

Nota Bene

Justice at the Fort

Recently, Fort Street had the pleasure of Justice Michael Kirby visiting and speaking to the school. Katherine Ngo takes time out to meet the high court judge in person.

Nota Bene: What would a day be like in the life of a high court judge?

Michael Kirby: It's hard work. It starts at about five o'clock in the morning, and you go into your office very early. You read the papers for the case for the day, and you go to court, and you ask a lot of questions during the day. And after your day, you have a meeting with the other justices to decide how you're thinking about the case, and then subsequently you have meetings with your staff. You talk about the matter. After that, you'll probably have to go to a function at a university, or some other body, and about ten o'clock or ten-thirty at night, you collapse into bed. But at least it means you don't have to watch television. It's a very hard life, and it's seven days a week. It never lets up. That's what they meant at Fort Street by striving and achieving and trying to do your best.

NB: What would you do if you weren't a judge? Did you have an alternative dream career?

MK: Well, I wasn't holy enough to be a bishop, I wasn't good enough at mathematics to be a scientist, I wasn't patient enough to be a teacher, so by process of elimination, I ended up in the law. But at Fort Street, I came first

in the state of New South Wales in the leaving certificate in Modern History. And I think if I had my life over again, I might be a professor of history, because I love history, and in my spare time, I never read law; I read history books.

NB: What can't you say no to?

MK: I can't say no to work. I can't say no to requests to come to the school or to go to interesting functions. I launched a wonderful book recently by Nance Irvine, and it was very crowded at the Glebe bookshop. There were hundreds of people, and it was a great occasion, so I have lots of friends in this country and overseas, and I am going tomorrow to Montreal in Canada for a meeting of

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the International Bioethics Committee, which is going to be looking at the issue of the human genome. So my life is full of very interesting activities, but it's a lot of work, and in life, you don't get anywhere by sitting on your bottom. You've got to get up and get on with it, and strive to achieve and make the world a better place. This isn't triumphalism. This isn't the triumphalism that existed when I was at school. This is service to other people, trying to make the world better, especially for minorities, especially for the disadvantaged. That's our duty as educated, civilised people.

NB: Do you have any words of wis-

dom for those who want to go to law school?

MK: The most important thing in life is to live a full, rich and happy life, to find a companion, or companions in life who love you and who you love and to make the most of the very precious gift which life is. But one aspect which improves the lives of clever intelligent people is if they are fulfilled in the work they do. Therefore, it is important to strive and try to make the most of your gifts.

NB: What would you do if you had only ten dollars, like your last ten dollars? What would you do with it?

MK: I would give it to the poor. I go to India quite often, and in India there are many beggars, and I once

wrote to my mother, I will never give money to the beggars because if you give money to the beggars, you will only encourage them. My mother wrote me a very wise letter and said that it's a stupid thing to say, because it doesn't hurt to give something to other people. I think she was right and I was wrong, and if I were in India, I will try to help others. That's what I learnt at Fort Street. Help others.

The full transcript of the interviews with Justice Michael Kirby and Mr George Rezcallah will be available at <http://intrepix.tripod.com/> from December 22. Please note that this site is operated independently of the school.