



THE SISTERS OF CHARITY
OF AUSTRALIA

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Keep in touch

Sister Maria Cunningham – truly an inspiration!

Castlemaine resident, Sister Maria Cunningham, has been invested with an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) for service to the community through a range of health and social welfare organisations, and to the Sisters of Charity.

Sister Maria is among the list of hard-working and inspirational Australians who were honoured as part of this year's Australia Day Honours List. She received her medal in a ceremony at Government House, Melbourne, on May 12th.

Sister Maria moved to the Castlemaine region in early 2002 where she helped to establish a home in Urquhart Street for the use of families visiting prison inmates at Castlemaine's Loddon Prison and Maldon's Mt Tarrengower Prison.

The Sisters of Charity 'Blake Cottage Prison Ministry Project' opened to families in a rented Urquhart Street cottage in 2003.

Sister Maria and co-manager Sister Pam Grime, later established a permanent residence in McKendry Street with wonderful assistance from the local community and the local prisons, and has been working to accommodate families from all over Victoria and interstate at the new site since 2006.

Sister Maria said the accommodation project supported by the Sisters of Charity and Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) aims to assist families to visit their loved ones in prison by providing affordable accommodation.

"We offer hospitality, acceptance and respect. We are here to help and to listen."

Sister Maria was born and raised in Werribee and later trained as a nursing sister in Melbourne. In her early 20s she moved to Sydney where she trained as a Sister of Charity.

After completing her Novitiate, Sister Maria worked in Sisters of Charity Health Services (SCHS) hospitals in Auburn, Lismore, Launceston and Melbourne.

During her 10 years as a nursing sister in Melbourne, she worked predominantly in paediatrics and maternity wards.

During this time, Sister Maria and some of her colleagues worked to establish a respite care program at Greensborough for disabled children to enable their families a chance to have a holiday and some respite. "It was extremely fulfilling work," Sister Maria said.



Sister Maria Cunningham served the Australian community through the 'Blake Cottage Prison Ministry Project' in Castlemaine.

Photo: Lisa Dennis, *Castlemaine Mail*.

She later returned to Sydney where she worked as a Director of Nursing at St Vincent's Private Hospital from 1977-97. She also worked in administration at St Vincent's Public Hospital and at St Joseph's before returning to Victoria in 2002.

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Sister Maria Cunningham – truly an inspiration!

From page 1

Sister Maria was also a Deputy Chair of the National Board, Sisters of Charity Health Services (SCHS) 1996-2002; Chair of the SCHS Council from 1990-94 and a Board Member, St Vincent's and Mercy Private Hospital, Melbourne, 2003-10.

She is also a founding member of the Blake Cottage Advisory Committee which meets several times a year and includes community members, VACRO and prison representatives.

Sister Maria said that during her long and rewarding career with the Sisters of Charity two projects in particular stood out in her mind – the respite care program she helped to established earlier in her nursing career and her current project.

"I am particularly delighted to have been able to finish my career working in the country in such a rewarding role. It has definitely been the most rewarding of my career."

Sister Maria says she does not like the stigma surrounding prisoners.

"Many are just normal people whose lives have been changed in an instant – such as an accident – or who should really be in a mental health institution."

De-institutionalisation in the '80s and '90s had seen many people with mental illness wind up in prison instead of in the care where they rightly belong.

We see more prisons being built when I feel there should be more of a focus on mental health care."

Sister Maria said she was a little overwhelmed by the Australia Day Honour but it provided a great opportunity to raise the profile of the prison ministry, the Sisters of Charity and also the wonderful rural community here in Castlemaine.

"I would like to see more awareness. We need to support people in the prison system and help their families just as we do with refugees. We need to work at doing this together. If this award brings this issue to the fore that's wonderful," she said.

"It's also great kudos for my fellow Sisters of Charity and I am sure my family will be delighted."



Srs Francis Xavier Purcell, Enid Doherty and Christine Madden are escorted to their seats.

Photo: courtesy of *The Catholic Weekly*.

Bethlehem College Celebrates 130 Years

by Aileen Thomas rsc

On Friday 25th February the Bethlehem Staff and Students were joined by 25 Sisters of Charity and 200 ex-students to celebrate 130 years of service to Catholic Education. Why celebrate 130 years and not wait for 150 years? The reason being, that more Sisters of Charity would be able to join in the celebrations.

Mass was celebrated by His Eminence Cardinal George Pell. The Mass began with the procession of the ex-students with each group behind a banner indicating the decade they had left school. This ranged from the 1940s to 2010. It was lovely that so many senior ladies, some on the supporting arm of a present student, were able to be part of the day.

One of our more senior ex-students, Sr Francis Xavier, assisted by two Year 7 Students, presented the offertory gifts.

After Mass, morning tea was enjoyed in the Cathedral hall.

Mrs Anna Dickinson, the Staff and students would like to thank the Sisters for their attendance and their ongoing interest in Bethlehem. I'm sure the sisters who were there will agree that we, as Sisters of Charity ex-students, are still very proud of Bethlehem.

As we celebrated within the shadow of Sydney harbour, my thoughts were of the first five Sisters. As I often say to the girls –

"...had there been no 'Francis Spaight', there would be no Bethlehem College."

Comely Bank

“A glorious position amid soft hills and trees with a stream at the foot of the bank – yes, the place had possibilities...”

These words were spoken of Comely Bank at Healesville in Victoria in the 1940s by Mother Agnes Skewes rsc. At that time she would not have known what the possibilities were to be over half a century later. The realisation of service provision within the Sisters of Charity Community Care, through the ministry of supporting carers and others in need, is a wonderful manifestation of today's possibilities for this place, which still fits the description from all those years ago.

It was following the evacuation of Catholic Ladies College students from East Melbourne to Alpine Lodge in Healesville during WWII, that Comely Bank was purchased for the Sisters' holiday house. In recent weeks our CLC connection has taken on a different perspective. Being welcomed in our hall, (originally built as our chapel in the 1950s) six groups of Year 9 students have had Comely Bank as a base for their Rural Experience. Sisters Elizabeth Wall and Colleen McDonald have been hosts to these lovely young women and their enthusiastic teachers. We have especially appreciated their help on the property in the 'Community Service' component of the Program.



Photographs left and below: Girls from Catholic Ladies College, East Melbourne assist in the care of the grounds.

We have especially appreciated the girls help on the property in the 'Community Service' component of the Program.

Here at Comely Bank, a practical application of changing and adapting to needs – as is the practice of the Sisters – has been the addition of an extension to the Sisters' Residence. With a second Sister appointed to our ministry, it became necessary to have adequate living space, so, after several months of seeing it develop, our extension is now completed – and very much appreciated! There is now a wing extending south from the kitchen. In this we have a 'workroom' with generous cupboard space, and a bedroom with ensuite facilities. Local authorities required the extension to meet current bushfire zone regulations, so it is very protected and has lovely large window space to take advantage of our beautiful environment.

Fortunately we still have a guest room for a visiting Sister to share the peace and beauty of the place. With the extension, our adaptation to current needs has been especially welcome!

Ministry needs at Comely Bank continue to grow, especially now that we have the hall available for non residential groups for education (as for the CLC program mentioned above), relaxation, celebration etc. We are looking forward to it being a Palliative Care Day Hospital once a week as a Healesville project of the Fernlea House Program in Emerald for their guests who live in this area. This welcoming, quiet and peaceful venue, will hopefully be very appropriate for this group.

Concurrent with this, we continue our ministry with resident guests in the lovely old original house. So, the words of Mother Agnes Skewes certainly ring true in this modern era – the 'possibilities' continue!

The Annals of the Sisters of Charity in Australia

by M. John Baptist De Lacy

This is the fourth instalment of De Lacy's annals. Part three was published in KIT, March 2011.

Great indeed has been the change in the Female Prisoners of the Factory, but nothing is impossible to the grace of God, and here the hands of his clemency has been stretched forth, Religion has gradually effected, what could never be done by human means or coercive measures. The same persons are still the Superintendts [sic], but they must acknowledge that there is a visible reformation in the conduct of the Women. I will give here an instance of it. On a late occasion when they were most unjustly deprived for both the quantity & quality of Rations allowed by Government, they acted with the utmost forbearance, But when the Governor Sir George Gipps went to the Factory to pay his accustomed visit, they represented to him in the most respectful language their grievances, and called on him to have their wrongs redressed, I must do him the justice to say that he acted in this particular with much Humanity and Benevolence.

Since writing the above a few individuals raised some disturbance in the Factory, but those who had distinguished themselves for general good conduct during the last year behaved on the occasion with much Piety & good Sense, in keeping apart from the noisy cabal which was raised around them, and endeavouring by every means in their power to promote Peace and good order.

The result was – that the Governor on learning the particulars of the entire affair, rewarded them by providing for them respectable situations (through the agency of the Magistrate) where they receive £10 yearly.

The Most Revd. Doctor Polding arrived in Sydney on the 9th of March 1843 – after an absence of two years, and some months. He was raised to the dignity of Archbishop by his present Holiness Gregory 16th who also ennobled him by the rank & title of Count of the Holy Roman Empire.³³ The Father of the Faithful received him with every mark of distinction, and felt much gratified by his interesting details of his extensive Mission.³⁴ He was also pleased to express his gratification that the Religious Sisters of Charity were established in New South Wales.

No Day indeed in the annals of the Catholic church of Australia can be considered a day of greater Exultation and joy than that on which a grateful, an improving, and regenerated people welcomed back their Beloved & revered Chief Pastor. Mighty indeed was the display on that day of Catholic Faith & Catholic Feeling!

The Archbishop's suite consisted of eight Priests, five Deacons, and three of the Christian Brothers.

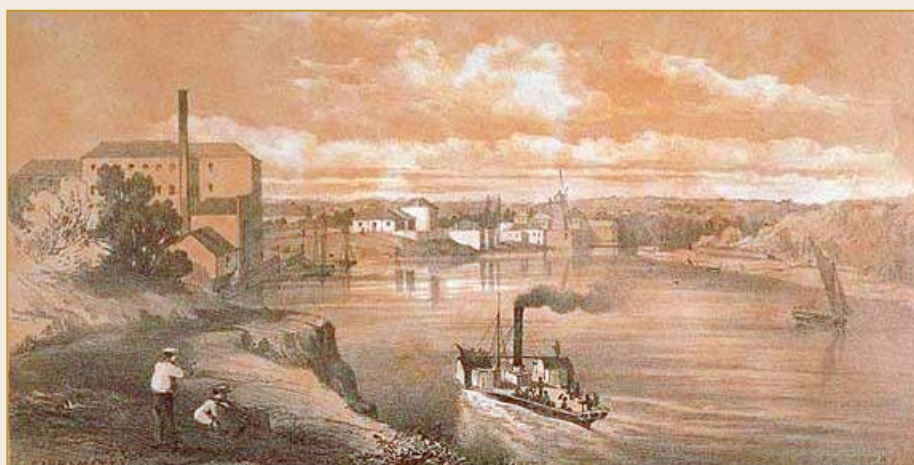
Circumstances having prevented the Archbishop from making an early visit to the Sisters, after his arrival, he wrote to the Revd Mother [M. De Sales O'Brien] requesting that accompanied by Mrs Cahil she would give him the pleasure of seeing her in a few days. On the following Sunday March 19th Mrs O'Brien, Mrs Cahil & Mrs De Lacy visited his Grace at the Episcopal Residence Sydney.

His Holiness having granted an Indulgence to all those who would assist at the celebration of the Divine Mysteries on the day that Doctor Polding would first officiate, the Sisters had the happiness of being present.

[Continued next edition.](#)

“Doctor Ullathorne came to Parramatta in the Steamer with us, it was the first time he had ever been in it.”

[Mother De Sales O'Brien in a letter to Ireland, 1840.](#)



'The Comet' on its regular run on the Parramatta River by Frederick Charles Terry ca.1860. National Library of Australia.

³³ This may be a place to mention Polding's coat of arms.

³⁴ This report on the church in Australia is held in the Archives of Propaganda Fide, Rome.

³⁵ Roger Terry (1800-1874) was a cousin of S.M. De Sales O'Brien, one of the first five Sisters.

Mount Hope: On the edge of the Outback

by Sr Colleen Noonan rsc

As a way of giving some support to our rural ministry, I work with a volunteer agency called VISE (Volunteers for Isolated Students Education). This group helps connect retired teachers with rural families, who need a six-week tutoring period for their children, while they are receiving distance education from the various schools in outback Australia. This could be necessary for all sorts of reasons – mustering time, or a Mum has a new baby, or some learning difficulty with one of the children, or perhaps a rural woman needs a break from constant multi-tasks.

Last year I volunteered on a 30,000 acre cattle property outside of Winton. This year I was assigned the task of assisting a five-year old boy to settle into school routine with Dubbo Distance Education. His parents ran the small hotel, the only building on Kidman Way between Hillston and Cobar. This was a vital link for food and a break if travelling between Hay and Cobar. Supplies for the hotel had to be purchased from Griffith 200 kms away. The weekly shopping trip was a real experience – distance travelled, purchasing and unloading supplies which included a can of petrol for the tourist!

My first challenge occurred when I arrived and was asked “Would you prefer to sleep in the hotel with the mice or in the caravan with the ants?” I chose the caravan and managed to get the ants under control but when I stepped onto the ground the next morning the earth rose up to meet me, they had forgotten to mention there was a grasshopper plague as well as a mouse plague in the district! The mice proved a challenge for quite a while and although baits and traps were set regularly it took some time to break the breeding cycle. Sadly, in the meantime the little boy's two pups died, having eaten some of the baited mice, so my first ‘religious duties’ were to conduct two ‘funerals’ for the pups and attempt to give pastoral care to all concerned.

In the meantime, we worked on our lessons in the well-prepared classroom in a section of the dining-room. Fortunately the little boy was an eager learner and the correspondence lessons from Dubbo were excellent if the ‘Bush’ postal system managed to deliver.



Having the last lesson of the Term on the veranda.

I was amazed how these little rural communities managed to have a meaningful liturgy and a great spirit of hospitality despite the various limitations.

Sunday was approaching and I started to look at the possibilities of sharing in the Eucharist. I had a choice of a 96km each way trip to Hillston, a 160km each way trip to Cobar or about an 85km trip to Lake Cargelligo, returning at night via isolated roads. I decided that I would have a different experience each week. Each community was different and it was a privilege to join with the various little communities for Mass. One parish priest had been taught scripture in the seminary by Sr Moira O’Sullivan rsc and one of the guests in the hotel had been taught by Sr Virginia Wilkinson rsc at Glenroy in Victoria in about 1952! His wife had nursed at St Vincent’s Melbourne. Sisters of Charity have had an effect on many people over many years. I also managed to connect with Sr Carol Pederson rsc who is working in various rural areas supported often by nurses she had met through St Vincent’s Hospital.

I was amazed how these little rural communities managed to have a meaningful liturgy and a great spirit of hospitality despite the various limitations. I was even more amazed that I managed to get to Eucharist safely without hitting a kangaroo, a rabbit, a feral goat, an eagle or an emu.

The rain has been a wonderful blessing. Lake Cargelligo, which was an arid lake late last year, is now full to overflowing.

There was great excitement, two days before the end of school term. The computer supplied by Distance Education was to be installed. My little pupil was ecstatic and learnt skills in a few hours, which had taken me months to acquire. The last day of term was to include his first school assembly. We made the connections, did our voice checks and waited. The assembly was based on Anzac Day and after a few introductory notes read by various students, we were asked to stand for the Last Post and then observe a minute’s silence. We stood to attention, and waited, and waited and waited. The new computer system for Distance Education had crashed! Well I guess life is never perfect. We just do our best. I take my hat off to the wonderful rural women, who battle the isolation and these other challenges not for just a few weeks but for a lifetime.

May they be blessed abundantly.

The Order of Australia Association

New South Wales Branch

by Sr St Jude Doyle rsc

Since 2001, the Association has conducted Annual Multi-Faith Services in various locations, the Garrison Church, St Patrick's Church Hill, St James High Church, King Street and The Great Synagogue, Sydney, to name a few. Sister St Jude Doyle OAM, in consultation with the Chairman, approaches a Minister of a church to arrange times and dates for the particular service, sends out invitations and organises the day.

In 2010, it was held in the Sisters of Charity Chapel, Potts Point. Students from St Joseph's College Hunters Hill and St Vincent's College Potts Point welcomed guests and acted as ushers. St Vincent's College Garraway Dance Troupe acknowledged the Land and the College Choir led the singing. The Guest Speaker was Rev Father Frank Brennan SJ AM.



St Vincent's Chapel and College grounds, 1917.

Invitations to participate, not just attend, are issued to Ministers of all Christian Churches, the Salvation Army, the Jewish Synagogue, the Sufi Association, the Buddhist Bajrayana Institute, Armed Forces (Army, Navy and Air Force), Police as well as the New South Wales Regimental Army Band.

After the service, guests enjoy a generous morning or afternoon tea. On most occasions, Mesdames Ruth Foran, Anna Kavanagh, Shirley McGrath, Pauline Noyce and Louise Paniora attend to the refreshments.

Mater Dei, West Ashgrove

60th Anniversary

by Sister Anne Crowley rsc

Mater Dei, a parish primary school at West Ashgrove in Brisbane is celebrating the 60th anniversary of its foundation this year. Two Sisters of Charity, Sister M. Sebastian (Phyllis) Murphy and Sister M. Patrick Dray began teaching there when the school opened in 1951 and our sisters continued to minister there until 1985 when a lay-principal was appointed.

In response to an invitation from the present Principal, Peter Delaney and the Parents Committee, Sister Margaret Mines and I (Anne Crowley), attended a celebration last Saturday evening in the new school Hall. Not only was the Hall new, but all the buildings and the whole school campus looked to have had an entire make-over since our time.

The small block of classrooms and office area of our day has been given a facelift and blended in with the new buildings.



Srs Anne Crowley and Margaret Mines cut the Jubilee cake.

The convent, built by the Parish in 1962 for Sisters to live on site, has been cleverly incorporated. The playground, oval (the fruit of many Fathers' working-bees) has been developed and now has a smart tennis court. It was pleasing to see so many improvements which offer children and teachers such learning and teaching opportunities.

Mater Dei was never a big school and that perhaps was the reason for what I recall was its greatest asset – the warm, happy atmosphere of the school community – children, staff, parents and the wider parish. It was very heart-warming on Saturday night to be so affectionately greeted by so many past parents and past pupils whom we had taught and who now have their own children at Mater Dei. The atmosphere at the gathering made me think that the school is still the happy place that has enabled it to make such progress.

All my memories of Mater Dei call forth pleasing feelings of gratitude and affection for the children, for the whole Parish community and for the Marist Fathers, when I recall how they supported the Sisters with such appreciation and kindness.

The Sisters of Charity

Remote and Rural Group

by Elsa Skinner, Raffle Coordinator Remote and Rural Group

In late 2007 it was decided to run a stall in St Vincent's General Hospital, Sydney supported by a raffle in St Vincent's Private Hospital. The money raised was to be 'starter money' for a volunteer group, to provide much needed financial support to rural families in New South Wales.

This idea had come up recently and had been discussed between a few friends. Some women and men well known in previous volunteer work were called together to discuss this idea and develop it further. The result was the Remote and Rural Group.

The first true fundraiser was held in 2008 and was a resounding success. About this time, Sister Elizabeth Dodds rsc, the Congregational Leader, made the Sisters of Charity Remote and Rural Group a Congregational Ministry.

The wonderful women and men who are the backbone of the Remote and Rural Group, meet seldom, but talk often and work independently throughout the year to use their talents to make craft items for the two stalls held just prior to Mothers Day and Christmas in the foyer of St Vincent's General Hospital.

The range of beautiful items is much sought after as the workmanship is a unique gift that each person, and often their own band of helpers, brings to the fundraisers. The variety is endless, knitted toys (remember Post Man Pat and Mr Squiggle from years gone by?) knitted and crocheted baby booties and clothes, slippers, tea cosies (yes, they are making a comeback as the therapeutic benefit of a freshly brewed cup of tea knows no bounds!).

There are also cuddly and tactile throw rugs of many designs and colours, cushions, ceramics, padded coat hangers, lavender heat packs, unique Christmas card holders and a delicious selection of muffins and cakes to tempt the hungry. Let's not forget the delicious jams and chutneys that sell out in record time and the therapeutic Tasmanian lavender products, with advice offered free along with the purchase!



The Sydney Royal Easter Show 'Champion Trade Steer 2011' presentation by Judges on behalf of the Agriculture Societies Council of NSW to the Scots School Bathurst. Left to right: Judge ASC, Laura Pollard, Scots School Year 11 student, Judge ASC, winning steer 'Scots Ace', and from the Sisters of Charity Remote and Rural Group, Mrs Gloria Cahill and Mrs Margaret Fitzpatrick, who presented the School with a prize for students to explore and interact with farm animals.

The raffle is a regular at the fundraisers with prizes sponsored by many generous businesses.

The raffle is a regular at the fundraisers with prizes sponsored by many generous businesses and always well supported in the week leading up to the stalls, with ticket selling taking place at the foyer of St Vincent's Private Hospital.

The Royal Easter Show saw the committee widening its pool of rural contacts by offering two prizes in the Craft and the Agricultural sections of the Show. This was another opportunity to assist and to encourage country people to learn a new and enjoyable craft and for secondary students from differing backgrounds to explore and interact with farm animals and to gather information about farm life. No prize had previously been available in these two selected areas.

We are also grateful for the monetary support of the Sisters of Charity Foundation. Funds from the Foundation are distributed in rural areas by Contact Persons well known to members of the Group. This method ensures confidentiality to its recipients and the giving of money to areas where it is needed.

Assistance is also offered to rural State and Catholic Primary School Principals for needs in schools, particularly those which 'slip between the cracks' and are not already funded. Money has been distributed to rural schools for children's shoes and jumpers, and assistance made available in townships to families for utility bills, telephone, general household expenses and food hampers.

The Remote and Rural Group appreciates and acknowledges the ongoing support by the management, staff, patients and visitors of St Vincent's Private and General Hospitals.

The support we receive from so many ensures that our work can continue and we express our gratitude.

Project Dreaming Tracks and international students

Prepared by Sr Margaret Costigan rsc, May 2011

“It is a huge experience for me being part of the Project Dreaming Tracks team.”

Sandeep Kaur, International student from India.

In 2010 we worked with 10 international students at Reservoir – Nancy, Gurpal, Ramon, Yi Xiao, Yiwen, Sandeep, Gurdeep, Rui Li, Bindiya and Ira. Then in February 2011 we moved to Thornbury where Nirmal completed her placement, and Hima and Jasz are working with us now.

All students study Community Welfare at Carrick Institute of Education or Cambridge International College, and we have received more requests than we have been able to accommodate. The students have many stresses while they study such as learning in a language other than their own, dealing with VISA issues; personal and family concerns including serious illness and death back in their own country. Getting their qualification opens doors for them and we are pleased to assist even in a small way by accepting them on field placement.

This program benefits the students and us. They receive experience while assisting and spending time with participants in our programs, which assists us in providing higher quality programs and enhances our cross-cultural focus.

Some students wrote articles about their time with us for our newsletter. So the following extracts allow them to speak for themselves.



Left to right: Sermen, Jasz, Margaret, Hima and Nirmal.

“Through working in Project Dreaming Tracks, I have had a good opportunity to work as a part of the team, learn new skills and develop my knowledge of welfare work.”

Nancy



Nancy, Margaret and Cameron while setting up 'Gathering as One 2009'.

Nancy

I am taking my placement at Project Dreaming Tracks. It is a great experience for me. I learnt a lot of stuff which I never had a chance of learning in the classroom. Through working in Project Dreaming Tracks, I have had a good opportunity to work as a part of the team, learn new skills and develop my knowledge of welfare work.

Margaret Costigan, is my supervisor here and, working under her guidance, I have learnt a lot of things, not only how to deal and talk with the clients, but also strategies for working with the clients.

Ellie Whitaker coordinates the Garden Program, which is conducted every Tuesday. We reach out to people who live in places without a garden and give them a chance to pot herbs and vegetables. I learn how to grow herbs and get information on vegetables, herbs, and how to grow them in small spaces.

In the Art Program conducted every Wednesday, I work with Cameron McGregor to provide a comfortable environment for the participants, and I chat with them and they share their feelings and emotions through the art. I was involved with the Art Exhibition 'Gathering as One' at St Francis Pastoral Centre in the city which ran from 27th May to 9th June. After all this, I learnt a great deal about administration and office work.



Gurpal, International student.

Gurpal

I have been working with Project Dreaming Tracks for the last two months. Being part of the team since April 2009 has been a valuable learning experience for me. Working under the guidance of my supervisor Margaret Costigan, I have gained valuable hands-on welfare work experience. It has given me a chance to work with people suffering from intellectual disability, mental illness, poverty, under a good behaviour bond and community based orders and people from the Aboriginal community. This has helped me develop my skills including some administration and networking skills required in a welfare agency.

Ramon

Project Dreaming Tracks is based on respect, justice and compassion for all people and it walks together in partnership and cooperation for encouraging, confidence, support and education. I have learned valuable experience.

The Garden Program helps and encourages people to learn about growing plants in pots if you don't have a garden around your house. It provides green environment to the clients and help them to express their emotions in a better way. Artists from different backgrounds as well as the Aboriginal community, can display and hang their paintings free of cost, giving them a platform to exhibit their work.

Sandeep

My name is Sandeep Kaur. I am a student doing first placement. It is a huge experience for me being part of the Project Dreaming Tracks team. I learnt a lot from Project Dreaming Tracks staff, which I never had a chance to learn in the past and I have gained valuable experience in welfare work. I have a good opportunity to work as part of the team, learn new skills and develop my knowledge of the welfare work.

I was involved in the Koorie Night Market on 25 November and 5 December 2009 in the Northcote Town Hall. We sold cards, bookmarks, candles and pot plants. Ros, Cameron, Margaret and myself, participated together and a lot of people came.

Bindya

Through our research project, which was really worthwhile for us, I had an opportunity to meet different experienced and professional people. I had an opportunity to put my learning into practice under the supervision of experienced and professional welfare workers. It enabled me to develop my communication and writing skills. It also helped me to build confidence to speak with professional people at various Neighbourhood Houses and other organisations, about their clients and services.

"...my field placement at PDT was a great opportunity to learn and experience relevant community welfare tasks and situations. During my placement period, I received positive feedback as well as negative feedback from my supervisor, which helped me to develop..."

Bindya

Hima

As an international student, I feel that I am included here in Project Dreaming Tracks because they respect all different cultures. Whoever wants to join the program is most welcome to the organisation and it's for all of us. I have got a golden opportunity to participate in different programs through building my confidence in interacting with people from different backgrounds.

"Margaret is very supportive and educative. If I am stuck in any task, she helps me out."

Likewise, my field placement at Project Dreaming Tracks was a great opportunity for me to learn and experience relevant community welfare tasks and situations.

During my placement period, I received positive feedback as well as negative feedback from my supervisor, which helped me to develop my writing, team-work, time management, and office skills. Also, I built confidence in communicating with co-workers as well as with clients.

Ministry of presence to asylum seekers in detention

by Sr Dorothy Bayliss rsc

Sister Dorothy Bayliss writes this account after her time of ministering at a Detention Centre in Australia.

One of the major political issues facing the Australian Government and the Australian people today is the influx of 'boat people' or so called 'asylum seekers', seen as queue jumpers coming illegally to our shores.

Many of us are fearful and are reacting in various ways to the many myths and questions surrounding these so called 'boat people.'

Some of the myths and questions that need to be explained are:

- 1 Why are they jumping the queue?
- 2 Why do they leave their family behind?
- 3 Why don't they join the army?
- 4 Why are they leaving it to Australia and the USA to fight their war?
- 5 Will there be an Islamic take over?
- 6 There will be an added risk of terrorists coming with the asylum seekers.

One significant problem, is the lack of a way to process these people seeking asylum with respect and dignity, in a humane manner and as human beings, as many lack documents due to the situations in their home countries.

I found all the clients well meaning, respectful and generous, sharing the little that they had every time I met with them or was invited to meet with them individually.

Some of our anxieties and fears are well founded, especially as we watch more and more horrific and vivid pictures on the news on our TV screens in our own homes. During my three months of ministry in the detention centre I have learnt a great deal about my own fears, and misconceptions about many of the myths that are circulating throughout our country and community.

As our relationship grew so did the trust, so their stories of survival torture and trauma were forthcoming to the extent that they were heart wrenching for me to hear.

I have never felt so helpless in my life and wondered how I could possibly give them a glimpse of hope as it seemed to them that God had abandoned them.

Each client had a different and painful story about the situation in their own country and their need to escape in order to find a better and safer life for themselves and their families. To have freedom and to live in safety is all they ask.

Their sufferings now, both emotionally and physical, come from the fact that they are held in detention for weeks, months, and years. They ask:

"Why? I am not a criminal. How can the Australian Government do this to us?"

The process for obtaining refugee status is so slow, especially after months of waiting with little to no communication from the authorities. Then, when a negative response comes and they have to wait again for a second process, it is no wonder that they become depressed and despondent. Day after day I saw the depression turn into despair and their physical health started to deteriorate.

Prior to setting foot on Australian soil, a land they believed to be committed to human rights, safety and freedom, many found themselves in an Indonesian jail, where again they were treated cruelly for months until they could bribe their way out again to try another dangerous sea crossing.

I had never thought of the dangers that they faced in an unsafe boat, with sea water pouring in day after day, constant engine failure and knowing that many boats had never made it to land. This showed me their desperation for a better life for themselves and their families.

No wonder that, after standing on our soil, and being put into detention for an undisclosed period of time and then, after months of waiting receiving a negative result for their refugee visa application, and worrying that their families are in constant danger, they begin to break. Then they self harm, try to take their own life by hanging or starving themselves. These actions come from despair and also in the hope that they will bring attention to their plight.

Some say:

"I am ashamed to tell my family that I am still in detention as they feel that their own suffering will soon come to an end now that I am in Australia and safe."

Some of the questions and comments I heard every day were:

- 1 I thought Australia was committed to human rights. Where are they?
- 2 What will become of us and our families?
- 3 Can you speak to the Australian people for us?
- 4 Who knows who we are and why we came?
- 5 Who knows and cares that we are here?
- 6 Who knows our story? How can we tell our story, locked up here?
- 7 Are we put here to die?
- 8 Your Government doesn't care.
- 9 We are told that it is safe to return to our country. How do they know?
- 10 The Australian and USA forces are still there. If it's safe why are they still there?

Foundation Day 2011

Toowoomba

“Madam, for us to return to our own country of origin is a death sentence, as we are seen as having entered a country of infidels which, in itself, carries a death sentence.”

Personally I felt completely helpless to assist them in any way, except to listen compassionately to their pain and misery. I was unable to change things for them as I had no voice or authority to change their circumstances. For me this was hard as I have always been in a position to bring about change in my former nursing ministry, where I gave life and hope to my patients and their families.

This ministry took me out of my comfort zone and I too, began to feel helpless and hopeless with questions ever before me:

How can I be a living witness to the compassionate love of Christ?

How can I give them a glimpse of hope in such a hopeless situation?

In a practical way each day, I provided for them when asked, a copy of their holy book, be it the Quran, Bible or Avesta, or gave an image of a Hindu God, a rosary or a statue of Our Lady to the few Christians. These small things I endeavoured to do, praying that they would hold on to their courage and faith through prayer, which in turn would give them a glimpse of hope.

Some of the current problems facing the clients today are:

- 1 Over crowding due to an increase in the number of asylum seekers.
- 2 Different cultures, traditions, and religions in confined in a space.
- 3 Insufficient activities to keep the clients physically and mentally active.
- 4 Staff shortage and staff training issues.
- 5 Amenities that are now becoming inadequate due to an increasing number of men.
- 6 A need for more full time pastoral care workers.
- 7 Limited understanding of our legal system and how to access it.

Over the three months that I was there the rate of suicide attempts had escalated, and on one occasion a fatality occurred. A young 20 year old single male hung himself. Self-harm increased as the stress became too much to bear.

I was extremely grateful for the support of the congregation and that of the Bishop and Parish Priest. To the Jesuits I am also grateful for the opportunity to assist in such a small way, the men in detention, so desperate for our recognition as Australians, to grant them asylum.

Please keep in your prayers all those who have been forced to leave their own countries because of war and violence and for those who care for them, as well as for Governments who need to find just ways to deal with all vulnerable people.

Sisters Maureen Parker and Tarcisius Donovan share with KIT readers the 2011 Foundation Day celebration in Toowoomba to acknowledge the staff and volunteers of St Vincent's.

At the beginning of the ceremony, an interesting account of the laying of the Foundation Stone by Archbishop Duhig, taken from the *Darling Downs Gazette*, 23rd May 1921, was read. The adapted text reads:

‘A crowd numbering many thousands assembled at the site of the proposed St Vincent's Hospital. The weather, though inclined to be on the warm side, was glorious. The Hospital, which will be in the charge of the Sisters of Charity, will open its portals to all classes and creeds. As the site chosen stands out prominently on one of the most picturesque spots of the city, the Hospital should serve a very useful purpose for the patients who are in a convalescent stage.’

The ceremony continued with a Gospel reading of the Good Samaritan, prayers of intercession and presentations of awards for those who had given dedicated service for 25, 20, 15 or 10 years. Blessing prayers were prayed over recipients and those Staff members who made their Re-commitment to Service. Sisters Maureen and Tarcisius, together with other Sisters in attendance, recited a Re-commitment to the Sisters of Charity story, a story which is strongly embedded in Toowoomba.

After the concluding hymn, all enjoyed afternoon tea in the café in the Hospital.



Srs Maureen, Tarcisius and other sisters recite the Re-commitment to the charism of the Sisters of Charity.

Congratulations, Maria!

Honoured for a lifetime of contribution

Photos by Catholic Health Australia and Fiona Basile, *Kairos Publications*, Victoria.

This year, Catholic Health Australia initiated a 'Lifetime Contribution Award' to be given annually to someone who, over the course of their lives, have given extraordinary service to the Church's health and aged care ministry. The congregation was delighted to hear that the inaugural honour would be awarded to Sr Maria Cunningham. Maria received the Award on 21st April, 2011 in Melbourne, at Cabrini Health.

Sr Maria, who commenced as a nurse at St Vincent's Darlinghurst in 1966, went on to Chair the Sisters of Charity Health Services. She was instrumental in establishing CHA, was a promoter of 'Integration 2000,' and served on the Board of the National Health Insurance Commission.



The new award will be made annually and known as the 'Catholic Health Australia Sr Maria Cunningham Lifetime Contribution Award'.

Congratulations, Maria! Well deserved!

In addition to the Catholic Health Australia Award, Sr Maria Cunningham was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to the community through a range of health and social-welfare organisations and the Sisters of Charity. The congregation was delighted for Sr Maria and she was congratulated by all.

"When I found out, my reaction was one of dismay for the other people who've done more than me and have never received anything," Sr Maria said. "Being here though I'm really thrilled for myself and for everyone who has been a part of my life for the past 40 years, to see it come to fruition."

Sr Annette Cunliffe and Maria's two sisters were honoured guests at the ceremony at Government House. Sr Leone Wittmack was also an invited guest for Mr Tony Killen and friend of Sr Maria.



Hon. Alex Chernov, AO, QC, Governor of Victoria, congratulates Sr Maria.

Also receiving an OAM was Mr Tony Killen, a friend and colleague of the Sisters of Charity. Tony's Award was for services to the community, particularly to St Vincent's Health Australia over the past 19 years.

"I was honoured to receive the award, but conscious of all the help and support given by other people, particularly my family," he said.

Keep In touch is a quarterly newsletter for Sisters of Charity, their families, friends and supporters.



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Big thanks

to Bruce Stephens for his valued help

Bruce and his good work, is known to many of us and since *Keep in touch* (KIT) began, Bruce and his Associates have been preparing and producing this publication. While Bruce has enjoyed doing this work for us, his real specialties, photography, videoing and film-making, are developing and making greater demands on his time, so he has had to relinquish the work of producing KIT.

The congregation would like to acknowledge the generous contribution Bruce has made over the years. His attention to detail, the care he took in producing KIT, the time he devoted to knowing and understanding our story and developing excellent materials to share it, are to be commended and we are most grateful to him. Sr Annette will make a personal acknowledgement to Bruce on behalf of the congregation.

While Bruce will no longer be producing KIT, he will still have a strong connection with the congregation through his skills in audio-visual work.

Thank you Bruce and best wishes.



Bruce Stephens, BWS+A.