

Glennelg school farewells two special buddies

JENNY BRINKWORTH

Graduating from primary school is a milestone in the life of any child but it was especially significant for St Mary's Memorial School Year 6 student Enzo Cornejo.

There was a time when Enzo's parents seriously doubted whether he would be able to attend school due to his rare rapid-aging condition, Progeria, which causes fragile bones, restricted growth and lack of body fat.

Progeria occurs in an estimated 1 per 20 million people worldwide and Enzo is the only case known to be living in Australia.

He might be small in stature but Enzo has a big personality and has made a huge impression on the school community, including principal Nat Izzo who is also leaving the school this year after 16 years as principal and 43 years in Catholic education.

At a recent Sunday Mass at Our Lady of Victories Church, Glennelg parish priest Fr John Herd expressed his thanks to Mr Izzo on behalf of the parish and Enzo made a speech as well.

"There are people who come to this world to make a difference, and Mr Izzo is definitely one of them, and lucky me, his biggest achievement is creating a very unique and inclusive school, where kids with special needs can enjoy school in a safe place where everyone is accepted," Enzo said.

"Your team was so special, between teachers, staff and parents you have created a very special community here at St Mary's Memorial School where we all care about each other."

Enzo's mum, Catherina Llonop, said when she and her husband Percy Cornejo took their only son for a tour of St Mary's Memorial School, they immediately felt welcomed.

"When we met Nat, he was wonderful," she said.

"We always wanted him to go to a Catholic school – we are Catholic – but we didn't know how he would go being so small, there could be an accident, it could be dangerous, but everything worked out."

Even during COVID Enzo only missed only five weeks of school after the doctors and the school came up with a plan for him to return. Catherina said those five weeks were "the worst time of his life".

"Other than that, he's missed some days due to illness but he's kept up and he's never had a day when he hasn't wanted to go to school, and he's never been bullied," she said.

Catherina and Percy migrated to Adelaide from Peru in 2007, four years before Enzo was born, and they said the school community became "very important" because they had no family here.

Mr Izzo, who also spent 10 years as principal at St John Bosco and 10 years deputy at Star of the Sea, said Enzo's enthusiasm and positive attitude was "heartening and infectious".

"His appearance and restricted shortcomings do not impact on his vivacious spirit and personality," he said.

"When students and staff interacted with Enzo, we acknowledged that he was part of our school community, and so we treated him with the same respect and dignity that we would show everyone else."

Mr Izzo said if there was one lesson he had learnt from Enzo, it was the belief that obstacles are a normal part of life and that "with the support of a loving network we can manage them and often be better for having had the experience".

"I have witnessed Enzo not give up and accept what has been dealt to him and make the most of the opportunities that have come his way," he said.

"Most experiences regarding Enzo, and especially those issues raised by his parents, have pulled

me out of my comfort zone and have plunged me into the unknown.

"In spite of this, as I do in most circumstances regarding the students in my school community, I make my decisions based on what I would want for my own child."

Mr Izzo admitted it hadn't always been a "stress-free journey" from when Enzo first started school as staff watched his health "spiralling precariously" as he dealt with the consequences of Progeria.

Having a full-time education support officer for Enzo had contributed to him "thriving" and he acknowledged the school board for agreeing to ESOs in every classroom.

He added that there were many more children who would benefit both academically and emotionally if educational systems invested in extra classroom support.

With Enzo heading to Sacred Heart College Middle School next year, Mr Izzo praised the way the college had been assisting the family in his transition.

[Learn more about Enzo and Progeria at TeamEnzoProgeria.com](https://www.teamenzo.org.au)



MOVING ON: Enzo and Nat Izzo outside Our Lady of Victories Church and, below, staff and students show their support for Team Enzo.



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