

Dear community,

It is with profound sadness that I inform you of the passing of the school's Chairperson, John Porter.

John's vision was for an international school in Verbier that was 'well governed and dynamic'. He wanted high academic standards, inspired students and happy parents. He wanted transparency and accountability to be combined with the drive of a startup. And he both saw the opportunity to open a new school, and was audacious enough to grasp it. This combination of vision and courage made him remarkable. Quite simply, without him, our school community in Verbier would not exist. The lives of dozens of families of children and staff, who share thousands of interactions each day, would be radically different. He put his finger in the dam.

Unusually this is also true of the other international school in Verbier, which John played a leading role in creating over a decade ago, joining with a small number of local entrepreneurs who gave of their money and time in order to ensure that Verbier developed cultural infrastructure essential to attract permanent residents who could live anywhere in the world. Another in this group was a close friend of his, Yves Paternot, who passed away in 2016. Both of them were great patrons of the arts in Verbier. Yves' grandson was Copperfield's first student. This meant the world to John. His friendship transcended life.

John owned businesses all around the world, but the enterprise that most engaged him in his final year was clearly Copperfield. He spoke with glowing pride about our successes, and was ferociously defensive when we were under scrutiny. During December 2020, one of his businesses had a multi-billion dollar IPO, but he spent the entire month totally absorbed by our work on this tiny startup. Some found his passion for our project difficult to fathom - schools are operationally intense and John loved to be involved every day. I believe his love for our project came from his ability and desire to be more than a mere investor. He had a brilliant mind, a deep understanding of human nature, and extensive business experience. Education was something that he understood and loved. He was not content to provide money and observe the effects: he wanted to be involved in the cause; he wanted to wreak disruption and creativity. This was not business, it was personal.

In my last meeting with him, in hospital in October 2021, he told the next visitor (a famous watch manufacturer) that they were obliged to visit the school as soon as they could find time, and should invite our students on a tour of his factory. This eminent horologist was clearly surprised by this imperative, but duly made an appointment. John had a magical charm that could move a person a thousand miles, and he used it to do good. He wanted to make a difference for his community in Verbier.

John had a vibrant inner child, which enabled him to make easy connections with young people, for whom he genuinely cared. He loved to walk around the school and see the learning in the classrooms. He was gentle and jolly with my infant son, quickly winning his friendship. He was a caring father, whose thoughts rarely wandered far from his two children. He loved them with a towering strength. We spoke a great deal about fatherhood. He had poignant memories of his own schooling. He was determined that his children and others' children should enjoy their years in education.

John made a huge difference in my life too. His fondness and support came readily. Injustice to others outraged him and he instinctively protected others when they were laid low. At these times he did not think for a moment of himself. He found it natural to identify and celebrate others' talents and successes: to be envious or small-minded was unfathomable for him. He was a kind man, a generous man, and a man with an incredible ability to blind-taste wine. He loved to discuss anything disruptive: philosophies, businesses, technologies, art. He detested institutions and meetings that continued simply because they were too large to lose momentum, and even at 68 he was ready to change his habits entirely if he could see an improvement. I loved this about him: this flexibility is so very rare, so precious.

Whenever I have a coffee, I think of his quest for the perfect personal coffee manufacturing device. Whenever I see a Rolex advert, I think of the time he withdrew from an innocuous drawer a hillock of rare watches. But he was not materialistic, and his favourite skiwear he had shopped for with others. He would see someone sporting an item that took his fancy and exclaim, 'Oh yes please!' He understood the important link between appearance and function: deciding one day that I did not dress like a headteacher, he took me to Fellay Sport, and after one hour, he had costumed me as a Bagnard entrepreneur. Looking at the output, he couldn't resist a giggle. And then he bought a pair of boots to match mine, driven by camaraderie and taste. He could impel his beloved baby-blue Porsche Taycan around alpine corners at terrifying speed with incredible precision while switching seamlessly between German, French and Italian on his handsfree kit. And then he traded the Porsche for a dark grey model ('The Panther') because he didn't like to be showy. His old-school panache was easy to admire.

John had a razor sharp wit, as dry as a desert, and many times he had us all breathless with laughter. His best one-liners invariably homed-in on dubious character traits: I loved that he could see the bad and make it good. Generous with his time and sagesse, he would answer the phone at any time of day or night, listen carefully and think deeply about the difficulties of others. He liked humanity too much to ignore people. After untying the latest Gordian knot, he would conclude, 'Good. What is next?' Indeed, whenever I answered a telephone call from John, he would reply, 'Good,' an idiosyncrasy that gave me great joy: 'Hi.' 'Good.' His penchant for recalling details about individuals' lives and inheriting their perspective made him very lovable, and also demonstrated how much thought he put into others during his private time (much of which occurred in his Bond-lair sauna). It was for this reason that John inspired the affection of so many people. And it was for this reason that he loved living in the mountains - the Verbier massif gave him the space he craved: to reflect, empathise and create. He was too large to be confined to the city or lowland.

His relentless pursuit of improvement leaves a hole that can never be filled. We will make further decisions and announcements in the coming months to recognise John's contribution to education in Verbier, but already his legacy is assured: his work changed the life of at least one young person, and that alone has made it forever worthwhile.

Dr Hugh McCormick, November 2021