

A CALL TO SERVE

VINCENTIAN STORIES



St Vincent de Paul Society
VICTORIA
good works

2023 CHAPTER

**Truly I tell you,
whatever you
did for one of
the least of
these brothers
and sisters of
mine, you did
for me.**

MATTHEW 25:40



**“All have the right to lay
their burdens on us...
Be kind and love, for love
is your first gift to the
poor. They will appreciate
your kindness and your
love more than all else
you bring them.”**

BLESSED ROSALIE RENDU

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OUR MISSION

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

OUR VISION

The St Vincent de Paul Society aspires to be recognised as a caring Catholic charity offering 'a hand up' to people in need. We do this by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope and encouraging them to take control of their own destiny.

OUR VALUES

Commitment

Loyalty in service to our mission, vision and values.

Compassion

Welcoming and serving all with understanding and without judgement.

Respect

Service to all regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender or political opinions.

Integrity

Promoting, maintaining and adhering to our mission, vision and values.

Empathy

Establishing relationships based on respect, trust, friendship and perception.

Advocacy

Working to transform the causes of poverty and challenging the causes of human injustice.

Courage

Encouraging spiritual growth, welcoming innovation and giving hope for the future.



STATE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear members, volunteers and staff,

I am proud to announce that this is the 10th year of celebrating the A Call to Serve. This year we honour three conference members, a community volunteer and the Box Hill Call Centre volunteers, past and present.

Over these 10 years, we have honoured 55 men and women for their dedication to serving people in need. It is wonderful that we have captured so many magnificent insights and records of our treasured Vincentians and volunteers.

While the majority have been members, over the past few years we have also honoured Special Works volunteers, Vinnies shop volunteers and community and former client volunteers. St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria is the sum of many parts and each part performs a vital role.

This year, a common theme that was raised by honourees was concern for mothers and children who find themselves particularly disadvantaged by harsh economic and social conditions.

The honourees' stories presented both in the videos and the written accounts give us a breadth of examples of servant leadership. They are a snapshot history we can all be proud of as we approach our 170th Anniversary.

As well, these awards are a poignant reminder of our member demographics, with 20 former honourees no longer with us. Recruitment and retention remain significant priorities. I hope that these awards inspire us all to be proud of the contribution made by members and volunteers and can in some small way, contribute to our recruitment efforts.

Our five honourees embody our Vincentian values and demonstrate decades of loving commitment, unstinting service, and humility across rural and metropolitan Victoria, as well as with the National SVDP and across many overseas countries.

We are pleased this year to include a group award honouring the vital service to conferences delivered by the Box Hill Call Centre volunteers. Their dedicated work in the background contributes so much to the smooth delivery of home visitation by members in 140 conferences.

I hope you enjoy the stories and the videos. These will be posted on the SVDP Victoria website.

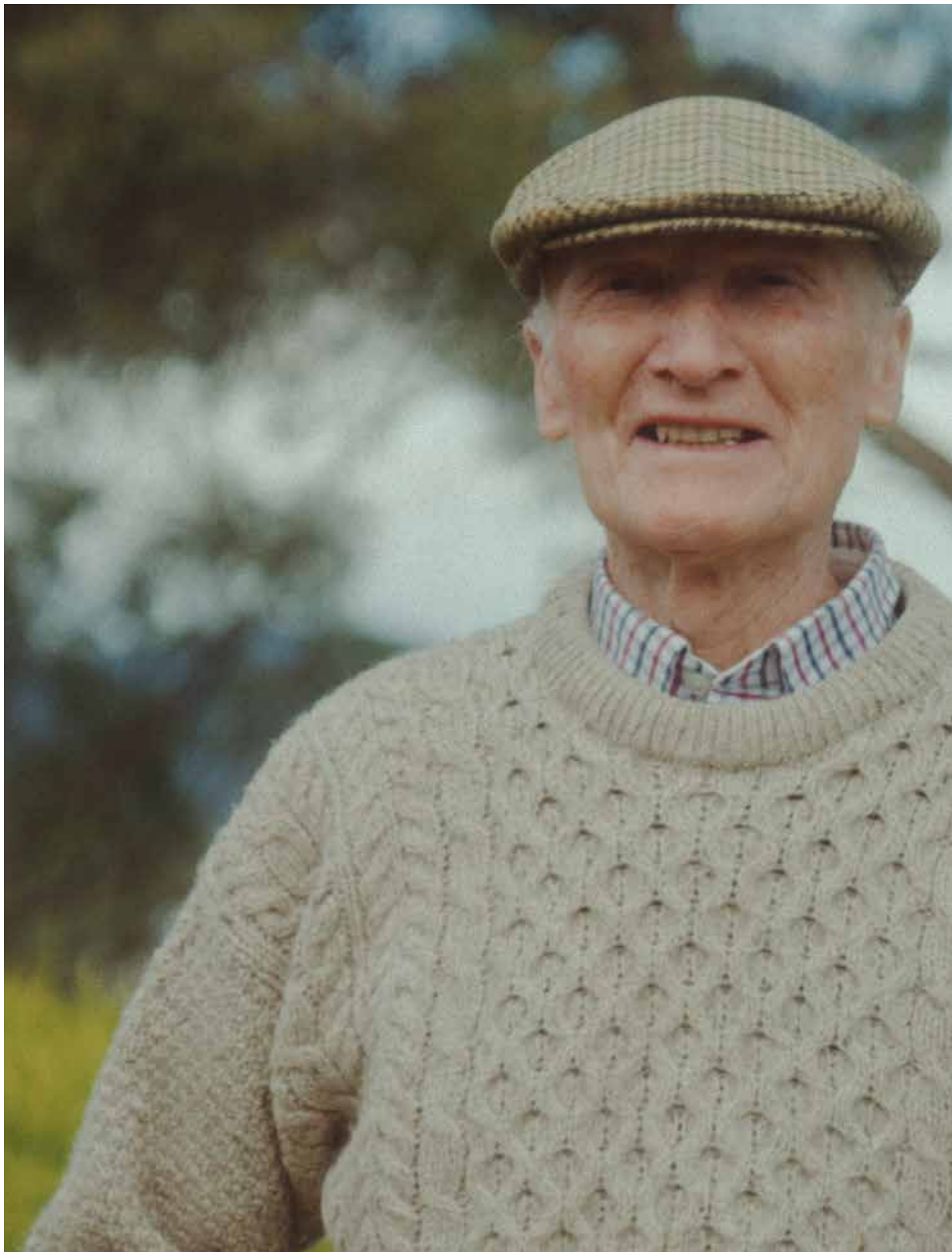
Thank you for your ongoing, steadfast commitment in living out the Vincentian spirit in all you do.

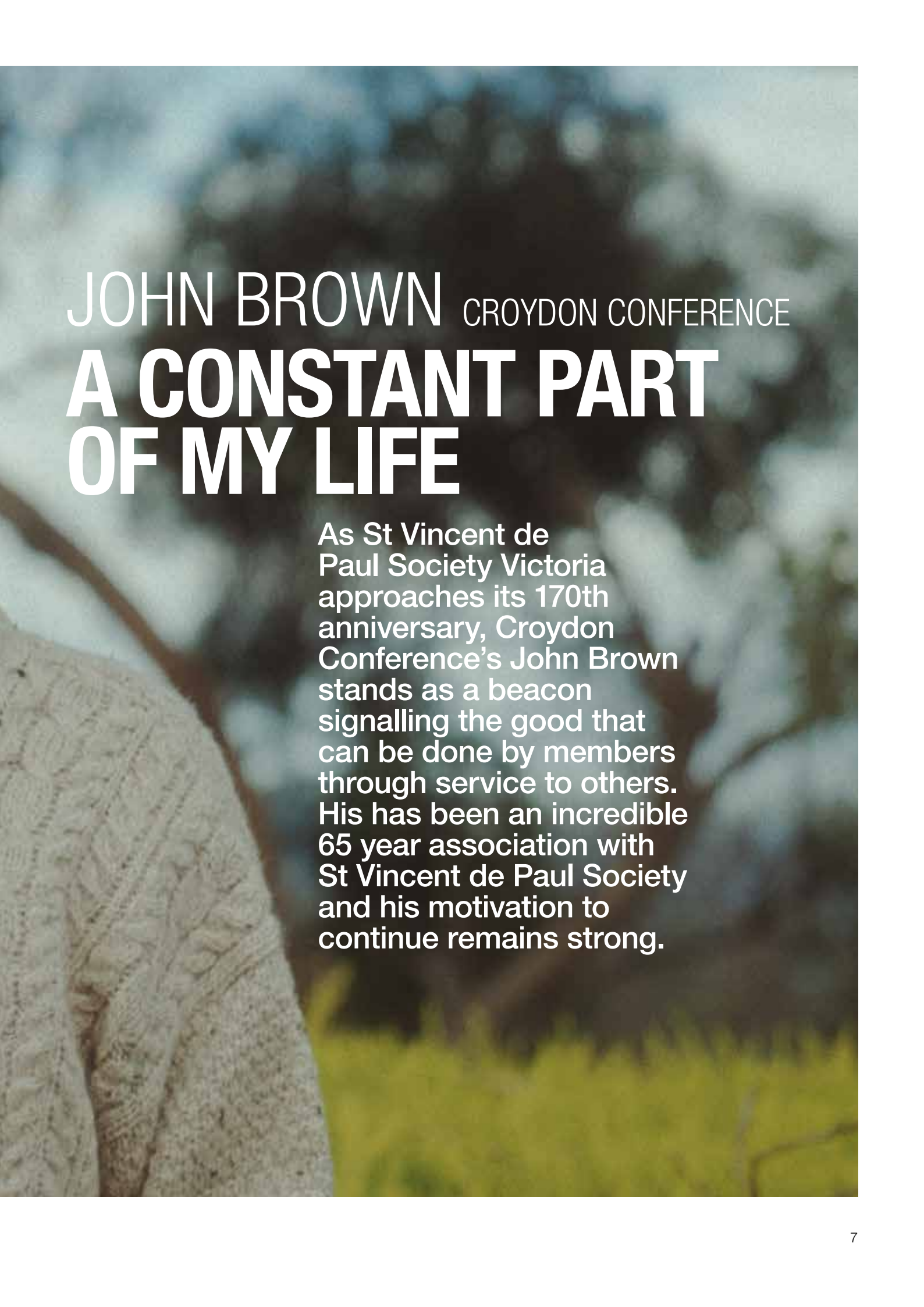
God bless.

Michael Quinn

State President

St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria





JOHN BROWN CROYDON CONFERENCE **A CONSTANT PART OF MY LIFE**

As St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria approaches its 170th anniversary, Croydon Conference's John Brown stands as a beacon signalling the good that can be done by members through service to others. His has been an incredible 65 year association with St Vincent de Paul Society and his motivation to continue remains strong.

John's connection to the St Vincent de Paul Society started in Scotland where he grew up. Joining his parish conference at 18 was very much the exception, but for John, it was a natural demonstration of his abiding faith. He was inspired by a parishioner, Tommy Clark, an exemplary, honest man, who invited him to join. John, in turn, is an inspiration to his fellow conference members. He is bemused by his A Call to Serve nomination, seeing St Vincent de Paul Society as simply "a constant part of my life".

Like most Vincentians, John's humility and motivation to care are intrinsic to who he is. He has always helped others realise their potential. His wife Sheila remembers an encounter early in their courtship where she started to gain an understanding of John.

John was driving us to meet friends and mentioned he had to make a stop on the way. We parked outside a house. A lady and a young child appeared at the door and they chatted briefly. John handed over what looked like a shoe box.

Knowing very little about John or the St Vincent de Paul Society, Sheila thought perhaps John had family she did not know about. She learned about his work with the Society and that the mother could not afford shoes for her child. Sheila was intrigued that a young man had this focus, quite unlike most other men his age. She also learned that John helped out one night per week at Ozanam House. As they grew closer, Sheila understood this was another typical demonstration of John's caring nature.

Strong advocacy

John is particularly well known for his keen sense of social justice. When he sees injustice, he takes action, often contacting his local Member of Parliament. He is very concerned about the impact the housing affordability crisis is having on companions.

Without affordable housing, we will always have social problems. Rents have been ramped up and as an example, we have a one storey building that has been converted into a 15 room boarding house. The landlord charges \$500 per fortnight for each room. A very substantial annual income that exploits low income people and is totally out of order.

John has recently learned that Croydon is getting a block of affordable housing units. It is a move in the right direction. As well, he is pleased that VincentCare, as part of SVDP, is a provider and manager of housing for so many.

John started working at 15. He recognises some people may never be able to work due to health conditions but is disappointed that as a society we don't always provide the essential steps towards increased opportunities to participate in society.

We must help but also encourage people, where they can, to help themselves.

John acknowledges it is hard to redress the inequity in society, but we must continue to try. He makes it his business to keep members informed about announcements that have an impact on the conference. He is always aware of relevant grants and applies on behalf of the conference. This year, he urged the members to write in protest to the Victorian Government when he heard about the change in waste management policy that would impact on the income generated by Vinnies stores.

Maintaining 'heartfulness'

John is inspired by the writings of Church leaders and their often simple yet profound messages. He quotes the Pope's concern that humanity is losing its capacity to be moved, accepting the inequitable status quo that prevails and the need to regain a sense of heart. John urges us all to do what we can to alleviate this inequity. He quotes former Croydon Parish priest, Father Paddy Duggan, now in his nineties, who still occasionally



relieves at Saturday Mass. Father Duggan writes of attending Croydon Conference meetings and what he experienced.

SVDP is caring for those cast aside in the frenzy of progress. SVDP is a measuring rod for the community at large; it operates at the coalface. They (members) listen without comment to the stories of misfortune, put a smile back on faces.

Never a word of criticism is levelled against the subject of charity. Praise is generous for the battler. Sympathy for the victims of life is touching. They work in the trenches in the battle for survival and are the conscience of the community. Where they operate, the Gospel is alive.

Learning through conference work

In the late 1960s, John arrived in Melbourne as a young man in his twenties. He found lodgings in

a boarding house in St Kilda and joined the local conference. There was great need in the area, with many homeless or verging on homeless. He remembers the contribution of Sacred Heart Mission, the many cheap rooming houses and the Gatwick Hotel which was a refuge of last resort for many who were down on their luck. It was the beginning of his understanding about the various faces of poverty and disadvantage.

He relocated to Fairfield, moving into a flat with three other Scotsmen and joined St Anthony's Conference. In these early years, the churches were full and he believes it was mainly parishioners who were being helped or people referred by parishioners because then, the parish priest was central to the work of conferences.

In 1971, he and Sheila moved to Croydon. John found that the conference here was also mainly seeing parishioners and the occasional person

referred by a parishioner. This has changed over the decades. John sees as notable that in the early years, all the members were working during the day and home visits were carried out in the evenings.

We thought nothing of this, but night visits are now a 'no-no'. I recognise there are safety considerations, but this will always impede our capacity to recruit from the ranks of people who are currently employed.

Another notable feature of what John has seen over the years is the decline in young people working. This disappoints him. He feels welfare dependency is too easy a trap.

We need effective early interventions and appropriate support that could help re-direct young people into jobs.

As well, John worries about declining member numbers.

Croydon Conference has lost five members in the last two years due to ill health and death. We must find ways to recruit more members.

In 1980, John and Sheila took their three children to Scotland for an extended stay of almost three

years. In this time, John joined the St Cuthbert's Conference in Edinburgh. This was the parish which he attended when he was growing up.

In all he has seen and all he has supported, his overriding concern remains with single parent mothers. To John, this is the group who need the most support. More should be done to ensure they and their children are well supported, particularly in the early years. There needs to be strong acknowledgement that mothers should not be pressured to take on employment while they are the sole parent with caring responsibilities.

When their three children grew up, Sheila joined the conference. She accompanies John on home visits and together, they help out at the Vinnies store.

The mothers are often receiving no financial support from the fathers of their children and have complex family arrangements. I always feel lucky to have Sheila with me on these visits. The women are more comfortable opening up to another woman who has also cared for children and can truly empathise.



Photograph by Jilian Kim on Unsplash



Anne Herbert, Sheila and John Brown

John and Sheila also spend one Saturday per month at the Croydon Vinnies shop. John has seen the fortunes of this former small shop multiply over the years and is a big promoter of this enterprise.

Scotland SVDP does not have charity shops, which must affect their revenue. And with so few going to church these days, we miss out on the donations that used to be made after Mass. We are very fortunate with so much need to have this focus on a lucrative business that brings in much needed income.

It is hard to quantify a contribution of 65 years. In John's case, the period of service to others is almost unfathomable, but it is also the consistency of commitment, engagement and devotion to the Society and its people in need. He demonstrates care and being present to the person in need and is a constant support to his conference members. Croydon Conference President, Anne Herbert offers these sentiments:

John is an amazing man who knows so much and has seen so much. I can always fall back on

John. He always has a finger on the pulse of local issues and opportunities and will strongly advocate on a person's behalf or where he sees systemic inequity.

Final words

Whatever the government provides, it will never be enough. Sadly, St Vincent de Paul Society will never be out of a job. People will always require more to manage bills and unplanned events. We see so many genuine cases where a crisis leaves a person in strife.

We must help people and also empower them, wherever possible, to help themselves.

1958	St Columba's Conference Edinburgh
1964	Sacred Heart Conference St Kilda
1967	St Anthony's Fairfield
1971	Croydon Conference
1980-1983	St Cuthbert's Conference, Edinburgh
1983	Croydon Conference

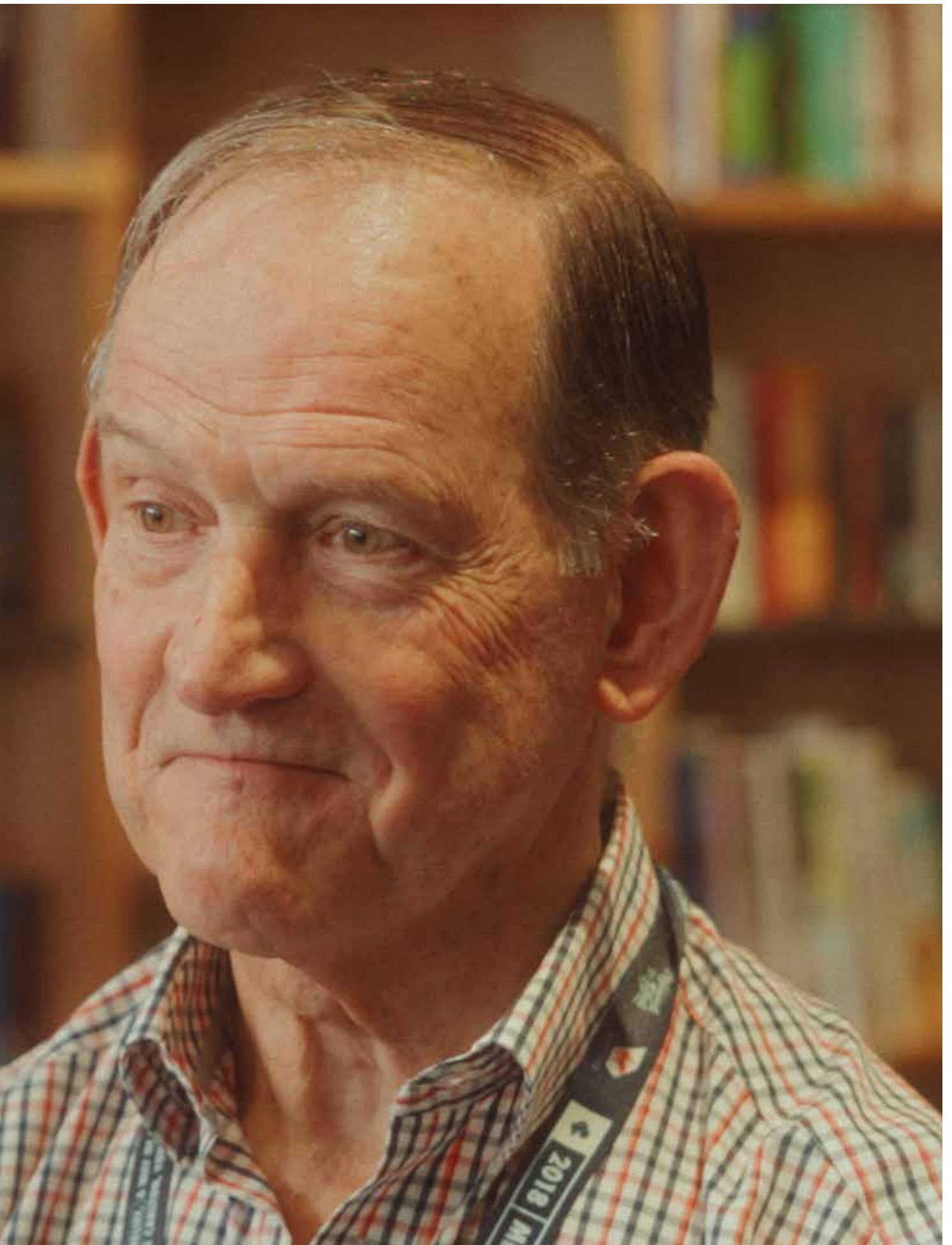


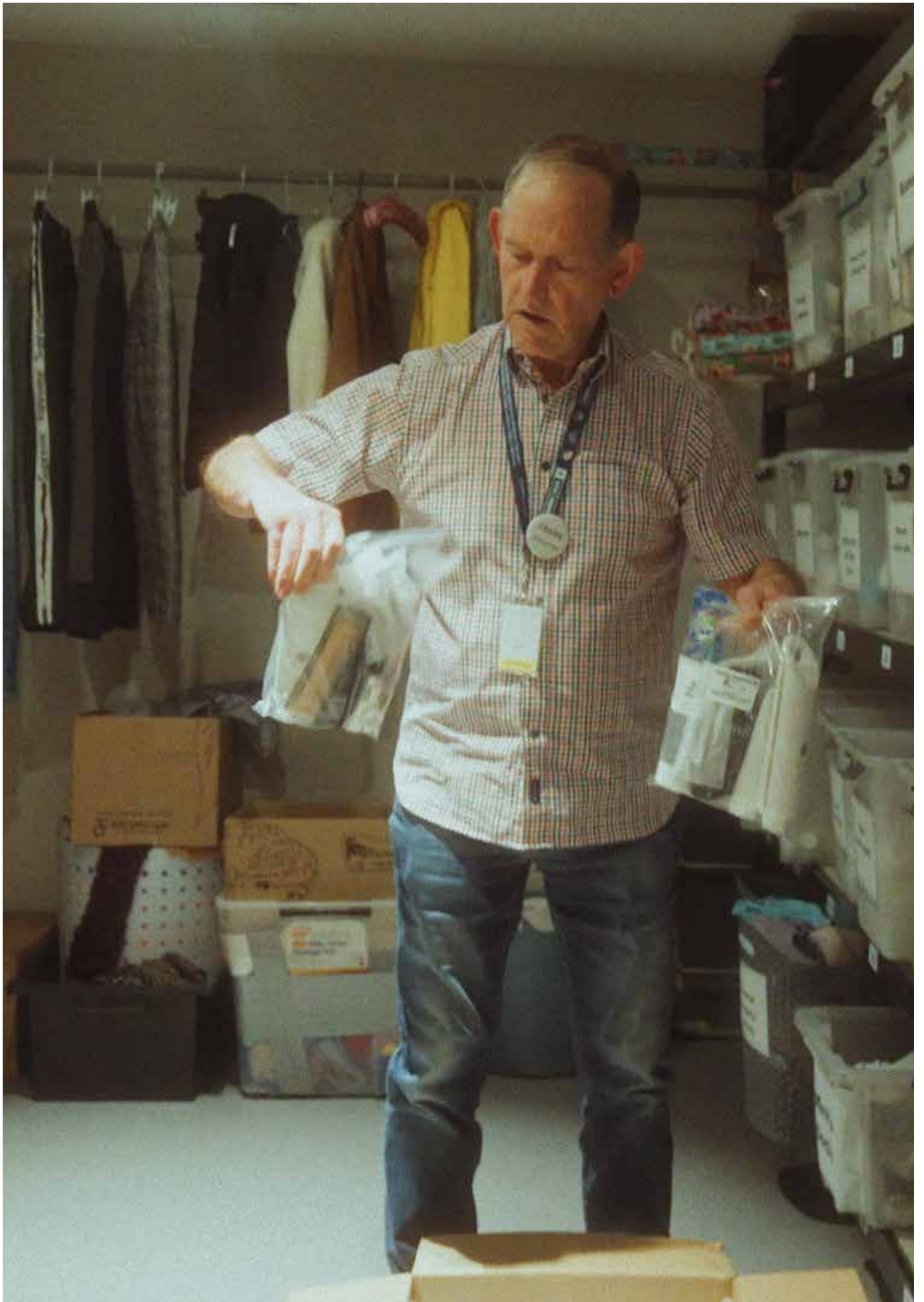
FRANK LEDDA

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER, OZANAM HOUSE

WE ARE ALL CALLED TO SERVE

In an increasingly unequal society, Frank Ledda is a strong believer in everyone sharing resources to help those without what others take for granted. Frank believes we are all called to serve. We all have skills which we can share and we should. If we can do something to ease the burden of others, why wouldn't we?





Frank is aware of the breadth of giving across his communities. Active in his parish, he sees the contribution of members supporting local people in need. There are many ways each of us can serve our community.

Frank first heard about Ozanam House from family members who volunteered there. He noticed the positive vibe that his family relayed from doing this work. He reflected that with their busy lives, they could still fit this in. Frank had recently retired so he contacted Louise Augustinus who manages the Ozanam House Volunteer Program.

Changing face of Ozanam House

Ozanam House has changed considerably over its history. From originally helping homeless men, it now assists men and women and with VincentCare's Rainbow Tick accreditation and Reconciliation Action Plan, prioritises LGBTQIA+ and First Nations People. It offers accommodation for 134 people with a mixture of crisis accommodation, extended stay and Independent living units. The Homelessness Resource Centre is available to residents and drop in clients and provides a health platform as well as meals, showers, laundry facilities, material aid, programs and activities and specialist workers who assist people experiencing homelessness.

Twenty five per cent of clients are now women and twenty five per cent are from the LGBTQIA+ community. The rise in older women presenting for the first time is a stark reminder of economic and social disadvantage affecting some groups more than others. As well, there are also more younger people using the services than occurred in the past.

Ozanam House Volunteer Program

Ozanam House values their volunteers highly. They fulfill many important roles and enhance the amenity and sense of welcome that is ever present in the new Ozanam House development. They

have 80 active Community Volunteers like Frank who volunteer on a regular basis. They also have a Client Volunteers program; a two-year recovery program for clients with a lived experience of homelessness who operate a barista coffee service on site. As well, there is a Corporate and School Volunteer Program.

Louise emphasises that it is important that the volunteers are familiar and comfortable in a crisis and homeless services environment; it can be daunting at first. She arranges for volunteers to assist with the meal service initially as a first step to understanding the client group and the environment. Volunteers share their experience and skills and assist with administration, reception, driving, running cooking classes, financial literacy and health promotion sessions, acupuncture, garden group and activities like bingo.

For the clients, it's a nice dynamic, knowing people volunteer by choice and give their skills, time and of themselves. This also enhances our services and experience for our clients.

The clients love the new building, it's sense of welcome, different spaces and a beautiful outside area. Last year's A Call to Serve Client Volunteer honouree, Garry is busy constructing a vertical herb garden with the residents which will provide produce for the Catering Team.

Frank's volunteering journey

Six years ago, Frank started volunteering in the old Ozanam House building. Frank is an organized person who likes order. Louise recognized he was the right person to manage and coordinate the material aid on site. He set up the original material aid at the old Oz House, then established the new material aid room when the redevelopment was completed.

Frank has lined the walls with tubs for different items, such as toiletry packs for men and women, hygiene packs, socks, underwear, and emergency



clothing. They are the kind of belongings and items most of us take for granted but many of the clients do not have this luxury. Staff access the material aid room to collect items for clients as needed. It is a wonderful resource for people who may present with very little.

Frank acknowledges the generosity of those who donate many goods.

We have wonderful donations from many organisations like Pinchapoo for toiletries, Footscape for socks and Kogo (Knit One Give One) for knitted blankets, beanies, mittens and scarves.

A typical day for Frank might involve a 7am start to get the dining room ready for breakfast service. Frank puts out the various cereals, juices, bread and spreads and makes sure the urn is boiling. He likes that people can choose what they want and can help themselves.

After cleaning up after breakfast, he works in the material aid room and then may help the set up for lunch. He sometimes helps with coffee orders in O Café.

Frank is always happy to fill in any gaps such as helping out with driving to pick up donations. He particularly enjoys this time with the client volunteers. These trips allow for conversation and he is often moved by what is disclosed and shared about their lives.

I keep doing it because I have a role to serve. I enjoy what I do. I enjoy the interactions with the staff and the clients. These guys are going through some pretty tough times. If we can help them along the way somewhat, that's better for everyone, not just them. We all benefit.

The Ozanam House Markets

Frank was aware that sometimes the material aid stock was remaining on the shelves and not



moving quickly enough to the people in need who could benefit from the items. He and Louise discussed how they could move this stock. The idea of regular free markets on site grew from this, with staff and volunteers helping out distributing the material aid on a regular basis.

We've held several so far. They're for the residents and anyone from the street. One hundred and ten people came to our most recent one and received scarves and beanies, blankets, socks and pamper packs. It is a pleasure to give these goods out to people who need them.

Final words

Frank credits the team and in particular Louise with helping him enjoy his involvement at Ozanam House.

Every ship needs a good captain and for me, this is Louise: she does a really good job. Everyone is

willingly here and doing what they can with a smile on their face.

Louise returns the compliment.

Frank is always willing to go over and above his role. I could not do what I do without Frank. Knowing Frank is on site, always makes the day better. He is a champion. Everyone loves him and he gets on with people.

We are so grateful that he chooses to volunteer with us.

Frank is about to turn 80 and will continue to serve as long as he can.

I will do what I can. I'm fit and have good health. I'll be here unless they kick me out. I've learned to be a little more humble. It's a pleasure to serve and a privilege.

2017 Community Volunteer, Ozanam House

JOHN AND MARIE O'BRIEN

COBDEN CONFERENCE

GIVING AND RECEIVING

John and Marie O'Brien's involvement with the Society of St Vincent de Paul spans five decades.





John and Marie's complementary skills and support of each other has enabled them to put up their hands for many challenges. Both have held an array of leadership positions across the Society.

They understand the diversity of the Society's coverage here and overseas: regional towns, remote locations, city and metropolitan areas. Some areas are very contained and high density; others spread out; everywhere has its own challenges and rewards.

John and Marie are expansive in their praise of the work of members, many of whom they have met on their long and wonderful journey with the Society. Every organisation needs a cheer squad and the O'Briens are barracking strongly for the Society as it reaches its 170th anniversary.

Starting the Cobden Conference

John's father was involved in many causes, including the Society. John himself served for a long period in Apex and with the State Emergency Services. John realised he wanted to do more. An old friend from school, Jim O'Shea suggested John consider starting a conference. Jim would continue to be an inspirational role model of Vincentian values for John.

I was attracted to joining an organisation that offered a way to practically help the poor.

In 1978, John became the founding member of the Cobden Conference. He was running a successful plumbing business, knew many people and was used to solving practical problems. Then, Marie had her hands full caring for their two children, looking after the books for the business, being involved in community organisations and the parish as well as being a full-time teacher. In 1985, Marie joined the conference and almost immediately became president, a pattern familiar to many conference members.

In the early days, the conference met in the evening at the O'Briens' home. After the formalities, members enjoyed a generous supper with everyone bringing a plate. John and Marie value the role of welcome and hospitality and the many enduring friendships made through Society work.

In the country, everyone tends to know each other, cross paths regularly and often know the background of a family. This can be both an advantage and pose difficulties. Discretion and respect for a person's dignity and privacy are very important. Always seeing Christ in the face of the poor must remain at the forefront.

Affordable rental housing and country realities

There is very little rental accommodation in the district. People might find an old farmhouse that seems cheap, but it may be quite a distance from the township and there'll be hidden costs. Without a reliable car, people are isolated; they run out of water and wood for the heater. An issue such as getting the kids to school becomes a hurdle. School buses need to be organised, school uniforms and books and computers need to be purchased. As well, internet reception is often a problem.

The conference ensures people understand the steps they need to take and keep an eye on people who might be a bit lost and needing guidance.

Finding jobs for companions

It is hard to get work and John and Marie see many people come to live in the country, not realising the challenges of isolation, unemployment and hidden costs.

Being well connected to their community, has enabled the O'Briens and other members to help companions obtain work. John believes



members' diverse skills can genuinely help those in need in country communities. Most work relates to farming. Over the years, John and Marie have known which farmers are looking for relief milkers, or need help with fencing and odd jobs. The Western Star Butter Factory often need tanker drivers for a few shifts. There is a strong sense all the members muck in to help people establish a new life here.

That's the wonderful thing about the Society, the diversity of backgrounds; Cobden has teachers, farmers, accountants, mechanics,

secretaries; a member from Department of Agriculture.

Assistance Centres

Lengthy distances to conduct home visits was a key reason that John was keen for another model of service delivery. As well, not everyone is comfortable being visited in their home.

John was key to the successful planning of the assistance centre model as a way to help people in need. The Corangamite Assistance Centre in Camperdown is part of John and Marie's legacy as are Mildura, St Arnaud and Ballarat. This model has continued to gain popularity, with at least

30 centres across Victoria. People can access support without the need to have members in their homes.

Each assistance centre has its own individual character suited to its area. We have to be attuned to this; what's going to work best for a particular area.

Highlights as State President

After a rapid rise through Conference and Regional Presidencies, John served as State President from 1991-1996. He was the youngest person to ever serve in this role. He counts many achievements in his term. Much of what he achieved would have been impossible without Marie's support. Marie was often with him, sharing the driving, providing companionship and the chance to de-brief. The regular visits to Melbourne necessitated 400 kilometres of driving each time and long working days.

Re-structuring the Society to achieve greater representation

John's prior involvement with the Camperdown Centre and as Regional President had brought him frequently to Melbourne and he was very familiar with the governance structure of the Society. He became aware that State Council often had little or no knowledge of particular concerns and issues that country members were dealing with.

As regional presidents, we were assumed to be members of State Council even though we only met twice a year. I didn't feel that structure served us well.

An early goal in his presidency was to change the structure of State Council to a more democratic one that gave every region representation at State Council through their central council rep.

John and Marie travelled all over Victoria, calling meetings everywhere, to explain to the members what John was wanting to do.

I very quickly learned, if you don't bring the members with you, you'll never get anywhere.

John told the members what he envisaged in

restructuring a central council. He received a strong vote in favour and set about establishing central councils.

We have a link from the conference through central councils to State Council and straight back to the conferences. It's still working today and I'm very proud of that.

Changes to Ozanam House

John also oversaw key changes to Ozanam House that had started in his predecessor Bill Kinsella's term. The State Government was imposing new arrangements on providers of homeless accommodation. John acknowledged there was a need to meet new regulations and standards, but not at the expense of what was important to the Society. It took two years of negotiation before State Council settled on terms that improved the dignity of men, even though this meant reducing the number of beds.

John holds dear a key tenet of the Society which is that the members should be in the driving seat. The Society is owned by the members. Without members, there would not be the Society we have today. The structural reforms meant accepting government funding which threatened the Society's ethos of independence.

It is much easier for us to raise funds than many other charities. Members have access to those funds. This allows us to control our destiny and not compromise our faith-based structure.

The Expo

During his term, John realised the importance of raising the profile of the Society in Victoria for the general public. In 1993, a group known as the Friends of the Society were supportive of this idea and covered almost all the costs to engage a professional company to deliver the Expo, which was held over a weekend at the former Exhibition Building in Carlton. The Expo showcased every aspect of the Society's work in Victoria. Seven thousand people visited and over 40 buses brought people from country areas. It was a wonderful event.

John recognises that raising the profile of what the Society does is an ongoing necessity; both due to declining membership across the country and more importantly, so that we speak out when we see social injustice.

The changing face of conferences

Over the years, women have been welcomed into the Society fold. John sees this as a blessing.

Women do a fantastic job, have proven to make fine leaders and add another dimension. They bring sensible discussion, compassion, faith, hope and charity. I look forward to the day we have a female State President. This would be a great step forward for the Society.

Overseas development involvement and twinning

John accepted an invitation to become Victorian chair of the State Overseas Development Committee and for a time,

Marie was treasurer. John was also the national representative for a time. Over almost two decades, these roles would see John and often Marie immersed in many wonderful programs to assist people living in abject poverty in developing countries and particularly assisting after natural disasters.

John and Marie felt enormous privilege to travel to many developing countries such as the Philippines, Fiji, India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and Vietnam.

The travel may sound glamorous but the days were long, often starting at 6am and involving many meetings in different villages and locations, often only accessible by motor bike. John and Marie were at times taken completely out of their comfort zone. There was a bomb that went off at close quarters in Karachi, Pakistan with John admitted to hospital. Another time, Marie and John remember a travelling colleague's rosary beads working overtime as the Indian plane they were in took off with



SVDP supported building of new homes for Parkari Koli tribal people, southern Pakistan who lost everything in floods.



Sunraysia Regional meeting, Allen Moloney at left, 2014

a door partly open. John has even had a close shave with bandits in pursuit on a trip to housing projects in Pakistan.

The trips were taken for many reasons. As the Overseas Promotion Training and Development Officer with the National Council, John was often providing formation and training activities in governance and leadership in conferences and councils.

John and Marie witnessed the good works the Society provided such as social enterprise projects, re-building homes lost after avalanches, floods or severe monsoons and education projects which parents valued as a vehicle for families to escape poverty. As a member of the Council General, John has had the privilege of serving as Project Coordinator for two Asian countries for the past ten years.

It is rewarding to share the Society's finances to this end and to deliver a very effective hand up.

Assist a student

When John and Jim O'Shea were on a visit to India, several conversations and much cooperation by the two resulted in the Assist a Student Program. Brother Doug Walsh provided his support as National Coordinator to ensure the program's growth. It has been a highly successful scheme that has allowed an average of 6,000 students per annum, who would otherwise have missed out, to attend school.

Marie reflects on some of the resounding memories from the trips.

In Da Nang, members repackaged rice into kilo bags for distribution to their Companions after a beautiful Sunday Mass. They were giving all that they had in the name of St Vincent de Paul.

The smoking mountains of urban rubbish that housed thousands who scavenged a meagre livelihood from the internally combusting heaps. We discovered a beautiful chapel made from

recycled bits and pieces that made it so easy to re-experience Christ's presence in the poor.

The people we met have so little and in the main are happy, even when going without. They are far more resilient than we are.

Many Asian, South East Asian and Oceania members have a deep expressive faith which is communicated with great joy and would be an asset to any conference here in Australia.

Tertiary Education Sponsorship Scheme and other key contributions of Marie

Marie recognised the unaffordability issues that can hold back country kids from having the same opportunities as their city counterparts. She implemented a regional Tertiary Education Scheme (based on the Gippsland model) to North West Central Council. The scheme in particular assists young people in the country to afford rent, travel and other essentials required for tertiary studies.

Throughout her 40 years involvement, Marie has taken on many leadership roles, always willing to fill a gap and share her skills. She has always advocated for members to receive the best resources. She singles out Bridges out of Poverty as a valuable experience for many.

Marie has made a particular impact in ways that increase networking and mutual support between members, particularly in leadership roles. A great supporter of face to face and follow up training, she established the Amelie Ozanam Hub in Ballarat where members can gather for activities and attend training without the demanding trip to Box Hill. She sought and gained approval for a part time resource worker at the Hub, who supports the work of the Central Council. This action was taken after a commissioned feasibility study and recommendations demonstrated the tyranny of distance experienced in the NWCC and the need for extra support to cover the largest Council in Victoria.

Marie enjoys representing NWCC on the Membership and Leadership Advisory Committee to help provide a country perspective.

Final words

Every day, the Society takes action to improve lives in big and little ways. John and Marie O'Brien's impact has been felt in their local town of Cobden as well as across their region, central council, across Victoria and nationally, particularly through overseas development work in many developing countries across South East Asia. It has been a long, fulfilling journey with a very broad reach.

This is an attractive organisation. Not only are we helping people; we are also enjoying what we're doing. We have made great friends all over Australia and around the world.

We couldn't have achieved what we have without each other's support.

John

1978	Cobden Conference
1981-1986	President, Cobden Conference
1986-1991	Regional President
1991-1996	State President and Member, National Council
1998-2016	State Overseas Committee Chairman
2009-2011	President Corangamite Regional Council
2011-2015	Central Council President, North West Central Council
2014-2015	Acting President, Sunraysia Regional Council
2014	Appointed Member Council General International

Marie

1985-2012	Cobden Conference
1985-1990	President Cobden Conference
2012-2021	Camperdown Conference
2013	Secretary, North West Central Council
2015-2019	President, North West Central Council
2016-2023	Twinning Officer, Wimmera Avoca Tyrrell Regional Council
2020	Member, State Leadership and Membership Committee



LOLA ROWE SUNBURY CONFERENCE

EVERY CONTRIBUTION IS VITAL TO THE WHOLE

Lola Rowe recognises the importance of understanding people's circumstances and helping identify the best forms of assistance.



Lola has spent a great deal of her time advocating on behalf of companions where there are outstanding bills, issues with Centrelink or needs not always readily disclosed. She knows how important it is to have someone in your corner. She is often called upon to show less experienced members how to be effective advocates.

Lola lives and breathes a sense of community. As she puts it, we all need to know we're needed, loved and wanted. People need to be involved in their communities. She worries young people are losing this ability with so much solitary time on screens. Families in need are often living insular lives because of unaffordability and a sense they cannot participate as fully as others in the life of their local community. This is another reason why the local conference is helpful; it can be a bridge for people.

A simple invitation to help make sandwiches was Lola's introduction to St Vincent de Paul Society. It was the start of an association that more than thirty years later, is still going strong and has given Lola immense fulfilment and purpose.

Joining Mildura Conference

Lola has an abundance of energy that belies her age. She is always on the go and has a natural tendency to help out when a need arises.

Lola had been very busy in her career as a medical secretary. This changed when she became a fulltime carer for her husband. When invited to help make sandwiches, she was unusually hesitant to accept, due to her husband's reliance on her. The conference suggested she bring her husband along.

Lola remembers a friendly, relaxed environment with people chatting as they buttered loaves of bread. She accompanied members who took the sandwiches and hot drinks to Aborigines living on the banks of the Murray. Shortly after, Lola joined the Mildura Sacred Heart Conference, which had

been established in 1939. The conference was a bustling, vital part of the community. The members guided her in understanding the Society's mission and values.

The conference met at 7pm which was incompatible with her caring responsibilities, so she, with some others, started the Mary McKillop Conference, which met during the day.

Mildura is a town known for its food production and warm climate. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was flourishing. There was always plenty of work available picking fruit and tending the vineyards, which would see an influx of people over summer. Even in prosperous times, with so many travelers looking for work and people passing through, there was often a call on the Society for overnight accommodation.

Mildura members are known for initiating many special works. In the 1970s, the Sacred Heart Conference opened a night shelter, giving free bed and breakfast to men who would otherwise sleep rough. This hostel for wayfarers was inaugurated by the Riverland Regional Council, made up of conferences close to the borders of New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria.

The Mildura members were an energetic bunch of people. Before paid managers were introduced, Lola enjoyed helping manage the Mildura Vinnies shop for several years with a long serving Vincentian, Veronica Grant. Lola valued the strong connection to the community that members worked to always enhance. In later decades, members built aged care units and established a food bank. The latter still operates today.

A hand up

Lola has a strong recollection of a family with four children she helped in Mildura. They were one of the town's early refugee families, first spending time in a refugee camp in Darwin. The father had grown grapes and citrus in his homeland



and went on ahead to Mildura to find work. The conference helped bring his family to join him and proceeded to be a valuable link to their successful re-settlement, assisting with education, financial support and being there to help them establish themselves in the local community.

This was a learning experience for Lola. The family was Muslim and while the mother adhered to strict Islamic code, her two older daughters wanted to dress like their classmates at St Joseph's College. The father asked Lola if she could provide some clothes. Lola invited them to come to the Mildura shop, not understanding the need for privacy.

I piled clothes into my mini minor and took them to their home. The girls chose their clothes and were very happy, just keeping their head scarves.

Lola relates proudly that the family have done extremely well. Through hard work, the father ended up with a team of 20 workers. The family

now own their home, the mother obtained her driver's licence and the two older children went off to university. Lola is sure the younger girls will be leading successful lives as well.

Helping others

Lola attributes her desire to help others to her loving family and particularly to her father, a policeman with a strong Irish Catholic upbringing. Religion and faith featured prominently in household discussions and her father always made it his business to help others.

Lola remembers many instances of her father going out of his way to assist people. He often met with Aboriginal Elders after Sunday Mass to resolve any matters he could. Her dad refused to patronise businesses that excluded First Nations people.

I saw the help he gave others. He always went above and beyond the call of duty. It is deeply ingrained in me to do the right thing for others.

Sunbury Conference

In 2012, Lola moved to Riddells Creek to help care for her ageing mother. She joined the Sunbury Conference and soon became treasurer. As well, she took on the new role of Regional Secretary to Regional President, Arthur Donovan. She also became the Mini Vinnies Coordinator, visiting schools in the region and speaking to children about Frederic Ozanam and how they could be involved. Lola believes it is important that members embrace the spirituality of belonging to the Society and honouring its foundational story.

Lola also assisted with the NILS program as well as conducting interviews with companions from the office at the Vinnies Centre. Sunbury Conference does very few home visits these days, but meet companions somewhere they are comfortable. This could be inviting them to a café for a coffee or meeting in a park.

Always looking to enact meaningful, long term assistance, Lola recounts the case of a mother escaping family violence with children under school age. On visiting, Lola and her co-member discovered there was no furniture in the house. The DV agency had left the family with two mattresses, two doonas and a microwave. The mother assured Lola they could cope, but Lola persuaded her to accept beds, and other furniture.

Lola stayed in touch. The mother was very focused on giving her three children the best chance in life. The conference supported the family financially and with material assistance and most importantly, with education. They bought a computer, paid for online education programs and for a tutor. When one child succeeded in receiving a place in Law school, the conference helped meet the cost of text books.

This demonstrates the importance of a hand up. We rarely receive requests for help from this family. All the children are doing very well.

There is a role for everyone

After her husband passed away, Lola travelled to Katherine and Tennant Creek volunteering with



Photograph by Ondrej Machart on Unsplash

the Mother Teresa Sisters. She had worked with them where they were based in Dareton outside of Mildura and wanted to be of more use.

In Katherine, I spent time in a beautiful home for women who had been alienated from family due to addictions and age-related conditions. I cooked and helped with other tasks. I also worked for the Sisters of Mercy in Wilcannia at the school. I filled in for the principal for six weeks and helped run the little Vinnies shop, mainly sorting clothes.

Every day is pretty full for Lola and that's how she likes it. She is always helping, often with a number of organisations. She has served as President of Probus, she helps out at the Anglicare op shop when not busy with her conference work and she regularly travels a fair distance to care for her three grandchildren.



Strong advocate of volunteering

Lola can't imagine a life without helping people; she enjoys it, believing she benefits as much as the people helped and encourages people to find a role that fulfils them. Every role is important.

We need people in leadership positions but also in the wings and in the background. Every contribution is vital to the whole. We have a dear lady in our conference, same age as me, who works busily two days per week making up pamper packs. Don't worry if no computer skills or home visits not your thing. We will value your contribution.

Lola believes strongly in immersing oneself in the spirituality of conference life. It is personally enriching and connects members back to the Society's foundations. She is also a wonderful advocate for the broad benefits of volunteering

and how much the volunteer gains from the experience. As she explains:

Don't just retire and do nothing. Find something to do. I get a high out of knowing I can help. I feel 36, not 86! Keep busy!

I have gained so much out of being part of SVDP. My life has always been very full but with SVDP, I've met the most fantastic people, travelled a lot, particularly when I was secretary to the regional president. What a lovely experience I've had.

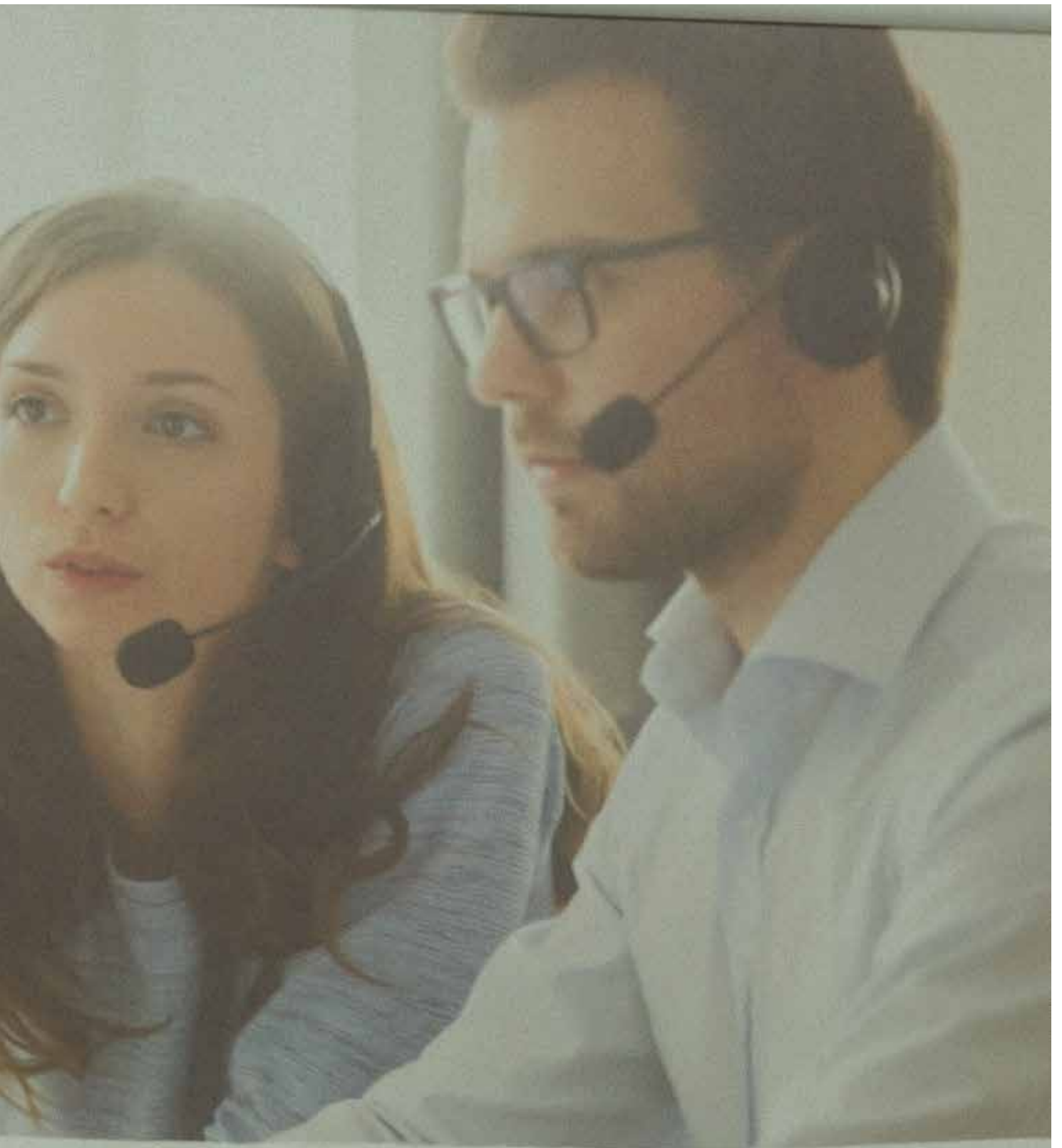
1995	Sacred Heart Conference Mildura
1995-2007	Foundational member, Mary MacKillop Conference Several years volunteered in Mildura Vinnies store
2012	Sunbury Conference
2012	Regional Secretary



WELFARE CALL CENTRE BOX HILL VOLUNTEERS **HIDDEN TREASURES**

When a person in need turns to the Society for assistance, the first step is almost always a phone call requesting help. The call is taken by either a conference or region or by one of our Call Centres. Overwhelmingly, most calls come through the Box Hill Call Centre.

“ EACH YEAR OUR CALL
MORE THAN 40,000



ALL CENTRE VOLUNTEERS RESPOND TO
100 CALLS FOR ASSISTANCE. ”

The Welfare Call Centre Box Hill was set up almost twenty years ago. It is the largest of our call centres and services the four metro Central Council areas (Western, Southern, Eastern and Northern) – excluding Geelong, Mornington and Berwick Regions which have their own call centres. The calls will be passed on to 140 conferences. On a typical day, six to eight volunteers will answer 250-300 phone calls between 10am and 3pm. Each call received represents a person or household who will receive assistance usually from the nearest conference, usually within 48 hours. This equates to between 3000 and 4000 households receiving assistance each month.

This A Call to Serve award recognises the contribution of both former volunteers who have contributed and current volunteers who continue

to contribute to the efforts that over twenty years have made the Box Hill Call Centre a vital cog in the operation of conference work. Many of the volunteers were reluctant to participate in this story, preferring to remain in the background. The satisfaction they receive from helping people in the Call Centre is enough for them. Three volunteers share their perspective for this story as a way to shed some light on the role and contribution of many.

While the Box Hill Call Centre is supervised by two staff, it is the volunteers who reign supreme. The Call Centre relies entirely upon their commitment to turn up every week day. It is a commitment the volunteers take very seriously, often offering to do an extra shift to cover for a sick or absent colleague. While they may seem at arms' length operating in an office, they are at the front line,



Lynne Tull with a trainee volunteer

albeit at the end of a phone line, hearing often heart-breaking accounts of what life is like for people living below the poverty line and with many personal challenges.

The role and commitment of Call Centre volunteers

When people show interest in the role, they are asked to make a six month commitment. Most stay much longer, such is the satisfaction gained from this role. Some come from conferences, others have a parish connection or no prior connection to the Society; some come to fulfil a study or work placement requirement. As Call Centre Team Leader, Lynne Tull explains:

We have a few volunteers who have done this role for 16 years. Most of the volunteers stay for 10-15 years and the shortest period is about two years.

It may seem straightforward: the volunteers take down the details and the conference then does the work of visiting and assisting the people in need. This under plays that the role is in fact a complex one. There is a high volume of calls coming in and the callers are from different locations. Each call requires the volunteer to pull up details on the screen about the relevant conference in order to understand what they provide and when. The volunteer must be across this information to ensure that the caller receives an accurate picture of how they can be helped and how often. There is a great deal of information to take in.

The volunteers are also dealing with calls where the conference has not yet responded or something that was promised such as a fridge, has not yet been delivered. Eligibility differs across conferences: some assist callers at a maximum of once per month, others every two months; some must wait longer.

Conference members in Melbourne appreciate the information gathered and passed on to them each day by the Call Centre volunteers. It enables them to be well prepared for home visitation.

Importance of training for the role

Watching the Call Centre operate, it is apparent that the volunteers demonstrate great respect and patience in taking these calls. The calls can be fast-paced or require a longer period of time for the caller to discuss in full what are the concerns and needs. Every call gets the attention it requires.

A great deal of thought, pre-planning and attention to detail lies behind volunteers' ability to manage a high volume of calls, feel they have done a good day's work and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

Training is very important; it is thorough, hands on and the volunteers receive regular updates. The volunteers are able to elect when they feel ready to start taking calls on their own. A supervisor is always present to guide and support.

Attentive listening is a key skill, along with respect, patience and compassion. Without these, the Call Centre is not the right fit for a volunteer.

The volunteers may take challenging calls; often first callers are embarrassed to be asking for help. The content of what is disclosed may be confronting, the caller may be emotionally charged and may not have English as a first language. De-briefing is very important for the volunteers.

Lynne has noticed that when one volunteer has a difficult call, the team are always quick to respond and offer to de-brief. They understand what each other may be confronting in a call and this shared understanding and empathy is an effective response.

Three Volunteers explain

Peter

In 2017, Peter Carmody responded to a parish recruitment drive, becoming a Call Centre volunteer shortly after he had joined his local conference.



Peter Carmody

He usually does one day per week and is on call if the Call Centre is short of volunteers. He also helped out on the hotline established for calls relating to bushfires and floods during 2020/21.

A typical day involves taking calls from 10-3 with a half hour break. Peter describes the pace, diversity and lessons:

It is full bore 40-50 calls a day. Some calls take 1-2 minutes; others 10-15 minutes. Callers have varying English language abilities and diverse issues.

Peter goes home reassured he has done a good day's work helping others, but some callers remain on his mind.

Callers who are single parents, or homeless with children, drag at your heart. You work hard to help them out. We are used to the frequent calls for food, clothing and other material assistance, but when a family and children are in precarious circumstances, it is very hard to push them to the back of your mind.



Sherin Bandara

What surprised me, is having grown up in a sound family, having my own loving family, that there is a different world out there. Many of us just don't realise until we are exposed to this through the roles we take on as members and volunteers.

What some families and individuals go through! Children are abandoned by their families, husbands and wives walk out on each other – we know it, but probably not the extent of it and how it happens everywhere. Even in our neighbourhoods.

The satisfaction that I've helped someone and it's what I'm able to do. We can go home with our heads held high. There's a terrific camaraderie between the team. It's an enjoyable day.

The team spirit in the Call Centre is self-evident. Everyone is welcoming and friendly.

All have been wonderful and knowledgeable and help old blokes like me to work my way around



Don Schroder

the computer. Socially, we have a good time and have the occasional event where we can catch up away from work. I count many now as friends.

Peter believes the ability to listen is the most important trait followed by the ability to know where to refer people for particular assistance and what each conference provides.

Sherin

Sherin Bandara became a Call Centre volunteer as part of a placement with her Community Service studies. This is a path other volunteers have taken. Sherin realised quickly that she wanted to stay involved beyond her placement and she hopes the experience will help her find work in a field of caring.

She appreciates that more experienced colleagues and the supervisors are always available to help and support, which is invaluable with challenging calls.

Sherin received a call from a homeless person. He was a new caller, sleeping rough on the

streets for many years. He was starving. He asked: "Can you please help me? You're the last hope for me."

I have no words to express my gratitude to the Society of St Vincent de Paul for helping so many people. I see it through the Call Centre. We always help people like this man. He was very grateful and was crying. I was emotional too. That story stays with me.

Don

Don Schroder has been involved in his Holy Spirit, North Ringwood Parish for many years. This is his ninth year as a Call Centre volunteer. He describes the role as a good way of helping people and having what is akin to job satisfaction at the end of each shift. With so much need - and he has seen an increase over the years - he tries to answer as many calls as he can to the best of his ability.

When I first started, I thought I'd never get the hang of the computer, but I had help from lovely people and gained confidence.

He finds the domestic violence and homeless callers the most tragic cases, often partly because of the loneliness and isolation, but also because a wealthy country like Australia should share its resources more equitably.

A woman in hospital called us. She had no clothes. We weren't able to visit the hospital and she had no family or friends to drop off the clothes. We found a way with a conference.

A mother with children and no food. Almost hard to believe this happens in this day and age. It shouldn't be this way.

I've learned that you can help lots of wonderful people by doing welfare work. There's an awful lot of good being done.

Don emphasises that his is a fabulous team and they always have some fun.

Come and work here. It's good to be part of it. I'm grateful for the opportunity given to me to be part of this.

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