

Transcript of interview with Tim O'Connor about Fred the Cat

Helen: Today is Friday 3rd June 2011 and I'm meeting with Tim O'Connor of Ultimo College, TAFE NSW, Sydney Institute, formerly known as Sydney Technical College. As part of the 120 year celebration this year and the popular local history tours conducted by Norm Neill, there has been a huge interest in the little known statue of Fred the cat which is located Building A, Mary Ann St. So could you tell us about Fred the cat please?

Tim: When I first came here in the mid 1976 and part of my lock up run which is what we did in those days, we came and locked up a run of buildings which hasn't changed. Fred the cat was the chief potentate of the building. He walked around with a swagger that no senior executive could emulate. He walked unchallenged throughout the College, but he also had his home in Building A. Building A had old style gas fires and he would command a position in front of a gas fire in the executive suite of the first floor and when he finished sleeping for most of the day, he would walk around and inspect the rest of the College.

Tim: In those days there were very few women working in Building A. It was an executive area and they were mostly support staff. And the thing in those days too people could smoke. And they had smoker's trays placed regularly along the corridor where one could stub out your cigarette and Fred had acquired an amazing skill of going to the bathroom with unerring accuracy into the sandpit. The males, of course, thought this was hilarious and was very keen to point it out to anybody that was passing by. And times have changed now. The first time I ever saw this was at the back door of Building A, where he straddled the stormwater grate and he aimed perfectly and executed very quickly the 'task' of the day. Senior staff would wait for him to finish before they walked through the back door. This was actually my first introduction to Fred the cat.

Tim: He (Fred the cat) was regularly cared for by Joy McMasters who was Senior Head Teacher in Hairdressing and we (in Security) had regular deliveries of meat which had to be put out at several places for the cats. We had to ensure the cats were fed and report back if they needed a vet or if they were not well and then we had to go and check them. We believe by rumour that Fred was able to live till 18 years. I'm not sure of this because most cats don't live past 12 (years). But he lived to certainly a long time and when he died he was found and brought back to Joy McMasters. I can remember doing this - we found a sack that held nuts and bolts for scaffolding and we placed him in the sack and we buried him. I actually buried him. We thought because he was the College cat and Building A was where he lived that in those days. So we buried him in the sack and we all stood around and we had a moment's silence and Joy wanted to know where he was buried, so we went and

MORE THAN YOU IMAGINE

took her to the site. She got on very well with the people who were restoring Building I and the stonemasons were teaching a trade course there, so they made sure the location was correct and we said it was. In those days the garden was overgrown and nobody would have said anything, nobody would have seen anything. At that time, they made up a sandstone plinth, a base. They made a very, very good copy of cat in repose sitting and waiting or sitting and looking. This was such a nice item, that it got stolen shortly afterwards, I presumed, by Saturday night revellers. The stonemasons made another one which wasn't quite as good a copy, but using the same stainless steel pinning from one to the other and that got pinched again. So the third statue was in fact bought from a garden supply company and has been Araldited [glued] to the plinth and that one survived.

Helen: Would you know how he got his name, Fred?

Tim: No – he was always called Fred the cat.

Tim: He was a very big cat.

Helen: He was very well fed?

Tim: No – genetics. He was different from other cats and we had no other cat that was like this. The thing was that he would follow the security guards around when they did their patrols. He would greet them and he knew when they were coming and he waited for them and would be fed at the same time. He had a sense of time and he had a sense of location. He would walk around and he was in fact more like a dog than a cat. He was smart enough to know that you didn't have to go up the steps when you were checking doors upstairs on the external balconies and things like that which they had so many of when I first came here. He would wait for you to come back down the stairs and continue on the ground level. All the guards had the same route, you had to do a door check to make sure everything was okay and he continued on that way. Most unusual cat – he was very perceptive, very affectionate cat, but he held his own position while still being affectionate. By being nice to you, he was obviously granting largess. He was a most amazing cat. A solid tabby cat, very big built, very strongly built.

Helen: That's a fascinating story Tim. Thank you very much for making yourself available. I'm glad we can keep this information in remembrance of Fred the cat.