

FRANK MULLINS

SOUP VAN MAN-OAM

Every week for more than 40 years, Frank Mullins has volunteered on the Vinnies Fitzroy Soup Van. Recognised as a Vinnies hero and awarded an OAM in 1994 for services to the Fitzroy Soup Van, Frank says he gains far more from this role, than he gives.

A number of years ago, Frank moved to Anglesea. Neither the sea change, nor the distance, dissuade him from continuing on the soup van. Despite the four-hour return to and from the soup van headquarters in North Melbourne, Frank won't miss a Thursday night without a very good reason. This is his story.

EARLY CONTACT WITH THE SOCIETY

More than 40 years ago, the Fitzroy Soup Van began through the goodwill and passion of a few university students motivated to keep a connection with their friends on the street after the sudden closure of a night shelter run by the Missionaries of Charity sisters.

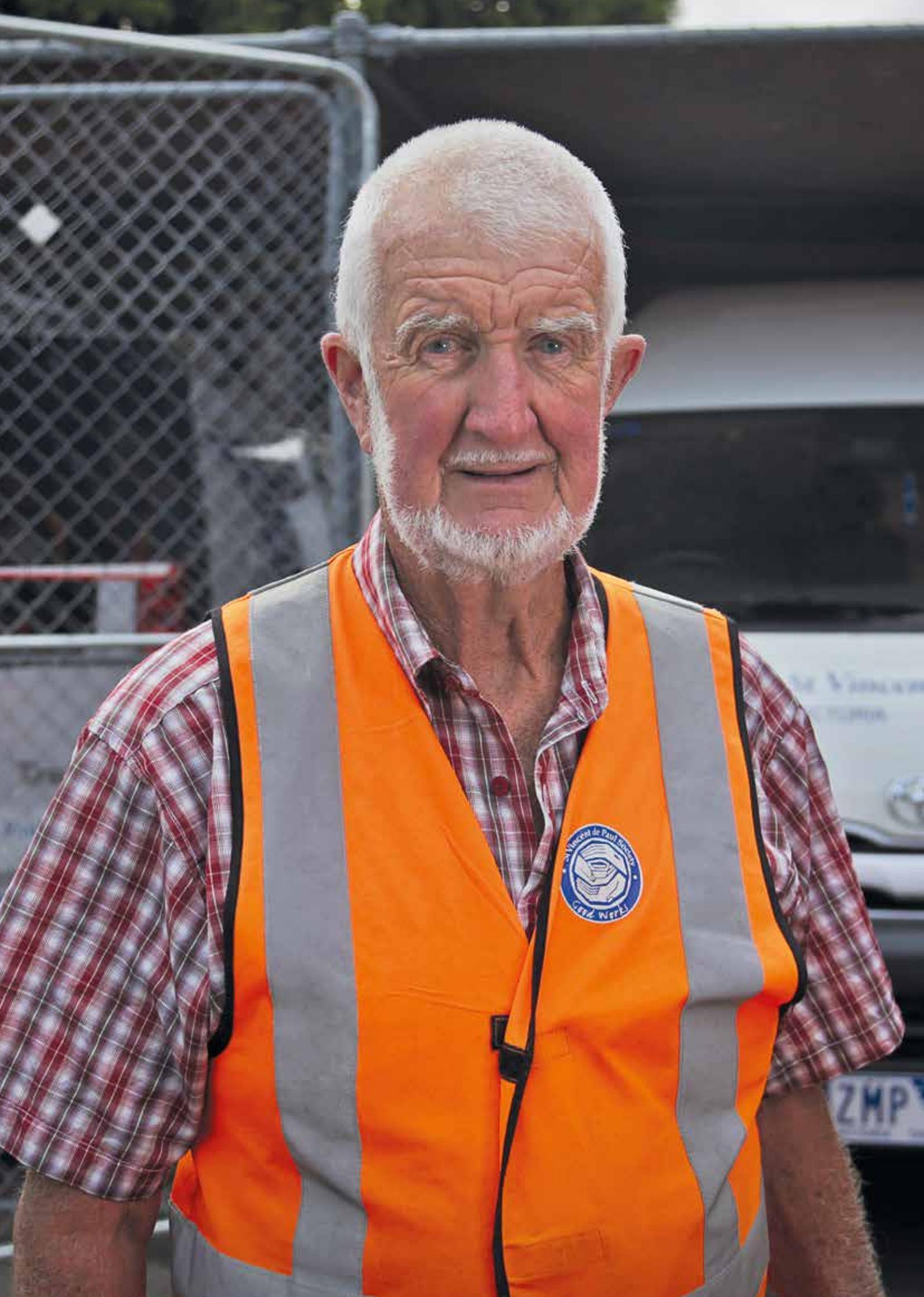
The St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria enthusiastically embraced the students' vision. In 1975, under the formal name of the Matthew Talbot Soup Van (otherwise known as the Fitzroy Soup Van), the service began operation as a special work of the Society. A mate of Frank Mullins who volunteered at the night shelter asked him to help fix a kitchen appliance. Frank was soon attracted to the simplicity and selflessness of what these students were wanting to achieve.

While never becoming a conference member, Frank was always available for any odd jobs required through the local conference, such as mowing people's lawns.

Frank doesn't see himself as a spiritual person, but recognises this quality in others. Raised Catholic, Frank and his wife Rosemary stopped attending mass in 2001, disenchanted by their parish priest's protection of a paedophile in the parish. Frank firmly believes that the soup van has satisfied his craving for something intangible; be it religion or a search for meaning. It has filled a big hole in his life.

Despite walking away from the church, Frank was drawn to two people who, in his mind, exemplified a 'spiritual life'. Both are no longer alive, but as members, they opened his eyes to the good work of the Society. Ron Temby was a devout Catholic and a member of the North Fawkner Conference where newly-married Frank and Rosemary were parishioners.

Frank witnessed Ron stand up for Aborigines when others made derogatory comments and this earned him Frank's eternal respect. The second person was Bernie Ainsworth, president of North Western Regional Council and another devout Catholic. Bernie attended a talk Frank gave about the newly-established Fitzroy Soup Van. He asked Frank what it would take to start a Footscray van. After establishing the need existed, Bernie was



determined to make this a reality.

Meeting weekly over a beer and fish and chips, they mapped out a plan. Frank and Rosemary sent letters to more than 30 parishes from Coburg through to Altona, seeking volunteers and a parish willing to provide a base for the soup van. They had plenty of recruits and eventually St Monica's Catholic Primary School in Footscray signed on as soup van headquarters.

Frank discovered Bernie's two daughters had been murdered and that Bernie had been visiting their killer in prison for many years up to his release. Frank reflects that both Ron and, perhaps especially, Bernie taught him a great deal about acceptance, humility, forgiveness and persistence.

A skilled instrument maker, now retired, Frank is adept at inventing implements to meet all kinds of requirements. He volunteers at a Geelong disability service finding solutions to overcome challenges that enable people to live life as fully as possible. He also helps with general repairs and maintenance work, a great boon for the soup van.

A TRULY SPECIAL WORK

From the beginning, as Frank tells it, it was the men who lived or subsisted on the streets who came first. In this way, the soup van became an important part of the homeless services available to them. The founders never saw the soup van as a service though; it was something much more powerful, and intrinsically involved relationships. It was also an authentic expression of the Gospel teachings to give preferential attention to the poor, to love one's neighbour, visit the sick, clothe and feed the poor and reach out to the most reviled, such as prisoners.

Frank related to this ethos and mission and recognised the beauty of belonging to a community of people who were living this out in a very real way.

Even today, he credits this sense of community as one of the most significant reasons Vannies join and stay.

Very few people who volunteer on Vinnies soup vans these days belong to a conference and may have limited knowledge of the workings of the Society. For example, there may be little or no understanding that the home visit is the integral centre piece of Society work. It is what sets the Society apart from other charitable agencies. Further, and most importantly, home visitation demonstrates a level of personal engagement that transcends the usual setting where a client and a service provider meet in a more public domain, such as an office or cafe.

It is an important distinction to make in the context of this story as many of the people conference members and volunteers encounter through the soup van do not have a home or, at least, not a proper home; the kind many of us take for granted.

This is a home that provides refuge, privacy, opportunities to socialise and develop our sense of self and belonging, away from the scrutiny of an often unkind and judgmental world. The interaction at the back of the soup van is different to what occurs when invited into someone's home.

Frank manages to elevate many of these encounters with people from the streets, parks, squats, rooming houses and public housing to a higher plane than merely an exchange of food and a few kind and encouraging words. Perhaps growing old with the van has helped hone his way of engaging; perhaps he is just a natural (most who know Frank suspect the latter). There is certainly something uplifting about being greeted by his friendly, warm presence and familiar face. The constancy of Frank for those who live with uncertainty and precariousness must be a wonderful tonic.

Frank is interested in other people and their stories, when, and in whatever capacity, they wish to share



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it. He understands that genuine relationships take time to establish. He rarely resorts to assertiveness unless the safety of others is an issue.

CONNECTING WITH THE VOICELESS

Many Vannies describe their time on the soup van as life-changing. People are formed by the experience. It is not only the sense of service and what a person derives from this, it is also the friendship, the sense of belonging and teamwork that keeps people coming back to serve every week.

Most significantly, though, Vannies talk of their connection and friendship, which goes both ways, with the men and women they meet on the streets and in the rooming houses. These bonds are ones that are special. As with any friendship, people are reluctant to break the bonds. Frank admits his first trips were confronting; he had much to learn. He still finds many experiences affect him emotionally.

He recalls some of the rooming houses he's encountered over the years and reckons that while you may become accustomed to them, the impression remains with you for life.

“It's hard to describe to the uninitiated the overall experience of entering some of the rooming houses we visited around Gertrude and Nicholson streets, Fitzroy. Many people would have no idea what conditions people are forced to endure if they want a roof over their head. I used to think you wouldn't keep a dog in some of those rooms...”

“I've seen people living in rooms so tiny they cannot turn around in them, the stench and mess beyond description. It's a world many would have no idea exists.”

It is the people living precariously for whom he has the utmost admiration. They demonstrate courage

and grace, the likes of which sometimes astounds him.

“I've also seen extraordinary acts of generosity in these rooms, with one woman, Pat Gray, inviting her mates off the streets to doss down in her room. Her friends would climb in the window and make a bed on the floor and under her bed.”

“The frailty and vulnerability of some of the people is what worries us most. You can have drug-affected, younger people terrorising the older ones. I can understand why some people say it's safer and preferable sleeping in the parks.”

CHANGING TIMES: CHANGING TEAMS

When the Fitzroy Soup Van commenced it was a small operation with only one van, a fluid route and more flexibility than today. Then, the Vannies went wherever they believed they might find people needing food and company. This meant walking through parks and back alleys in the dark, and visiting squats.

Frank and other long-term Vannies reflect on whether the deep engagement the old guard had with their friends on the street has changed as the operation grew and policies and regulations were introduced to ensure higher levels of safety and food standards. Some things can be lost or diluted, going from a tightly-connected group to something bigger. There is a much larger pool of people required now that there are four soup vans operating from Fitzroy—two that visit the boarding houses and two for the streets.

Frank's Thursday night shift, however, never falters in keeping the faith with the men and women it encounters once a week. The team is very loyal, committed and canny. It comprises many long-termers, but equally embraces new comers. Frank finds it hard to express the range of emotions he experienced in 1994, when he received the letter advising he had been nominated for an Order of

Australia for service to the Fitzroy Soup Van.

“It changed my life in a good way, realising my crew who nominated me thought that much of me.”

The newer recruits acknowledge it can be challenging to establish relationships with the soup van’s friends. But when such relationships begin to deepen, Vannies recognise the pull to return. Frank believes that it doesn’t matter what Vannies’ backgrounds are; it is a level playing field once they enter the kitchen where all the preparation for the night ahead takes place. Frank says he appreciates the cross section of ages, life experience and varying years of service. Each generation learns from the others, with the younger Vannies appreciating the wisdom and knowledge of the old hands. The older Vannies, in turn, respect and value the young peoples’ ease of connecting through different conversation starters with their friends on the streets. As the saying goes, “One is only as old as one feels”, and some Vannies seem perennially young, such is their evident vitality and ability to be agile in the face of challenging situations. Frank possesses such an eternally young aura even after hip and knee replacements.

GOING THAT EXTRA MILE

Frank is one Vannie who would be seen by some today as going beyond the call of duty and, yet, his empathy is what Blessed Frederic Ozanam calls Vincentians to do. The two following accounts demonstrate Frank’s willingness to go that extra mile and to extend the hand of friendship where it is most needed.

In the 1980s, Frank met Bernie Kyle who was living in substandard boarding houses including Osborne House. Frank always looked forward to visiting him. Bernie was a mad Collingwood supporter and was very adept at cadging cigarettes from the Vannies. Frank assumed because of Bernie’s unstable gait and challenging behaviour that he had alcohol and mental health issues. After a few years, Frank

learned that Bernie had advanced Huntington’s disease and was struggling to manage in squalid, substandard accommodation. Frank organised for him to move into an aged-care facility near his home. He was then able to visit Bernie several times a week and provide the care that normally would be provided by family.

“He was a lovely bloke and it was a real pleasure to visit him. He died in his 50s and the Society organised a fitting funeral and send off.”

Frank later learned that Bernie had bequeathed \$10,000 to the Society.

Children are rarely seen around the soup van although, over the years, Frank has been disturbed to find children living in precarious and, sometimes, dangerous situations. In the 1990s, Frank recalls coming across a young man the Vannies knew who was about to have temporary care of another man’s young daughter.

“We knew there were concerns in terms of this man and children. The girl’s father had been charged with an offence and was to be locked up. We spoke to the police who told us to apply for bail on his behalf. We presented a cheque to pay the bail, but the police wouldn’t take a cheque. I drove out to my business in Airport West to pick up cash and he was bailed.”

Frank also recognises that while a ‘hand up’ is critical, at the same time, many people need sustenance.

“We’ve made various attempts to get people jobs. Unless they have continuing emotional support, it doesn’t work and can’t be sustained. You still try. Sometimes people don’t even have someone to talk to who they can share their day with. The stuff that happens naturally in families”.



“There are many hungry people. Food is dear to buy in the city. We think we’re more about the personal contact, but there are still many people who need food. We keep people going.”

BUILDING CONNECTION

Early on, the Fitzroy Soup Van recognised the importance of socialisation. This reflected the mission of greater respect through greater understanding. Opportunities to socialise were not only for Vannies; there were plenty of occasions when Vannies and friends gathered together. There were cricket matches, footy matches, the Christmas party, even an event called The Soup Van Olympics.

The soup van founders always hoped that through meeting with each other on the streets and in the rooming houses, the Vannies and friends would form an ever-growing and intentional community, not just something that ‘happens’ when the soup van goes out.

For the Vannies, there were weekends away in the early years, staying at places such as Shoreham and Apollo Bay. While these weekends involved some serious content, on the whole they were held to bring Vannies together. There was always plenty of planning and advance warning so that people could put the weekend dates in their diaries.

Team sports were another important way of enabling engagement. The footy matches, which began around 1980, were particularly memorable. The soup van team comprised Vannies and any friends who were willing to pull on the jumper. The other team was usually from Ozanam House, made up of staff and residents who wanted to play. In 1995, the Vannies played against the Hearts (Sacred Heart Mission, St Kilda). It was an annual event that continued well into the 1990s.

The Soup Van Footy Match lays claim to being the forerunner of the Reclink competition, a not-for-profit organisation formed in 1990 to enable isolated and disadvantaged people to reconnect with the community and start rebuilding their lives through participating in a wide range of recreational activities, (Reclink went on to initiate the Choir of Hard Knocks, for example).

As well, in the early years, meetings relating to the operation of the soup van were usually followed by a BBQ or supper. Frank remembers many convivial meals in Lygon Street. There were also the usual gatherings that friends have; housewarmings, weddings, birthday parties and send offs.

The regular BBQs, meals out, weekends away, sporting events and reunions are warmly remembered for bringing Vannies from different nights together. These events were also symbolic ways of reminding everyone they were part of continuing something that is worth sharing and celebrating.

It is hard to summarise a life of more than four decades of active service on the Fitzroy Soup Van within these pages. More significantly, it is near impossible to capture the flow-on effects of Frank’s contribution. He sees his life as blessed. He has a wonderful family and he believes he would be lost without his regular Thursday evening commitment.

Frank’s dedicated service equates to more than 12,000 volunteer hours, but that doesn’t come close to quantifying the impact. In an often harsh, uncaring, judgemental world, Frank really cares and the streets of inner Melbourne are the better for it.

