Mrs Bronwyn James (Law) was the Deputy Principle at The Junction Public School when the earthquake occurred. The Junction was another area that was hit hard in the earthquake. Here she recounts her experience of the day:

I was in Upper Allyn when I heard a rumble come up the valley. I thought it was a timber truck at first. I had no mobile phone with me but I heard reports start to come over on the radio. There were mixed alarmist messages; earthquake in Newcastle, Hamilton & The Junction devastated, BHP Steelworks on fire, etc.

The afternoon of the earthquake I went to The Junction Public School. The area had been cordoned off, but as Deputy Principal I gained access in and was able to assess the situation. The Principal was out of the country on holidays and was unable to get back. The two story heritage school was badly damaged. The roof had collapsed on the front office (mine) and the walls were leaning out. I was unable to reach the Department of Education as they were still on holidays but did manage to reach the SES. Later in the afternoon someone arrived, did a quick assessment and left. I took some rope and sheets and with that tried to cordon off the badly damaged areas to avoid the public swarming over the site and taking souvenirs. I used my pseudo authority in protecting the building until a guard was put on it for the night.

Saturday morning I went back and continued vigilance. There were spasmodic visits throughout the day from the SES, Council, and other persons. I stood guard with some of the parents from the P&C and some responsible locals to not only protect the school property records and secondly to ensure that no-one was trespassing and could be in danger. It was all in the hands of the Public Works. Rumour had it that the school would have to be demolished. Already they had demolished the George Hotel on the corner of Scott & Watt Streets. It was determined that the former Star Picture Theatre in the Junction would be demolished the next morning and possible the two buildings of the school. The premises was guarded overnight by the SES.

I returned early on Sunday morning. I noted that the Star Picture Theatre was being knocked down by a big ball crane, and rumour had it that the school was next. Meanwhile, parents, children, former pupils, war veterans wearing War Medals, and Merewether families all congregated in the park opposite the school. Hundreds of people were protesting about demolishing the school. Being built in the 1800s it was old and heritage listed. There were press on site and photographers everywhere. People from heritage of scene, locals, but still no DET officials as of yet. In the middle of all this the demolisher with its wrecking ball trundles around the corner and paused, ready to knock down the premises.

By Monday the place had been roped off officially while experts from New Zealand had been flown in. A halt was put on the demolishing until a heritage assessment had been made on it and a full guard was put on duty. I was the official contact person. Eventually the decision was made to empty the school and remove everything was removed from all 16 classrooms and the corridors. Teams went in to the school and threw everything out of the windows (two story’s up) in to wheelbarrows on the concrete below. This included desks, chairs, book records, blackboards. Even rats! It was dumped in the schools assembly hall. I was allowed in to the building with the aim of trying to supervise the action but it became apparent the speed was of the essence and it would be almost impossible to procure records neatly. It was highly dangerous with concerns that the walls would collapse any minuet. From my observations the external walls had separated from the structure and were leaning out and there were gaps around the stair wells. It all looked very unsafe. This emptying procedure went on through the night. Once everything had been removed experts came in and fenced off the
entire site. I was not allowed back in to my office to collect essential gear. It was an add on at the
front of the building and had I been in there at the time of the collapse I would have been severely
injured. What is remarkable was that no ceilings in any of the classrooms had collapsed. I believe the
children would have been safe at their desks as few cupboards or shelves had actually turned over.

In this period I enlisted a team of volunteer parents to sift through the debris that had been dumped
in the assembly hall with 100 years of vermin excrement and dust and do an inventory for insurance
on what was lost. This was quite an unhealthy task in retrospect. Desk. Chairs, tables and old
blackboards were dumped. Everything inside the building had been literally thrown from the
windows. I had to list the number of scissors, compasses, ect lost so that an appropriate claim reissue
could be possible. It was ridiculous! In the end this was irrelevant. The insurance just paid a set some
of money. I ordered our essentials with the usual practice.

After considerable time, about six months later, and after debate with heritage experts it was made
clear that the school could not be saved and would have to be knocked down. Teaching continued
throughout the demolition. It was not easy as even though the demountable classrooms were away
from the old school, the noise was still horrendous. A workman was killed during the demolition
process and he was added to the list of those who lost their lives in the earthquake.

Demountables were brought in for the students to study in, but students had to be relocated to the
old Cooks Hill School until The Junction was up and running properly again. During the latter part of
the year plans were drawn up for the new school and it was built. However it did not cater for the
entire school and teaching has continued in some of the demountables to this day. Towards the last
weeks of the holidays it poured rain and construction was held up. I was trying to ascertain which
classrooms I could allocate to what year levels and get the appropriate size of desks and chairs. There
was a problem with leakage, roofs were not sealed properly and water was leaking in. At one stage I
was electrocuted from touching a light switch.

It will stay in my memory forever

Brownyn James (Law) – 15 May 2017