

Sports star Kurt Fearnley ‘hit the jackpot’ in school

Paralympic gold medallist Kurt Fearnley says a good supportive public school education changed his life and helped make him the champion he is today. As a young child in a wheelchair he “hit the jackpot” when he was allowed to attend a local mainstream school with his siblings due to the intervention of a school principal.

“When I was five years old, I had a principal who stood up and fought for me when I could not fight for myself,” the sports star told the Public Education Foundation annual awards event at Sydney Town Hall last month. “He had no idea that that moment would propel me into where I would be because that moment gave me an expectation

of normality.”

Three generations of Mr Fearnley’s family had gone through Carcoar Public School in central western NSW, and although a departmental ruling came from Sydney in 1985 that segregated schooling was better and that he could not attend Carcoar because there was no aide available, the principal decided otherwise.

“I think we have all won the lottery with the benefits of this strong public education system, but I feel that I’ve hit the jackpot,” Mr Fearnley told the audience.

The sports champion, who has won three Paralympic gold medals and won 35 marathons round the world, 11 of them in

Sydney, said that by the time he reached Blayney High School it was another public schoolteacher who again introduced him to a new world of wheelchair racing.

In her lunch hour, she made a phone call to invite a sportsman in a wheelchair to visit the school and she also ordered more wheelchairs to be delivered. “She brought 10 wheelchairs into my school and she put my peers and my brothers and sisters in wheelchairs and she showed me truly what sport is about – this even playing field.

“She had no idea again of the world that she had just introduced me to.”

His teachers, family and the community all told him daily

that he was extremely strong “and I wish we all grew up that way” said Mr Fearnley. The support extended to the small town of Carcoar raising \$10,000 locally to send him overseas for the first time to compete in his wheelchair in an international sports event in Colorado with 1000 other children with a disability.

As a qualified physical education teacher, Mr Fearnley travels throughout NSW teaching high school children in small and large communities.

“Education is opportunity, is life,” he told the audience. “I am grateful for many things, and public education is one of them.”

— Shelley Dempsey