



## ACK Story: Brendan Condon

### ***1. For how many years were you at Assumption College Kilmore?***

I attended ACK in 1984 and 1985. There were 6 boys in my family and my parents gave each of us the opportunity to spend our final 2 years at Assumption. I jumped at the opportunity and had a wonderful time as a boarder.

### ***2. You have achieved a lot since leaving Kilmore; Can you share a brief overview of the past few decades of your professional life?***

Initially, I studied Criminology at Melbourne University, but it was never my passion. I have always had a strong interest in the environment and in 1997 I identified an opportunity to combine business and my passion and started my first company, Australian Ecosystems. In the 20 years since, my team of 50 staff and I have grown and planted over 35 million trees, grasses and shrubs as part of restoring wetlands, grasslands, forests, coastal habitat and recreating green spaces in and around Melbourne, protecting our waterways and adding to the liveability and biodiversity of our city.

In 2008, I was part of starting another company, Biofilta. We began designing and building large stormwater harvesting systems around Melbourne and Australia, to help “drought-proof” our cities. Our systems are positioned under roads and parks, to avoid taking up valuable public space, where they intercept underground pipes and drains to harvest the abundant stormwater running off city roads and rooftops every time it rains. Our systems filter out trash and pollutants and hold as much as 5 million litres of water! We then divert hundreds of millions of litres of filtered water into city parks and green spaces, helping to preserve our precious drinking water and cooling our cities in the process. In 2015, the City of Melbourne judged our Biofilta stormwater harvesting system as one of the top 64 designs ever developed in Melbourne, alongside the Sherrin football and black box flight recorder.

With most of the world’s population now living in cities, we also focus attention on growing food in cities. We have invented modular, self-watering, pop-up farms that are installed on rooftops, carparks and in backyards, diverting surplus rainwater runoff and waste stream organics into closed loop urban farming. We are also supporting Australian Government aid projects in remote countries, like Tuvalu (Pacific Islands), to help overcome the issues of soil contamination caused by rising seas.

In addition to this, I have been fortunate to be part of designing and building Australia’s first carbon neutral/zero emissions housing project near Phillip Island. When complete, the estate will consist of 230 energy efficient homes that are attractive, affordable and in many cases eliminate energy bills completely. The Cape Paterson project demonstrates how Australian communities can eliminate the use of fossil fuels, and move to a lower cost and cleaner energy base. All of these projects are profitable, create employment and stimulate economic activity, pushing Australia towards a sustainable and carbon neutral future.

### ***3. Did your time at ACK influence your passion for the environment or help prepare you for your current role?***

My interest in the natural world started in early childhood, but my interaction with a broad range of students, teachers and Marist Brothers at Assumption helped to build my confidence and self-belief in pursuing my goals. Brother Mark O'Connor, who was our dorm master, was an extremely positive influence. We enjoyed lots of great discussions and debates, which covered a wide range of diverse topics. I left ACK with a great scholastic education, but an equally important broadening of the mind on global issues.

### ***4. How do sustainable systems and projects, as well as natural resource management, benefit current and future generations? Why is this so important for all of us?***

We have a fairly simple decision to make. We either learn to operate our lives, communities, businesses and food systems within the carrying capacity and constraints of our biosphere, or we have a very limited future. The choice is ours to have a brilliant quality of life and ensure the same for following generations or continue chewing up all of our natural capital (clean air, clean water, clean soils, functioning ecosystems) and exhaust these finite resources.

### ***5. Some people believe success is merely a product of luck and coincidence. Looking back on the obstacles you have overcome since leaving Kilmore, and all you have achieved, would you agree with them?***

I believe the 'luck' algorithm is comprised of self-belief, hard work, personal resilience, good research, willingness to step outside of your comfort zone and a preparedness to take calculated risks. My family didn't have lots of inherited wealth but that wasn't a setback. Australian Ecosystems started with some solid research and a small loan from from my mum, grandmother and oldest brother. The one thing we did not lack, however, was determination and an unlimited overdraft on the bank of perseverance. We had an ability to work through the inevitable setbacks that confront all start-up ventures. Having a life partner who is able to weather setbacks is also invaluable. I owe a lot to my very patient partner Marie, who rolls up her sleeves and gets involved in everything.

Australian culture often frowns on failure; but failures and their associated learning's, pave the way to future success.

### ***6. What values are most important for you to live by?***

I am deeply committed to doing whatever is possible to leave our earth in a fit state to support a good life for the next generation (and the 20 generations following!) We can do nothing to change the past, but everything to protect the natural world and our quality of life, which are both connected. Achieving this will require cooperation, generosity, restraint, discipline and forward thinking amongst all people. Our report card so far as a species is not good, but I am optimistic we can improve greatly in the future.

### ***7. Which people have had the most influence on your life and why?***

First and foremost has been my family. My family has been the cornerstone to everything I have in my life – good health, support and confidence to have a go. My ACK friends and teachers have all been important contributors. I have been fortunate also in my career to have encountered inspirational people to learn from – people who look beyond narrow self interest and have a mindset to leave the world a better place. There are many innovators and trailblazers, investing money and effort, moving beyond their comfort zones and tackling the big challenges confronting our planet –these are the people who really inspire me.

***8. When will you consider yourself and your team to be successful?***

Although our teams have achieved very positive results, Australia still faces multiple overlapping challenges, such as climate change, water scarcity, topsoil loss, plastic pollution, deforestation and environmental degradation, which require urgent prioritization at every level of society. I will deem ourselves to be successful when we see measurable improvements in addressing climate change, when people are more food and water secure, when we start rebuilding biodiversity, and when we are alleviating poverty in Australia and on the world stage. We know the solutions to these problems and we have the resources to do so. We just need to overcome the present apathy towards implementing the required changes.

***9. Is there a particular failure you remember most vividly? What did you learn from the experience?***

Although not a failure, the Cape housing project took us a decade to get through local and state government bureaucratic hurdles. We were formally rejected numerous times and we barely survived the experience. It was extremely depressing and the personal financial stakes were very high. I had to dig deep and weather the stress and uncertainty. I learned during the process of the importance of friends. I recall leaning heavily on the support and counsel of three people in particular – my partner and two old buddies. In the end we prevailed and the Cape has since won the Victorian Premiers Sustainability Award and various national awards for industry leadership, house design and is a model for building sustainable communities. I learnt that if you fully commit to something you can overcome most obstacles.

***10. If you had one piece of advice to share with the current Year 12 ACK students preparing for life after school, what would it be?***

Never let failure deter you. You are allowed to make mistakes. In fact, mistakes are your best teacher. Don't be in too much of a hurry. Take your time to get some broad life experience when you are young - travel is a great way to broaden your horizons. Spend time in other cultures; particularly cultures that have been around for a long, long time. Finally, select a career that feel you can be passionate about, then you won't feel like you are "at work". If possible, pick a career that helps to contribute to the livability and health of our world. There are great careers and livelihoods to be made in new emerging clean tech and sustainable industries, such as renewables, sustainable agriculture and energy efficient construction. The smart money is increasingly being invested in these areas. The world is your oyster!