

Breaking rules: Reddam House's unique approach to achievement

In the world of private schools where reputations are built over a century, one school in Sydney's eastern suburbs has been an enigma, writes **Jordan Baker**.

Midway through year 9 Murphy Pietraski quit her historic girls school, with its sweeping harbour views and stellar facilities. She didn't want to wear a regulation hair ribbon, or have rules governing her earrings. "It just wasn't the right vibe for me," she says.

Pietraski moved to Reddam House, a not-quite 20-year-old school squeezed into no-frills urban buildings in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

There, she could choose her jewellery and wear her shirt untucked. But she was also expected to maintain a grade-point average of at least 60 per cent, measured by a weekly test, and have her place reviewed if she slacked off.

Yet she was happier. "At a lot of those private schools, it's about how you look," says Pietraski, 18, who left last year with an ATAR of 99.75. "Here, we have more freedom."

In the world of eastern suburbs private schools, where reputations are built in sandstone over more than a century, Reddam House has been an enigma.

It made a splash: within a few years of opening in 2001, Reddam hit the Higher School Certificate top 20 schools, and has since become the only school regularly in the top 10 that does not require an entrance test. Last year, it also became Sydney's first major school to eschew \$5 million in annual government funding and become a fully for-profit enterprise.

Yet the school keeps to itself. "They're a bit of an unknown," said one principal, on the condition of anonymity. "They don't participate in any of our associations. I've never met the principals."

Among Sydney parents, however, early caution about Reddam has given way to enthusiasm. Last year, there were 170 applicants for 25 year 7 places. "[The students] love school," says co-principal Dave Pitcairn, in his

first extensive interview. "It's been a word-of-mouth thing."

Reddam was founded by Graeme Crawford, who built his reputation in South Africa in the early 1990s after ranking the educational establishment but delighting some parents with his intensive approach to teaching. "He made [students] work hard, he knew how to motivate them academically," says Pitcairn, who went to university with Crawford. "He'd get them into after-school tutorials. He'd push them."

Crawford founded many schools, including Reddams in Britain and South Africa. If they have a common creed, it's that all students must be motivated. Bad attitudes are not tolerated. "We have high expectations. Teachers don't teach to average, and we don't let students just coast through," Pitcairn says. "[That] translates into a good attitude in the classroom, it translates into preparing to the best of your ability, rather than not caring."

Reddam knows exactly how students are faring because of its weekly, 50-minute "cycle tests", sat by students from year 3. The tests, in a different subject each week, are designed to ensure the students achieve 60 per cent if they do the required work, but can score higher with extra effort.

For teachers, the test ensures students understand the material, have done their work, and are trying. For students, it creates familiarity with exam conditions, so the HSC does not seem so daunting, says Pitcairn.

But if a student does not achieve 60 per cent, "this is time to act," he says. "Phone the parents, chat to the student, put remediation in place... identifying if the student is able but didn't prepare thoroughly, isn't able, or didn't try."

A failure to try is the greatest concern, says Pitcairn. The school has a "positive culture... that can be broken



Miles Bornman and Marcus McDonald in a science class at Reddam House (above); Mia Achhorne and Tahlia Glasser in the drama space in the drama space (right); principal Dave Pitcairn with students (below). Photos: Janie Barrett



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down reasonably easily by the sort of students who don't care, don't come prepared, don't try, go into class and are disruptive and spoil the atmosphere.

"And those students are the ones I will counsel very, very seriously about, 'is this the right place for you? Change your attitude to what we believe is our culture, we are here to help you do that. If you are not prepared to do that, then it's not going to be the right place for you'."

To many educators, cycle testing "would be anathema," says one expert, on the condition of anonymity. "The general view of educators would be that it would be excessive or artificial." However, depending on how it was conducted, it could be a "time and cost efficient way to keep reliable data".

One principal worried that the school's response to sub-par results would leave students feeling dispensable. "Kids are not perfect. You can't just give up on them. There are messages that are important, and being dispensable is not one of them."

Pitcairn disagrees. "[Students] know that they are not slipping under the radar," he says. "And I think that works. Sometimes it feels oppressive,

but at the end of the day it's actually a caring [attitude]... they appreciate it eventually." At the end of the year, those who achieve an 80 per cent average get "half colours" – a form of piping around their blazers – and if they get 85 per cent, it's full colours. Those who achieve 93 per cent, or excel in sports competition, wear an honours blazer of a different colour.

Since it was introduced, those numbers have sharply increased. "Students strive for it," he said. "They like the recognition."

Reddam is divided into two campuses; K-9 classes are at Woollahra, and the year 10-12 students study at North Bondi. Neither has the kind of sprawling grounds enjoyed by other private schools in the area, limiting Reddam's capacity to expand.

The school uses venues at Centennial Park and the University of NSW for sport, and the North Bondi campus rents space from Galilee Catholic Primary School. Over the Christmas holidays, the school also purchased a building adjacent to the senior campus.

In kindergarten, admissions are decided based on a first-in, first-served

For seven years, Amber lived in Australia's feminist utopia

What was life like inside Amazon Acres, the women's commune in northern NSW? Mary Ward reports.

Amber Jackson is the only woman in her house. The 48-year-old lives with her husband and son in Annandale, in Sydney's inner west.

It's a circumstance that seems rather unremarkable, until you consider Jackson's life 40 years ago.

From age seven to 14, Jackson was raised on Amazon Acres, also known as The Mountain, a 400-hectare, women's-only commune in northern NSW with a fluctuating population of between 10 and 100 women and girls in the 1970s and '80s.

"Sometimes I feel like a bit of an imposter because I now come across as quite straight and conservative, but I don't feel like that inside," she laughs.

Jackson's mother Susanne first brought her to Amazon Acres for holidays when Amber was five years old, before moving there in 1979.

A single mother who came out as a lesbian after her daughter was born, Susanne had previously moved with Jackson from Melbourne to Adelaide where she became involved in a women's theatre company and the pair lived with women in sharehouses.

"It wasn't always a perfect situation, but ... she'd been a teacher and she had told me how ridiculously hard it was for her to teach because they didn't have anything set up for you to work if you weren't in a family," Jackson recalls. "When she found there were other women in her position as well, it was quite comforting."

In that sense, moving to a women's only, communal lifestyle "didn't really shock" Jackson, who will be speaking about her time on Amazon Acres in a panel discussion with the commune's co-founder, academic Kerryn Higgs, at the All About Women festival next month.

"Although I remember having the realisation where I was thinking, 'Oh my god this is going to be life now, we're not going to have any transport, walking for hours carrying our backpacks' ... because there was no



Amazon Acres in northern NSW; Amber Jackson with her mum at Amazon Acres, below. Photos: Kerryn Higgs



phone, or running water or power or anything like that, often you weren't able to arrange a lift. So, if you just turned up randomly, it could take two or three hours to get where you needed to go."

Once at the commune, Susanne changed her name to Zoe. It was a conservative option; other women took names such as Moonshadow and Jaguar.

"I think it was probably about shedding your old life, in hindsight it makes sense," Jackson says. "But I often laugh about it with my husband when I just mention someone who's called Compost and he's like, 'Oh my god, you have a friend called Compost'."

Women on Amazon Acres varied greatly in their backgrounds, an ABC Radio National podcast on the commune documented last year: there were gender separatists, public servants, academics such as Higgs, but also some women with little education.

Some used the place to leave situations of domestic abuse.

They lived a nomadic lifestyle, travelling on horseback, camping, building shelters when they needed them and going without clothes if the weather necessitated. Decisions were made by consensus, a governing structure which proved challenging on some issues, such as women having young sons with them on the property.

The commune was said to be defined by the "three Ms": no men, no meat, no machines – although Jackson claims to have sighted all three in her time there. ("A lot of the women were vegetarians, but it really more had to do with us not having fridges.")

Schooling for the children was "sporadic", says Jackson, noting that what you learnt could depend heavily on the woman whose care you were in at the time. "You'd be doing acrobatics and the next week you might be doing hardcore feminist history. Then the next week my mum would be doing meditation, and the following week you'd be doing women's anatomy."

Ultimately, Jackson decided to leave Amazon Acres aged 14, moving to a sharehouse in Marrickville with two young women to complete high school while her mum stayed at the commune. "A lot of the girls who were hitting teenagehood were a bit over it and wanted to leave," she recalls. "For me, I just needed a change and wanted to be out of the women's land."

The last full-time residents of Amazon Acres left in the 1980s, after the commune failed to become self-sufficient, although some visit and live in the area. (Susanne, now 71, lives close by.) The land is still owned by the co-operative, who told the ABC they would be willing to hand it on to the next generation if a group wanted to resurrect the commune.

"It was probably the best of worlds and the worst of worlds, in that it was very removed from a lot of normal society," Jackson says. "We had incredible freedom and we could just go off and get the horses and go off riding. We had a real independence about us that people 100 years ago had ... [it] was very freeing and I miss that in a lot of ways."

Now mother to Monte, 9, Jackson says she does not think being raised in a women's only environment necessarily impeded her ability to associate with men, although she says it has guided her in the men she has chosen to be with in her adult life. "I guess I find it a bit hard living in a patriarchal world, I do, because I was raised without that and I do notice how badly it's skewed in society," she says. "Hopefully I get Mont questioning things."

Amber Jackson will be speaking on the panel "No Men, No Meat, No Machines" at the All About Women Festival at the Sydney Opera House on March 8.



basis, and those students move through to the high school. But for intakes in older years, the school takes into account elements such as the child's past academic performance, and their motivation for learning.

Critics say Reddam practices a form of selection through its cycle testing and admissions process, even though it has no entry test. "There's no magic in schools," says one.

But Pitcairn says students are chosen for their aptitude, rather than their results alone. "I look at the all-round child," he says. "More than academic achievement, I'm looking at academic attitude and aptitude. Enthusiasm, their attitude to learning."

Reddam's fees range from \$21,835 for kindergarten to \$34,995 for year 12, similar to fees for St Catherine's at Waverley (\$35,873) and Knox Grammar (\$34,770).

Eschewing the \$5 million in government funding allowed Reddam to become part of the Inspired group, a global association of 63 schools – all of them for-profit, and many founded by Crawford. The school had been constrained by its not-for-profit status from participating in many of the group's activities, so decided the \$5 million annual sacrifice was worth it.

"We run the school efficiently, there's not a lot of grounds to manure," says Pitcairn. "We felt we were a poor cousin to all these other schools getting together, and having exchanges."

Being part of that global network will give Reddam Sydney access to Inspired's international programs such as a partnership with Berklee College of Music in Boston, and a deal with Crimson, a company that helps students apply for international universities.

James Zheng, 18, arrived from China when he was in year 9, and graduated Reddam last year with an ATAR of 99.95. Back in China, the pressure was external. "Teachers would pressurise you into studying," he says. At Reddam, "you have to put the pressure on yourself. It suits me better."



A unique life: Amber Jackson with her son Monte. Photo: Janie Barrett