

BREAKING THE MOULD

Drawing on a tough childhood and deeply conservative schooling, author and educator John Marsden is passionate about teaching a different way.

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

Sitting on a verandah at his Candlebark School, John Marsden is surrounded by giants. Towering gum trees rise in a green wall around the grounds, 70 kilometres north of Melbourne, creating a sense of isolation and adventure. At 450 hectares, it's probably the largest primary school campus in the country, and John says there's a reason for that. "We want our students to be adventurous," the unorthodox principal explains. "Not reckless, but adventurous."

A former head of English at Geelong Grammar's famous Timbertop campus, John says children learn best from first-hand experiences. "Going to galleries, museums, performances, hiking, skiing, canoeing and camping – living in the real world, not just being told about it by some intermediary." Another key ingredient is exceptional teachers. "We want teachers with spirit and life and energy and a sense of perspective, people who have engaged with the world and who've had life experience," John says. "They've canoed down the Amazon, or written a book of poems, or they've composed pieces for the Australian Ballet," he says. "When you link those sorts of people with children, you don't have to do much else."

John admits his own childhood experiences were often not positive. Growing up in Devonport, Tasmania, the second youngest of four children, he says home life was far from perfect. "My father was a troubled man in many ways and certain behaviours by us would trigger very angry responses from him," John recalls dryly. It was a similar story with his mother. "She saw children as people who needed

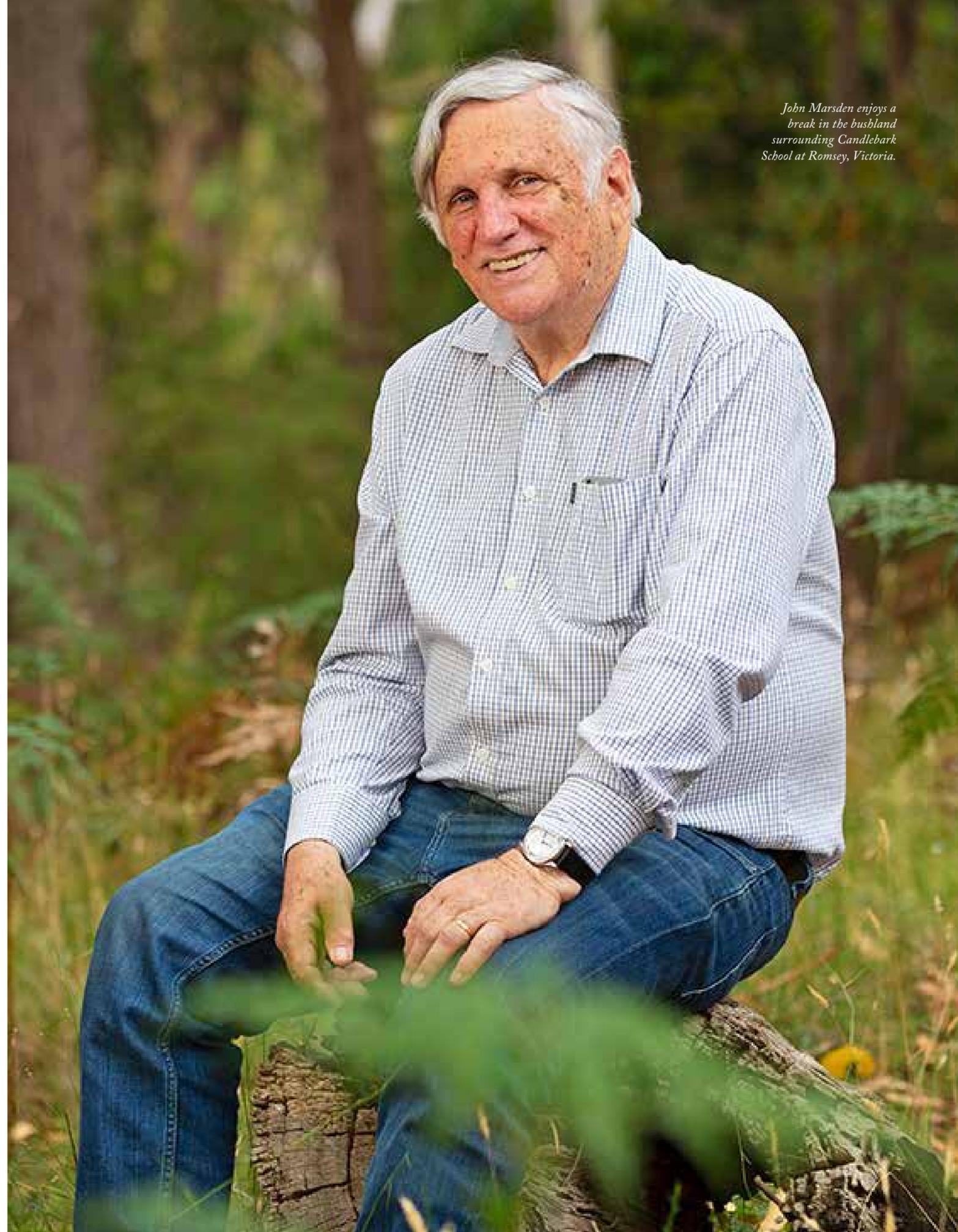
to be modelled into perfect citizens and there was a lack of warmth and affection in the way she interacted with us."

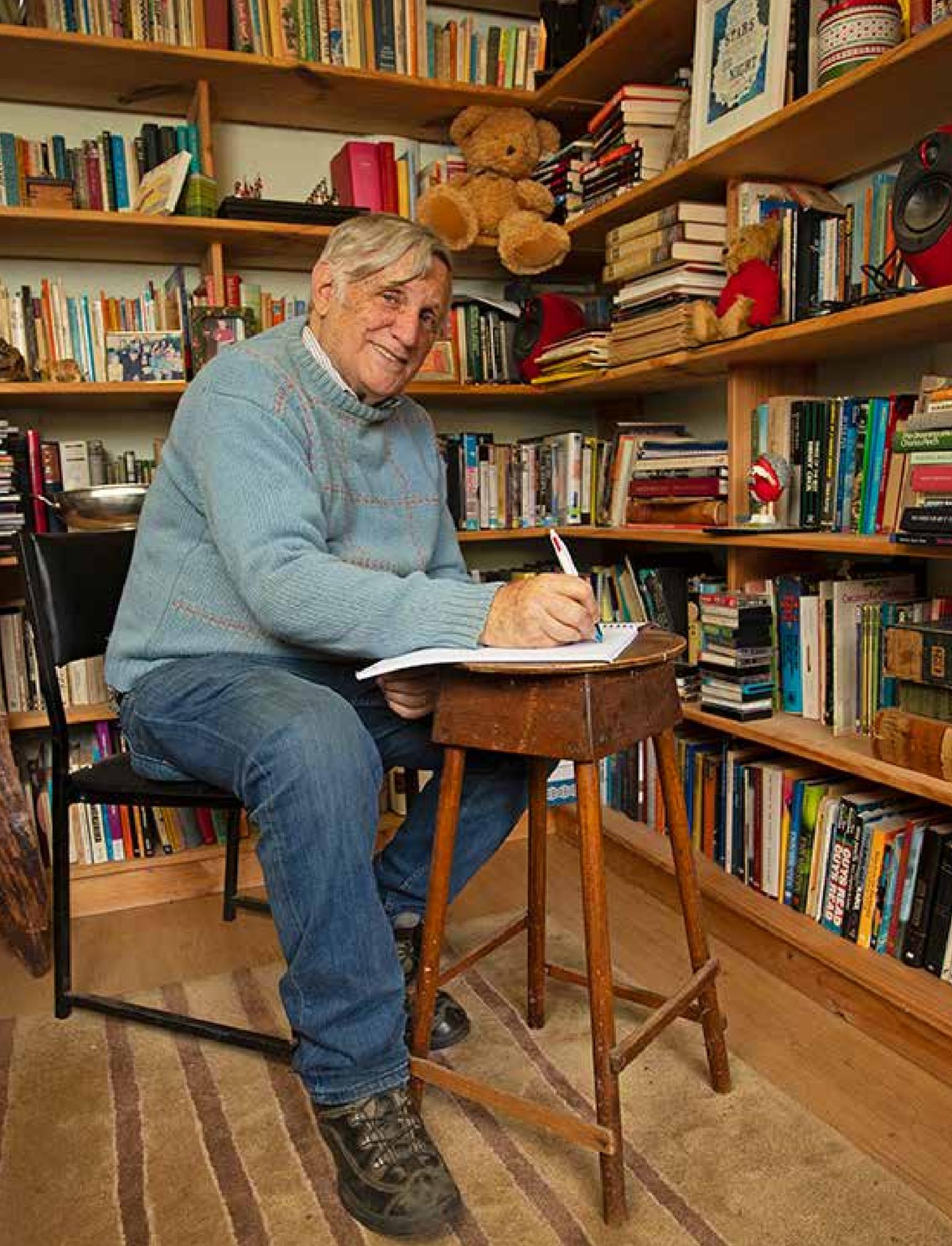
For those reasons, John and his siblings spent as much time as possible away from home, roaming the town's fringes and exploring the beaches and paddocks beyond. Books were another escape. "If I couldn't be out roaming the streets of Devonport or heading off into the bush, I'd be reading," John says, citing authors Enid Blyton, Tasmanian Nan Chauncy and British writer Geoffrey Trease as among his favourites. "I'd bury myself in those books, living in their world, oblivious to anything else."

When John was 10, the family left Devonport for Sydney to follow his father's career as a bank manager and, after finishing primary school at the official prep school for The King's School, John found himself enrolled in the prestigious senior campus at Parramatta. With the school's paramilitary style focused on discipline and rules, John says he found classes often "turgid and boring". "And if you were subversive, as I was, that attracted a lot of hostility."

Skipping class regularly, playing practical jokes and writing his own school newspaper, John did his best to distract himself from the dreary realities of his day-to-day life. Then, in Year 8, a pivotal moment changed how he viewed the world. "I was pulling books out of my locker to go home and I don't know what triggered it but this thought just burst into my mind," he recalls. "Maybe this school is really on the wrong path and the rules and all the stuff they're

John Marsden enjoys a break in the bushland surrounding Candlebark School at Romsey, Victoria.





ABOVE: John (right) and his brother Andrew explore the bush and dressed for cubs at Devonport, Tasmania, in the late 1950s. OPPOSITE: The author and principal in his school office.

telling us is actually not good advice, and maybe my parents are really toxic and destructive and maybe there's no God. And I just stood there feeling like the world had suddenly stopped orbiting, and everything had turned upside down and inside out."

Coinciding with his newfound world view, John discovered the subversive sounds of Bob Dylan. "Listening to Mr. Tambourine Man changed my life," he laughs. With new confidence, he made friends with similar students and orbited towards a small group of liberal intellectuals among the teaching staff. "Without them, I don't know what would have happened to me," John says.

A month after completing Year 12 he left home, leaving a message for his parents not to contact him. Working casual jobs to pay rent on a room in Kings Cross, John enrolled in Arts/Law at Sydney University. It didn't work out. "I found university overwhelming, alienating, unfriendly, and I just was lost." Five months later, with suicidal thoughts, he quit and sought professional help. "I went to a psychiatrist who slammed me into hospital at the end of the appointment," he says. "That was a painful time, but bloody worthwhile."

After another crack at Law School he again quit, tried Arts, quit, and for most of the next decade worked various jobs – motorbike courier, pizza maker, switchboard operator – before seeing a newspaper ad for a primary teaching course in Bathurst. It was 1978. "From the first day of the course, I thought, 'Wow, this is great,'" John says, grinning at the memory. "It was very hands-on and they had ideas, unlike the teachers I'd had at school," he says. "And they were teaching us very deliberately to be subversive, by saying, 'Get out into the system and change it.'"

Taking his first job at All Saints' College in Bathurst, John was surrounded by a team of enthusiastic and

inspirational teachers. He'd found his calling. "I felt like I was doing something meaningful and worthwhile and I could see the impact you can have on kids if you teach lessons that are interesting and engaging." From Bathurst he moved to Geelong Grammar, which included four years as Head of English at the school's Timbertop campus in the Victorian High Country. It was another career-affirming placement. "My years at Timbertop taught me that kids can achieve far more than I'd ever imagined," John says.

Friend and former colleague, Bill Montgomery, recalls John being well liked by his peers at All Saint's College. "When you meet John you know he's a deep thinker and he chooses his words, and he's got a really good sense of humour," Bill says. Having also worked with John at Timbertop, Bill says his friend's gift for education has always been clear. "He had a different approach in the classroom, an unconventional approach to teaching and particularly English, and he wanted to motivate the kids to write and reflect," Bill says. "He liked working with kids, and those who were difficult he found even more rewarding, and he had the patience of Job." Although some more traditional teachers didn't agree with that style, Bill says the results were clear. "Because they could see the kids really responded to him."

It was at Timbertop teaching English where John discovered a dearth of teenage fiction relevant to the current generation. His first novel *So Much To Tell You*, was written in the school holidays and published in 1987. John continued teaching, eventually returning to the main campus, where he worked for three more years before leaving in 1989, after publishing his sixth book. For the next four years he toured the country hosting writing workshops and speaking at schools.

Then, in 1993, John wrote *Tomorrow, When the War*



COURTESY CANDLEBARK SCHOOL

Students at Candlebark School doing bush carpentry.

Began. “And that changed everything”, he says, grinning. “The idea was to give teenagers a good self image,” he says of the novel, which follows a group of teenagers fighting a guerilla war after Australia is invaded. “I wanted them to understand that when you’re under pressure you can dig deep and find stuff you didn’t even know you had.”

The seven books in the *Tomorrow* series, and the three-book sequel series, *The Ellie Chronicles*, became household names in Australia, international bestsellers, and spawned a TV series and feature movie. He’s now published or edited 48 books and sold almost six million copies.

In 1998, John bought Tye Estate, a sprawling patch of natural bush on the northern edge of Melbourne. For eight years he ran writers’ courses and camps, and then, in 2006, started Candlebark, fulfilling a long-held dream of creating his own school.

It had another unexpected impact when he fell in love with Kris Rielly, a single parent with six children. “Her oldest, Fletcher, was the first student I suspended for poor behaviour,” John recalls, laughing. John and Kris are now married and share their home with the six boys. “Kris is a wonderful, spirited, active person with a wild sense of humour,” he says. “And the boys, who range in age from 14 to 24, are a delight – each one is so different, but they all have terrific personalities, and they’re great to be with.”

John says Candlebark, and its sibling senior school, Alice Miller at Macedon, were inspired by his own teaching experiences, and visits to the widely regarded

Fitzroy Community School in Melbourne. “But the seed had been there since I was 16,” he says, smiling in reference to his own schooling.

Although academic results are important, students at both schools are encouraged to think for themselves and make up their own minds about important issues. “We have kids who have a confidence that is authentic,” John says. “They have a quiet, strong inner strength that means they can cope with adversity and they can solve problems, which is very much at the heart of what we’re trying to teach.”

Head of Campus at Alice Miller, Sarita Ryan, who’s taught with John since 2007, says the principal inspires those around him by placing trust in them. “John gives staff a huge amount of freedom, and he employs people who he feels are experts in their field,” Sarita says. “And what that means is when new staff join the school they quickly develop this sense of the possibilities that are available to them. He also has a very clear vision that’s incredibly motivating.”

As birdsong floats from the forest around Candlebark, John remains as passionate as ever about creating an environment where children can engage with their world. Although today’s young people are much maligned for their preoccupation with screens and social media, John says they share an interest in the world that goes well beyond their own backyard. “Most teenagers are great; they’re lively, artistic, creative, and they have real compassion and real concern for the world,” he says. “And to see that developing feels terrific.”