

# BETH DEVINE

## A STEADY PRESENCE THROUGH CHANGING TIMES

*Wheelers Hill, the suburb that started life as a farming and orchard area, might have changed significantly over the past 50 years, but the small Good Shepherd conference continues to do what it has always done with commitment and a dedicated core of longstanding members. In the 1970s, Beth Devine joined the conference as a young newlywed. She has recently clocked up 43 years as a member.*

### EARLY LIFE

Growing up, Beth Devine and her five siblings had a peripetatic upbringing due to their teacher father regularly relocating to schools across Victoria, but a 15-year posting in Warrnambool allowed the children to complete their schooling in one place.

Beth completed her nursing at Warrnambool Base Hospital and went on to midwifery at St John of God in Perth then specialising in the care of ill and premature babies. Beth's mother was a nurse in Gippsland before she married. Her father, Alan had a long involvement in the St Vincent de Paul Society, starting with his time at St Joseph's Warrnambool. A Catholic stronghold, two other Vincentians who also served in this conference, Jack Daffy and Bill Eccles, have been honoured in previous A Call to Serve stories.

Beth remembers her father attending conference meetings, but he never talked about this work. Both her parents were active contributors to the community in Warrnambool, generally lending a hand wherever they could. They were strong tennis players and volunteered as tennis coaches at St Joseph's tennis club, helping to organise the annual Easter tournament at the local lawn tennis centre.

Beth's parents moved to Melbourne and built in Glen Waverley, then a newly developing area, as this allowed the youngest children to attend Monash University where they graduated as teachers. Alan worked for a few more years teaching at Ashwood Primary School.

Shortly after, Beth, now married to Brian Devine, would move to nearby Wheelers Hill in 1968 and in the parish of Good Shepherd.

### JOINING GOOD SHEPHERD CONFERENCE

Beth is not completely certain of the year she joined the local conference. She believes she began as a young bride before she had children which suggests she had joined by the early 1970s. Minutes of a Good Shepherd conference dated 15 March 1974 record both Alan Douglas and Beth Devine as present. Beth's father-in-law, Bill Devine had also been an active, longstanding Vincentian belonging to the Mitcham Conference so there is a strong Society connection running through the family.

Given the accepted view that the Society, even into the 1980s, was very much a 'men-only' affair, it's surprising to learn that Beth did not feel like the odd



one out as the only woman member in her early years. Perhaps, the patronage of her father helped establish her sense of place in the conference. Within a few years of joining, Beth would have three children under three years of age, with another appearing four years later. In a career that continued until 2001, Beth only had a five-year break from the paid workforce when her three youngest were at home.

For 12 years she worked night shift three nights a week in special care nursing with very ill babies to accommodate her children's needs and husband's work commitments. The Good Shepherd parish had just started when Beth moved to Wheelers Hill; previously the area had been part of St Leonard's in Glen Waverley.

The minutes from 1974 and 1975 indicate the conference had a stable membership of eight. The following minutes record members' concerns and follow-ups relating to home visits. One, in particular discusses a visit to an Indo-Chinese family:

*“J. Drysdale reported that he thinks the two immediate needs of this family were: a) financial and, b) need to overcome problems of isolation and loneliness. Mrs P. has finished her crash course in English. P. Saveda asked whether Mrs P. could get a home assembly job? Could we, as the Society, write to local firms asking re. jobs available?” (Minutes, 6/10/75).*

## THE ENTERPRISE MIGRANT HOSTEL

In this period, the conference also visited the Enterprise Springvale Migrant Hostel. This hostel provided accommodation and comprehensive settlement services to more than 30,000 migrants and refugees between 1970-1992.

The Enterprise Hostel demonstrated the long-term benefits of providing a place of warm welcome, respect and encouragement for those coming

from other countries. Many former residents found Enterprise to be a 'safe and welcoming place'.

The hostel was well regarded by many in the community. An approach was made to one of Australia's foremost rose growers asking them to name one of their new hybridised roses, the 'Enterprise Rose' which they agreed to do.

The rose has been adopted by the City of Greater Dandenong and mass planted at the former hostel site which is now a retirement village.

Beth remembers visiting the hostel twice a week with a female member. Conference minutes reveal that members were active in seeking out work and making referrals to employment officers, on behalf of hostel residents.

Since the closure of the hostel, things have changed dramatically in Wheelers Hill where the median prices for a three-bedroom house is around the \$1 million mark and rental is close to \$500 per week, and there's little public housing. So what happens to a conference when the need in the community changes?

## ALWAYS GOING WHERE THE NEED IS

Even though Beth's conference does comparatively few home visits these days, the parish is very generous with support and provisions to other conferences.

*“We have a food collection every week and there is always plenty. We stack it in a cupboard at the back of the church and distribute it. We often have too much and give it to Jordanville Conference. They do on average 80 home visits per week.”*

The conference also organises hampers at Christmas. It has been able to give plenty of food



and toys to Jordanville and to 70 new families who had recently moved into Syndal, as requested by St Christopher's Conference Glen Waverley. Good Shepherd Conference has also offered to visit other areas where there is need, such as Oakleigh and Glen Waverley.

The conference has visited Ozanam Community Centre, in North Melbourne, for many years and serves lunch on average six times per year. At Christmas, conference members collect toiletries, thongs, and men's shirts, socks and underwear for Ozanam's Christmas event in which they give out presents for around 450 of their clients.

## THE KNITTING GROUP

In 1998, Beth's sister Maree was collecting knitted squares from her Narre Warren base and asked Beth if she knew anyone who could sew them together. Since then, she and a group of knitters have been providing rugs, scarves, fingerless gloves and beanies to the men at Ozanam House. The conference provides the wool and Beth delivers it and picks up the finished products.

Beth advertised for knitters at Good Shepherd Church and the Springvale Shop. She has recruited a wonderful network of knitters and paints a picture of dedication.

One lady is Val Brown, who has been knitting since the group started. She and her husband were a knitting duo and whenever Beth visited to drop off wool, she would see the pair of them, sitting side by side, working away.

When they moved out of their home in Doveton, they kept on knitting. While her husband died recently, Val is still going strong and has recruited other knitters at her Berwick retirement village.

Each rug has 56 squares and Beth estimates Val has knitted 97,000, enough for more than 1,700

rugs. This year has been the most productive for the group with 180 rugs, as well as 15 special footy team colour rugs, 109 scarves, 56 pairs of fingerless gloves and 95 beanies. The items are displayed at the church in May every year. It's a wonderful way to honour and reflect on the many ways that people can make a contribution.

## STEADY AS SHE GOES

The members of Good Shepherd Conference have a tried-and-true formula of service. They say the opening and closing prayers and stick to a meeting agenda that has served them well over the years.

They have supported for many years a 'twin' conference in India. Beth used to attend 'social justice in the city' talks, but admits retirement is busier than she had envisaged with family commitments.

The conference meets every for the Monday after church at 9.30 am, in the parish school. The ever-present supply of donated food in the store, thanks to the generosity of the parish community, enables the members to hand out non-perishable food and to give vouchers for meat and fresh food.

Beth is a true foot soldier and never aspired to become an office bearer. She sees others as more suitable in this role, acknowledging, in particular, the wonderful work of Norm Hyland who has been a member since 1972 and president for 17 years.

She believes her conference will continue doing what it has been doing, for many years to come, provided there are members.

The conference currently has eight to nine members. It is a fairly typical example of many conferences today. Beth understands it is not always easy to attract new members, but her daughter Sarah became a member last year, loves the work and hopes to become more involved in future.



*“We’d love to recruit young people, but it is harder now when we are no longer actively involved in the school ourselves.”*

The conference mainstay is President Norm Hyland. Members’ ages span from 60s with most approaching or at the other end of their 70s and 80s. Beth describes them all as ‘salt-of-the-earth people’.

The conference has a positive relationship with the parish. She credits Norm as a key contributor to this.

*“Our parish is very generous when our conference President Norm speaks at mass at the end of June collection. This can raise as much as \$10,000 for the Society. This is a vast amount of money compared with other parishes that may only raise \$500.”*

The conference’s core members’ reluctance to slow their pace in part relates to having very few to share the load around. As well, there are three to four families whom members have been supporting for a long time.

One family has been touched by suicide; there are other personal tragedies and hardships. Members like Beth see the journey as one that continues as long as they’re required.

The Society has recently adopted the term ‘companions’ to describe the relationship members have with those they support. It is a fitting title that accurately reflects the ongoing relationship of this conference with the people it has supported over the years. Perhaps because of the demographics of this mainly comfortable suburb, there are not many requests for financial assistance. Beth knows of only one request for assistance with education costs. The conference does occasionally refer people to the Benevolent Society if people indicate they’re struggling with large bills.

As a young mother, Beth, who juggled paid work and family life with conference work, presented a striking example of work-life balance in the 1970s. Like most members, she sees no reason for the accolades bestowed by the *A Call to Serve* series.

She is bemused and a little embarrassed by the attention. She lives out her service with humility and recognises she is the one who has benefitted greatly from membership of the conference. Her faith is a very practical, down-to-earth one. It is spirituality in action. Beth’s conference may soon be at the crossroad that many older conferences now face, particularly those in areas that have undergone a gentrification process. Still, as long as there’s need out there, the members will providing assistance where it’s needed throughout the year and especially at Christmas with food and toys. Cut from a different cloth, it seems the likes of Beth’s energy and commitment serve as a wonderful model to others.

*As she says, “Always ask a busy person if you want the job done”.*



