

Barry Kirby

Failed Year 12 exams. Now remote rural GP with obstetric skills saving women in PNG

As a young scholar, Barry Kirby was an outstanding sportsman. From leadership to athletics, he excelled at most things. In his final year at Brisbane's St Laurence's College he was vice-captain and held the school record for shot put. Then he sat his Year 12 exams. "I think my parents were a bit disappointed with me when I failed high school. I didn't pass anything, even English," says Kirby, 70. "Can you imagine the vice-captain of the college, head cadet, captain of the athletic team, and I failed high school? I think everyone was disappointed."

Except Kirby. "I knew it was going to happen.

I'd paid attention but I just couldn't grasp anything. My focus was to go on the land. I was going to be a farmer." While his parents – his mother was a nurse and his father, a trained carpenter and a farmer – sought a good education for him, their son saw himself living on the land, without focusing on the steps it would take to get there. "I was interested in classes and I would do my study at home but it just wouldn't stick. It didn't have any significance for me. I loved the outdoors and sport and I just thought I would put study off."

By the time his dismal results came in, cattle prices were low and his parents could not afford for him to repeat his final year so he began the first in an eclectic line of jobs. He shovelled coal into hessian bags. He became a boilermaker's labourer at a steel mill. In Sydney He filled out invoices for BP, completing a month's work in a fortnight and

spending the remaining weeks idling at his desk, drawing pictures of the countryside, until 12 months later "all of a sudden there was this bolt of lightning that said, 'what the hell are you doing here?'"

At 20 he became a carpenter like his father and found joy working with his hands, a job that took him to rural PNG to build a school and student boarding house. But while his days were occupied, his mind would increasingly turn to the low standard of local medical care and in particular the plight of expectant women who faced an alarming maternal mortality rate. After two or three years there he "started to think maybe I could be doing medicine" but would push aside those ideas. "The person who had failed high school was never an academic. It's a crazy stupid thought."

Then, one night in 1990, he found a woman on the road near his village. She had chronic diarrhoea, probably HIV-AIDS, and she had been cast out as a witch. Kirby drove her to a health centre but no doctor was there so he put her to bed and found someone who promised to watch her. When he went back in the morning, she was dead. At 40, Kirby decided he would become a doctor. "The thought had been nagging me for a long while," he says. "The lady dying did it. I walked out of that hospital saying I am going to give this 10 years, if it doesn't work out I will go back to carpentry."

He enrolled first to study biomedical science. "I didn't now how to apply to uni so I got my sister to help me. I needed a CV but I didn't know what a CV was so I hired a guy in Sydney to write why I wanted to do medicine in two pages... And lo and behold I was accepted." He finished his degree with honours at Queensland's Griffith University and then, repeatedly rejected from medical courses because of his age, he completed a PhD. In 1997 he was accepted to study medicine at the University of PNG, the country's only medical school. He graduated at the end of 2000 aged 50 – just within the decade he had allowed himself to achieve his goal.

Twenty years on, Kirby runs a rural obstetrics practice in remote PNG conducting maternal health checks, training midwives and encouraging mothers to have their babies delivered at health centres. The vice-captain who failed high school was last year named Griffith University's outstanding alumnus. "It's important to do as well as you can," says the late learner, "not only for the sake of yourself and all the hard work you put in, but also recognise all the sacrifices your parents have made for you. But don't be disappointed if your expectations aren't met. Because you'll find in life that that's meant to be. And what you are going to be in life is yet to be revealed." ●

