



MATT DILEO

RIPPLES OF KINDNESS

This year's Rising Vincentian, Matt Dileo has mastered the 'ripple effect' – just like the ripples that extend out from where a stone hits the surface of the water, Matt is having an impact on many works within the St Vincent de Paul Society. Most notably, with Young Vinnies' Special Works.

In the case of these programs with young people, the ripple effect isn't only far-reaching – it can be transformative.

Much like St Vincent de Paul Society Founder, Frederic Ozanam, Matt first became involved as a university student. It was 2012 and Matt was volunteering with Vinnies Roadshow, an annual school holiday program for 6- to-12-year-olds run by conferences in three Victorian regional towns.

Secondary students from local Catholic schools are encouraged to become involved, engendering an awareness of local needs and the active role the Society can play in people's lives.

The following year, Matt volunteered with the Young Vinnies' youth camps. Camps are a Special Work of the Society and operate as a conference. After seeing the young peoples' enthusiasm first hand, and realising how much they gained from it, Matt was hooked. He's been coming back to Vinnies ever since.

At 25, and now a qualified teacher, Matt is six months into his four-year term as Camps Conference President. The conference has 10

members and meets every two months during the three main school holidays.

As president, Matt focuses on overseeing the programs and helping others achieve what they need to do, including enlisting volunteers through Vinnies' networks and universities, and encouraging members to develop their skills as camp leaders.

“We have recently been able to enlist 16-to-18-year-olds to volunteer on camps. That's been a positive breakthrough. Ideally, we need about 30 volunteers for 40 kids. It can be challenging getting this number. But last summer, after I sent out a call for more volunteers, the response was amazing! It is reassuring how people come out of the woodwork at the vital moment. Perhaps it was a flow-on effect of kindness.”

Or perhaps, a ripple effect.

This special work is highly valued by the students who participate, their families, their schools and the conference members who refer the students. The camps have several key aims: to offer a memorable experience for students who may otherwise miss out due to a family breakdown, bereavement or social disadvantage.

The camps and Roadshow also promote the idea of establishing conferences in schools, known as College Conferences.

There are wonderful benefits for young people having these experiences in their formative years; often sowing a seed for later involvement with the Society. Matt describes what he has gained from his involvement:

“I’ve gained so much experience and skill working with young people, understanding what energises them, how to relate to them and to recognise when they are upset or something is wrong. These are all valuable, practical skills you don’t learn in lecture theatres.”

The roles of teacher and Vinnies volunteer dovetail nicely. Matt’s school has a Mini Vinnies and is initiating Footsteps of Frederic, a leadership program for young people who have completed year 12. Matt is a proud, vocal champion of the Society and the breadth of what it offers – from practical assistance to social justice and advocacy.

On the Youth Roadshow T-shirts is the Ozanam quote:

“Yours must be a work of love, of kindness, you must give your time, your talents, yourselves.”

It’s a quote that resonates strongly with Matt, and helps explain what he means about the deep connection that can occur between two people of all ages.

“Only when giving yourself and being open to the other person is deep engagement possible. There are times where you witness the kids’ happiness, where they’re ‘in the moment’, focused on enjoying themselves and being part of the group. These moments may appear ordinary on the surface, but something special happens. Everything comes together.”

LEARNING BY DOING

As a relatively recent recruit, Matt feels he is still on a steep learning path to fully understanding the Society’s story, but he relishes the insights he has learned so far.

Matt particularly relates to Ozanam’s account of being challenged by Blessed Rosalie Rendu while delivering firewood:

“Frederic was initially reluctant to encounter the person; he just wanted to drop off the firewood and leave. Blessed Rosalie Rendu challenged him to connect and understand the personal circumstances. I remember initially feeling quite challenged and out of my comfort zone doing a program with a group of people I’d never met before, until I opened myself to the possibilities that could emerge from this encounter.”

“You have to be engaging. It is really important and may be more important than talking about things. You have to live what you say, otherwise, it lacks authenticity.”

In all his interactions, Matt takes inspiration from people close to him.

“Watching my family, friends, people I work with as a teacher, I see their qualities and what they achieve. I guess my goal is to emulate many of the fantastic skills I see in these people and utilise these on the camps and in my duties as president.”

TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENT

Matt is often struck by the challenges the students face, not to mention their incredible resilience and insight. He remembers one camp where a brother and sister attended, and then, the following year, seeing the boy was there on his own, without his sister. She had passed away in tragic circumstances.

“This camp was the first time the boy had given himself licence to enjoy himself. At home he was constantly reminded of his loss, and this was very hard for him. That has stuck with me. I still wonder how he is getting on.”

Matt says his work with Vinnies has offered him many opportunities that he wouldn’t have had otherwise, and he was privileged to take part in a

Society-run immersion program to an Indigenous community, Nganmariyanga, near Wadeye, 300km from Darwin. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet with many inspiring young people from across Australia.

Matt recalls one episode that occurred at the end of an activity with the six- to eight-year-olds, when everyone was exhausted and relaxing in front of a movie:

“One of the young boys looked at me and commented that I looked tired. That’s never happened before with a child that young. These kids were more switched on about others and saw things differently to most children of their age.”

Matt also speaks of the considerable satisfaction of being a part of something that makes a difference to young people’s lives.

“When a program finishes there is always a great sense of having achieved something worthwhile. It’s that sense of togetherness: together we achieved something wonderful.

“Feedback can be fantastic; we write letters to the kids and they write letters back and to each other. I have kept them all. There are always so many positive messages that make you want to keep going. Messages as simple as: ‘Dear Matt, you’re awesome!’

“No matter what the program is, I always enjoy watching the relationships that develop between the students, and the students and leaders, and the leaders themselves. I’ve met so many good people through Vinnies.”

THAT RIPPLE EFFECT

Matt knows he’s blessed to be part of Vinnies’ Special Works. He sees himself playing a small role in creating a better world, and wants to be part of addressing long-term change. He believes the camps are a good start, helping students to recognise their worth, and strive to be their best in order to actively participate in society.

In the future Matt would like to see camps that engage older students, but in the meantime he is focused on up-skilling the volunteers and students who participate. Matt’s also open to any future roles in the Society.

Young Vincentians like Matt help to ensure the youthful spirit of Ozanam is ever present and sowing wonderful seeds of good works with young people who may represent the next generation of Vincentians. His story is yet another Vincentian example of Ozanam’s words: “In my life I want to become better and do a little good”.

A snapshot of service

2012	Joined South Eastern Young Vinnies
2015	Joined Kids Camps Special Works Conference
2016 – 2017	Secretary, Kids Camps Special Works Conference
2018	Joined State Youth Team and President of Kids Camps Special Works Conference