockatoo-Collins from Port Adelaide, also Mark Bickley from the Crows, but also some wonderful Olympic stars like Juliet Haslam, famous gold medal winning (on a number of occasions) hockey player, and Rachael Sporn from basketball. And then Mem Fox, of course, who’s very famous, who wrote ‘Possum Magic’. So we got these Reading Challenge ambassadors.

So we were delighted that in fact the Reading Challenge in South Australia, when it was started in a fairly small way, became massive much quicker than we expected and there’s now more than 100,000 children involved every year.

Why do you think reading is important?
Reading is the key to culture. And I think literacy is so important if kids are going to go on and do well in high school, but then whatever they go on to do, whether it’s university, or just in their lives.

Just as important, is that there is this incredible magic world that is internal to you that comes through reading books. Through reading books, you can be in another country, you can be in another world, another planet, and another age – go back in time, forward in time.

I think I saw the joy that my own daughter was getting from reading ‘Harry Potter’ books and everything else. That simply can make this take hold.

So the thing that I have been struck by is the incredible enthusiasm of the kids, but also the great work by teachers. Teacher librarians are the real heroes of this scheme, because they’re the ones that really make this work.

There are so many books available on the Premier’s Reading Challenge that it means that there’s a great variety to fit anyone’s interests.

What were your favourite books as a child, or your favourite books that you read to your own children?
Oh, well when I was a kid, I was obsessed with Robin Hood, robbing from the rich to give to the poor, all that sort of thing. So I had this big collection of Robin Hood books, and also Worzel Gummage was another one, so they were my favourites as a kid.

With my own children, I know they loved (when they were really little) Mem Fox books. My daughter queued up at 5 in the morning to get the latest ‘Harry Potter’ book, and had read it by the time she went to school, you know over the weekend, so that she wouldn’t find out the ending from another student!

What kind of books do you like to read?
I love biographies, because I studied History at university. History was my favourite subject at school. So I read hundreds of biographies. Biographies about U.S. Presidents, like President Lincoln, or Roosevelt, or Kennedy. Or Prime Minsters like Winston Churchill or, in Australia, John Curtin. So I read a lot of biographies.

I like general reading as well, so I’m always about 20 books behind because I’m always buying books. I’ve got this huge library, I’ve converted a whole room in the house into a library with thousands of books, and I’m always about 20 books behind because I keep buying so many!
What other activities do you like to do in your spare time?
I like going to sport, and I’m also Minister for the Arts, so my favourite event every year is WomAd (WomAdelaide), that’s my number one event. Also the Adelaide Film Festival.

I’m also a Port Power, Port Adelaide ambassador, so I go down and watch the Power – they’re going quite well at the moment. I’m also very involved in soccer, although I’m sort of retired. My last appearance on the soccer field was so dismal that my son told me I was tragic and it was time to pack up my boots!

Who is your favourite football player?
Ah, now this is interesting, this one. My favourite Port player, who’s become a very close friend, is Che Cockett-Collins, who used to play with Essendon before he went to Port, and has actually worked for about a year and half on my staff. I also really like Mark Bickley. I think Mark Bickley for the Crows was one of the great players – he’s also a really decent guy, terrific bloke.

What was your favourite subject at school?
My favourite areas were History, Geography and English – they were my three things that I loved the most. I wasn’t very good at Maths, which is why I’m not the Treasurer!

Do you have a message for students participating in the Premier’s Reading Challenge?
My message is: I’m really proud of you! I think it’s fantastic that more than 100,000 students are involved in the Premier’s Reading Challenge. I love it when you come up and tell me about the books that you’ve read and the books that you’ve liked. So I’m very proud of you. Keep going, keep it up, and I’m really pleased that you’re discovering the magic that comes through reading. So, good on you and have a great year!