



A CALL TO SERVE

Vincentian Stories - 2013 Chapter

Acknowledgements

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Family and friends of the honoured members

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St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

State President's Message



Tony Tome, State President

Dear Members, Volunteers and Staff

I am honoured to present the 2013 Chapter – “Our Story, Our Mission, Our People – A Call to Serve – St Vincent de Paul Society, Victoria.”

The State Council is committed to ensuring that our mission is promoted, connected and integrated within all our works and with our members, volunteers and staff.

The sharing of our story, from our Founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam to our modern day leaders is an important part of achieving the State Council's commitment.

In 2012 State Council, with the guidance of the Mission Identity Advisory Committee (MIAC), established this project.

Each year, members of the Society will be called upon to nominate individuals and, or special works of the Society, that demonstrate outstanding contributions to the work of the Society.

As a way of honouring their contribution, these stories have been documented to demonstrate both the breadth of the contribution and with regards to the members, the diversity of life experiences they have brought to the Society. We hope that the readers find the stories inspiring.

As these Vincentians lives span many decades, their stories reveal snapshots of ways of living and community connections that have changed over the years. While documenting aspects of the Society's story, they also present aspects of Victoria's rich social history.

All five stories portray selfless, compassionate service to those in need and an enduring commitment to making the world a better place, be it in Bendigo, Geelong, Pascoe Vale, Mooroopna or in communities of men and women within the inner city Ozanam fraternity.

The gifts each brought and for the three still alive, continue to bring to the Society are bountiful, rich and diverse. All reflect the desire to see the face of Christ in every person they have served.

There is also a good measure of humour which seems an invaluable trait for any Vincentian.

The stories document works and services that are what the Society continues to do. However home visits must remain a staple work of conferences.

I hope you share my view that this on-going project and the stories of the members and special works will serve as a fountain of courage, vision, possibility and inspiration for future generations of members, volunteers and staff.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Tome". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tony Tome
State President
St Vincent de Paul Society, Victoria

John Cannon Rising to every challenge



John Cannon 2003

He has lived by a motto of 'have faith and it will be done'.

Introduction

John Cannon's involvement in the Society spans six decades, starting in the 1930s. His recall of events from long ago is astounding and over several hours, his words flow unprompted: there is much to cover in a long history of service.

He infuses the simple landscape of his boyhood with a magical quality which reveals the contrast between growing up in inner Melbourne then and now. Aspects of his story relate to times and circumstances of a Melbourne that no longer exists. It is partly a lament for the passing of some of the old ways such as the strong sense of community and the ability to have a yarn and make time for one another. The story also reveals a past unencumbered by the rules and regulations of today.

John outlines his experiences, both with the Society and in other areas of his life with candour. His way of telling belongs to an era where economy of detail was preferred but his emphatic tone reveals his passions and speak volumes of the man. His speech often glows with feeling for many he has met throughout his life. It also reveals a dry wit and understated sense of humour; a valuable tool shared by many Vincentians.

He has lived by a motto of 'have faith and it will be done'. He also ascribes to an edict of Society Patron, St Vincent de Paul: "Say little; do much."

Having joined the Society as a twenty year old in 1952, today John remains active in the life of St Oliver Plunkett Conference, Pascoe Vale. It is a conference with only six members currently and he has served as President for several decades.

A Brunswick boyhood

John was born with minimal fuss on the kitchen table at his family home in Barkly Street Brunswick on 26 June 1932. He has lived all his life within a short distance of this home. The working man cottages and cobblestones of early Brunswick are indeed a part of his genetic makeup.

As a youngster he attended St Ambrose's Brunswick and later, St Joseph's North Melbourne. He recalls that he was not a very good scholar and when he reached intermediate, was struggling with some of his schoolwork. He used to gaze wistfully out the window watching all the other boys doing their cadet drills every Friday. Br Nash kept John in class to focus on school work. His class mates felt sorry for

him but John accepted that Br Nash was working in his best interest.

Even being kept in did not diminish his enjoyment of school. He has attended many St Joseph's Old Boys' reunions over the years.

Br Nash would often reassure John by saying: "You know mister, there'll be a niche for you."

John would ask "but what will it be?" and Br Nash would simply tell him, "It can be anything. You just have to find it."

John describes his parents as positive and loving influences. He remembers his mother as a very determined lady. His father was a glass beveller by trade and his skills were keenly sought during the war years. He worked making the sights for bombers and tanks in a factory in Lonsdale Street which was designated as essential to the war effort. This often meant his father worked seven days a week during the war. His father was also involved as an Air Raid Warden.

While he and John saw less of each other during the war years, John still recalls the tall, gentle man who was a great dad. His father died at 58 from cancer caused by the ingestion of fine particles of glass. John was 21. John's mother remained in her home until her death in 1987, aged 91.

Early working years

John left school armed with his Intermediate Certificate and did an apprenticeship in the grocery trade. The grocer's shop had the conventional shop front operation and out the back, a composite buying business where all goods were bought in bulk and made up into orders for other grocery businesses. John delivered the orders and continued to work there until the business closed.

He wondered what he might do next. Everyone was saying 'stay in the food trade, people always need to eat'.

When John was growing up in the thirties and forties, there were many more job opportunities available and within a short distance of most people's homes. In his own street there were many businesses and four factories. The factories made cardboard boxes, braces and belts, did printing and made textiles. During the war years, all four were designated to make goods for the war effort.

In another part of his street, there was a baker and John's next job was as a bread carter, driving a horse drawn cart, delivering door to door. Gradually horse and cart were phased out and replaced by bread vans.

John obtained his driver's licence and drove the vans for a few years.

John has always loved horses and even today enjoys spending time at a friend's who agists horses on land at Gisborne. John's first introduction to horses from the bread cart days has stayed with him as a happy memory. The horse he was assigned was owned by the bread factory and was stabled nearby. After work, John would uncouple it and walk it to the stable. Although his horse could be frisky, he remembers that most of the horses would walk unlead and simply wait at the water trough to have their harnesses removed. The horses never bolted.

While John was still doing deliveries for the bakery, the owner of a family-owned clothing factory, Henderson shirt makers, asked whether John liked driving the bread cart. Henderson's was losing their driver. They offered the job to John, offering him double his salary. This was too good an offer to refuse.

John smiles, remembering that in earlier years, he and mates had played outside the back door of the factory. He remembered the patriarch of the business, who had four children. The daughter was always dressed like a princess and would come out in a haughty manner and tell the boys to move away.

When John was hired, the daughter told him he was the rudest boy in Barkly Street, saying he and his friends had called her names. Even with this awkward start, she and John became great friends and John worked there for several years. After a while, Henderson's hired another fellow to help John with his deliveries. John however could see that after the death of a key family member, the business was going into decline. What to do next?

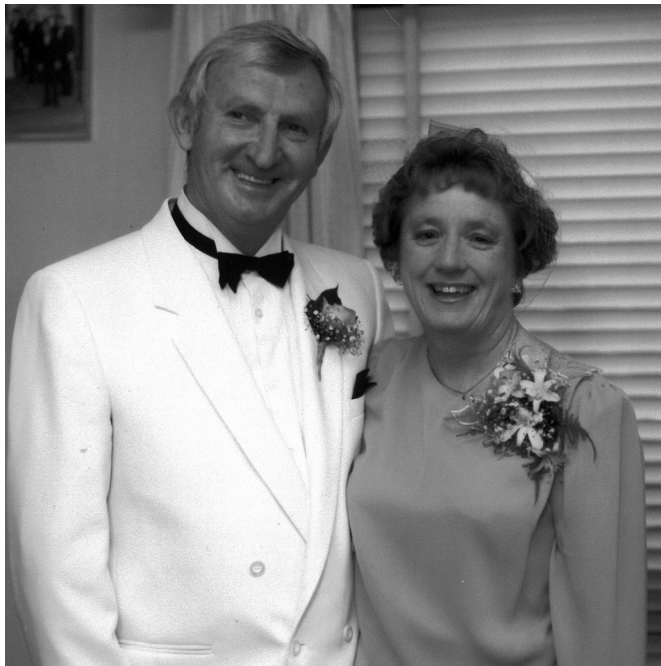
Marrying Margaret and family

John met Margaret when he was working at the grocer's and Margaret worked at the bakery. John never imagined he'd end up working at the bakery himself and taking her out. They married at St Fidelis, Moreland when John was 23 and Margaret 21.

They had three sons and two daughters, Peter, David, Christopher, Catherine and Linda. There are also eight grandchildren.

John took early retirement at 55. He and Margaret toured Europe and the United Kingdom. This adventure remained a talking point for many years.

Sadly, Margaret died in 2007. After recovering from a severe stroke, she was then diagnosed with advanced



Margaret and John, 1987

cancer. John mentions the quietness of the house, even with his two loyal companions, a border collie and a staffie. It no longer feels like a home without Margaret, “God love her.”

He counts his blessings that they had many happy years together and even with a few setbacks, the children have all turned out well.

Joining the Melbourne and Metropolitan Fire Brigade

After working with the shirt manufacturer, John decided to apply for the fire brigade. It was not easy to be accepted as they only picked the fittest men. He also applied for the police force as well, to keep his options open.

The selection process involved a very thorough medical check and warnings that wives needed to understand that night shifts were non-negotiable. This was drummed into any new recruits so that any second thoughts were had before final selection.

He was offered a place in both the police force and the brigade and knows choosing the fire brigade was the right choice for him. In a funny turn of events, soon after joining the MMFB he ran into his old teacher, Br Nash, who asked John what he was now doing. John told him he had joined the fire brigade. John had found his niche as predicted by Br Nash.

John has observed the changes that have been made over the years and the much better equipment that fire officers now have. He realises how ill-prepared they were when they turned up at a fire or emergency with insufficient breathing apparatuses and poor fire

protection. John still has his brass helmet on display. He recalls the leggings and gear which are a far cry from today’s standard uniform which guarantees maximum protection to fire fighters.

He knows when he joined the brigade, 24 men were recruited with only about 30 applying. Today, as many as 1700 apply for the same number of positions. John often reflects on the ease with which men in the past were able to find work and move easily between jobs.

He served at many different stations after he finished the recruitment training, which was much shorter than what new recruits undertake today. He was fighting fires almost immediately after he joined the brigade whereas today, recruits are not sent to a fire for many months. He also notes how societal changes have altered the design of stations. There are prayer rooms and facilities for women who have joined the ranks as fire officers.

He also remembers other contrasts between scenarios today and then. Today we have smoke alarms in most houses although as John wryly comments, the batteries are often not working. Today, there are no longer fire alarms on street corners. These used to be dotted throughout suburbs and towns. New Year’s Eve was always busy with the kids mucking around. It was always the same routine on a Monday morning, checking appliances at the station and then riding around on his bike, testing the alarms.

One alarm in one street always went off so John’s officer in charge decided to set up surveillance. He deployed a fireman in ‘civvies’, who concealed himself in a gateway near the alarm.

The alarm went off but the fireman couldn’t see anyone. The officer in charge reminded him to watch more carefully. The fireman returned the next day, his pride dented, and watched the alarm like a hawk. He noticed a long stick weaving its way towards the alarm, and then with a repeated jabbing action, the glass was broken. The stick was then quickly retracted through the hedge in the front garden of the house opposite the alarm. The culprit was not a minor; rather a young man with not much to fill his time. The man was let off with a warning.

John also recalls when going to a house fire, he’d notice someone watching the fire intensely. He would then see the same person at another fire. Fire officers knew to always alert the police when this happened.

As a fire officer, John attended a range of emergencies. One of the worst was the Westgate Bridge collapse in 1970 which killed thirty five construction workers. John recalls the sense of

hopelessness with people trapped under huge slabs of concrete. The fire officers did not have any of the lifting equipment available today that could have expedited recovery.

He counts himself lucky as many retired fire officers have suffered from work-related cancers. In the old days fire officers were sitting ducks in terms of exposure to hazards. Still, he firmly believes it was the best career for him and provided secure employment that enabled him to put five children through school. He developed many strong friendships and still volunteers, giving fire safety talks at various groups such as mothers' groups and Probus.

Joining the Society

John's father was a member of the Society, as was Margaret's, so both families were involved. Yet the Vincentian process had seemed mighty mysterious to him as a boy in the 1930s.

Just before tea, when his father came home from work, the doorbell would ring and it would be Mr. O'Brien. The two men would go into the lounge room and shut the door. John and his brother and sister would hear a low hum and always wondered what it was. Their mother told them the men were praying before they went out on a home visit. John wonders how many still pray before a visit. He and his siblings were always intrigued by the process, never understood the secrecy around who the men were visiting and always wanted to know.

John mentions that the war years draw a blank for him in relation to Society work. His father was so busy with the war effort that John has no recollection of the mysterious meetings in the lounge room in that period.

The Vincentian process had seemed mighty mysterious to him as a boy

John was 20 when he joined the Society's St Ambrose Conference, Brunswick in 1952. There was a certain inevitability that men would become involved in the Society, through their parish.

John recalls in 1962, the first week he and Margaret had attended mass at their new parish of St Oliver Plunkett's, Pascoe Vale. The priest picked him out as a new parishioner and tapped him on the shoulder. The priest was Irish, with a commanding brogue. He told John the Conference met every Thursday evening.

Look, learn and listen was the motto John adhered to in those early days and still does. John's approach was to say prayers with the people he visited, not before.

In the early years, the conference activity revolved mainly around home visits and handing out food. John has noticed that people are generally not as connected as they once were to those around them. Growing up, his mother could always borrow a potato from a neighbour and return it the next day. John knows all the old timers in his street but new neighbours move in and pass him by without saying



l to r: Brian Lenten, John Cannon and Jim Carroll, planning Society Congress 1984

a word. Asking after people is a routine that seems to have broken down. There is an immeasurable level of loneliness and isolation experienced by many people that he believes was not as significant in earlier times.

Conference highlights

John casts his mind back over six decades of conference involvement and comments on some of the contrasts between now and earlier times. He feels in real terms, less money is raised today through donations than in earlier decades. Admittedly, fewer people attend church. The conference was formerly mainly involved in food and fire wood, slowly gaining centres and becoming increasingly involved in new initiatives as the years advanced. However, membership of the conference has dwindled over recent years, limiting what can practically be achieved.

Although a relatively small number were assisted, the Society was most effective in helping boys on probation. The conference would support the families to ensure young offenders received non-custodial sentences. In these situations there was virtually no re-offending when this support was provided.

Today, it is very hard for the Society to help find employment for people. In past decades, occasionally a job could be found for someone and as a following story will reveal, in one particular instance, employment was found for a large number of people through the Society's intervention.

There were other cases, where work was not found. Conference minutes from the 1960s and 1970s reveal the ongoing contact conference brothers had with families and the efforts to tide them over through difficult times. There were small payments, food parcels and practical assistance such as finding football boots for children. Conference brothers also made inquiries on behalf of people relating to social security payments and sought to assist where there were pending evictions and medical needs. Sometimes the families, even in hard times, simply appreciated the chance to have the personal contact and the chance to talk things over with men who would listen and relate to their plight.

Besides serving the needs of the local community, members volunteered a little further afield such as at Ozanam House, with the number of meals and guests served recorded. The conference also donated to other causes such as the special appeal relating to the Darwin cyclone.

John also notes the higher number of priests involved in parish life in the past. His own parish had three priests Frs Gilman, Kelly and Martin, whereas today most parishes have only one who may serve two or more parishes.

Hospital visitation

St Oliver Plunkett Conference was active in visiting Royal Park Hospital in Parkville, visiting the palliative ward every Sunday. The conference members would provide a kind word, companionship and always had newspapers and cigarettes for those who wanted them. John remembers the devotion and care with which the Vincentians would treat the people they visited. Often the people the members had visited the week before had died.

He remembers one conference member, a man who had endured a shocking wartime experience in the navy. He had been torpedoed several times, left in the water for several days, but somehow managed to survive. He became an alcoholic but always treated the people he visited at Royal Park with the utmost compassion and care.

Often the people the members had visited the week before had died

The conference visited there for many years until the hospital closed in the 1990s. This kind of service reflects the breadth of what is possible and echoes the original intention of work performed by The Daughters of Charity's Sr Rosalie Rendu, along with Frederic Ozanam in attending to the living, accompanying the dying and burying the dead.

Broadmeadows Hostel

In the late 1960s Frank Murphy, who was the president of the Society's Migrant Committee, visited John and told him that a group of migrants would be placed within the old army camp at Broadmeadows. Frank was usually well versed in migration matters but in this instance, all he knew was that it would be a large number so existing hostels at Springvale and Maribyrnong could not accommodate this new group. Frank asked John if his conference could assist in some way and John said yes. He remembers Frank pressed him for reassurance that he would do this and John gave his guarantee.

As conference president, John called a special meeting of members and explained the dilemma. He knew the conference was already very busy and was now being asked to do work almost akin



Broadmeadows Migrant Hostel social gathering, 1970, John in front row 2nd from right

to social work. The meeting discussed bringing Broadmeadows conference in as well.

Minutes reveal that it was decided on 30 October 1969 to undertake the special work of visiting the hostel regularly.

It was all rather vague and it felt like a leap into the unknown but John and the members of both conferences threw themselves into the task.

A few conference members cleaned the old hut they were given in the camp that looked like a “herd of goats had been living in it.” They transformed it into a welcoming place, buoyed on by Ozanam’s “No act of charity is foreign to the Society.”

John remembers vividly the energy and enthusiasm of members as they decorated the walls with Australian images to help make the atmosphere welcoming for the migrants. The hostel manager was amazed at the transformation.

Close to arrival date, the conference was advised that the vast majority of migrants were Turkish farmers. They and their families had been brought out by the Bolte Government under a proposed scheme to open up part of the Little Desert for farming.

On the arrival date, a group of Vincentians assembled to welcome the bus carrying the migrants. John recalls that an army officer with a bayonet was stationed nearby which was an unfortunate juxtaposition for a welcoming party.

He describes, still with the shock of recall, a noise none of them had ever heard coming from the bus. It was an eerie wailing coming from the Turkish women. It seemed to epitomise their fear of the unknown, having left all they knew to travel to the other side of the world. John recalls, still with

amazement, “I’d never heard anything like this before. It was terribly sad.”

But the Vincentians were determined to give this a go and started youth groups and all manner of activities to assist in breaking down cultural barriers. They held English lessons and explained that women and men in Australia were seen as equals. Like the migrants, the Vincentians were virtually thrown in the deep end to sink or swim and felt at times inadequate in their de facto social work role.

It was an eerie wailing coming from the Turkish women. It seemed to epitomise their fear of the unknown

John remembers that through Society networks, some young Turkish women who worked at the Commonwealth Bank gave their time to assist with communicating key messages. “They were lovely young women that Jim Carroll organized to assist with interpreting but the men didn’t like being told what to do by women. We had to persist with the message that women and men were equal here. It took time to get this message across and involved some very plain speaking.”

The members put notices up that there would be a weekly youth group. Different organisations donated dart games, billiards tables and other equipment.

As everyone waited for the day the families would be taken to the Little Desert, the conference tried to keep them purposefully occupied. Then the news came that the scheme would not go ahead. There had been an outcry on environmental grounds and the government had concerns that adequate water could not be supplied to the area.

What to do with this group of farmers brought out to Australia on what, in the end, was a hollow promise of a new life? John had noticed an advertisement in the local paper that Goodyear Tyres were looking for workers. He and conference members visited them and other factories along the Hume Highway and told them about the Turkish migrants. Work was found for approximately eighty men. It was unpleasant work, unloading the fine black dust used to make tyres. As John explains, “These poor devils were doing this work that many didn’t want to do.”

Work presented more challenges initially as the men didn't like wearing the heavy safety boots. The young women were brought back to interpret and read the riot act about no boots, no jobs. Some left and found jobs elsewhere.

The Broadmeadows hostel case shows the determination of the conference to ensure these people would not be abandoned. The members persevered to secure jobs and a foothold in a future life for them. Even with the cultural challenges the Vincentians faced with these migrants, they were determined and overcame them. John believes that things worked out quite well for this group of migrants, most of whom remained, obtained secure housing and made lives here.

It is interesting to reflect if this type of action would be possible today. Admittedly, it may have been easier to find work in the 1960s. Today there is likely to be a sense that professional services involved in employment or specific migrant and refugee services might be best able to assist. There was certainly a deep sense of urgency to help these people and as John declares, "justice delayed is justice denied."

This special work continued until the hostel closed on 18th August 1971. The minutes of the meeting following the closure recorded that 'the zeal and devotion of members to this charitable work will go down in posterity.'

Archdiocesan Council of Victoria

John became Melbourne Archdiocesan Council President in 1979. This was a five year term.

The role was separate from, but worked closely with, State Council. It was intended as a way of easing the workload of the State President. It was a very busy and fulfilling role for John as it involved visiting all Society conferences and special works within the Melbourne Archdiocese. While there was always a great deal of administrative and behind the scenes work, John ensured he always made it a priority to get "out on the road" and visit all the conferences.

The challenge was that it took a great deal of John's time, affecting his working hours. The collision of his spiritual and secular lives had been noticed and there were concerns about which was taking precedence. The State President, Vin Thomas would often ring John at work and his brigade colleagues would joke to John that the Pope was on the phone. His officer in charge took him aside and asked that he restrict Society business to out of hours.

In this Archdiocesan role, John accompanied State President Jim Carroll to a Society centenary conference in New Zealand. They saw many good works while there and promoted the work done in Victoria.

As his term was nearing its end, John asked someone else to take over. When it came to his retirement, his replacement could no longer commit due to family illness. John was not in a position to take on the role for a further five years and State Council decided to disband the Archdiocesan Council. North, South, East and West Central Councils were created at this point. John is aware this is a part of Society history of which many are unfamiliar.



Jennifer Kyte presenting flood appeal cheque to John on behalf of the Society, 1993

Finding three isolated conferences

In his conference visits as Melbourne Archdiocesan Council President, John came across three of what were known as 'isolated conferences'. Located at Kilmore, Sunbury and Seymour, they had all somehow lost connection with their regional council

and were in effect, flying under the radar, until John visited.

He discovered they were quietly operating outside of current Society arrangements. It was as if time had stood still. They were utilizing old practices, procedures and forms, many of which had long been superseded. Still, John discovered that in spite of the out-of-date practices, the spirit of Ozanam was alive and well.

A new council was formed, Central Highlands, which provided an umbrella for these conferences. The Sunbury Centre had been operating from an old hall which was a very inappropriate venue. There was no weather proofing and it simply did not suit modern day needs. John convinced the conference to consider a new venue and supported them through their worries about borrowing money. It all worked out well and proved to be a worthwhile investment and an achievement which even today, gives John great satisfaction.

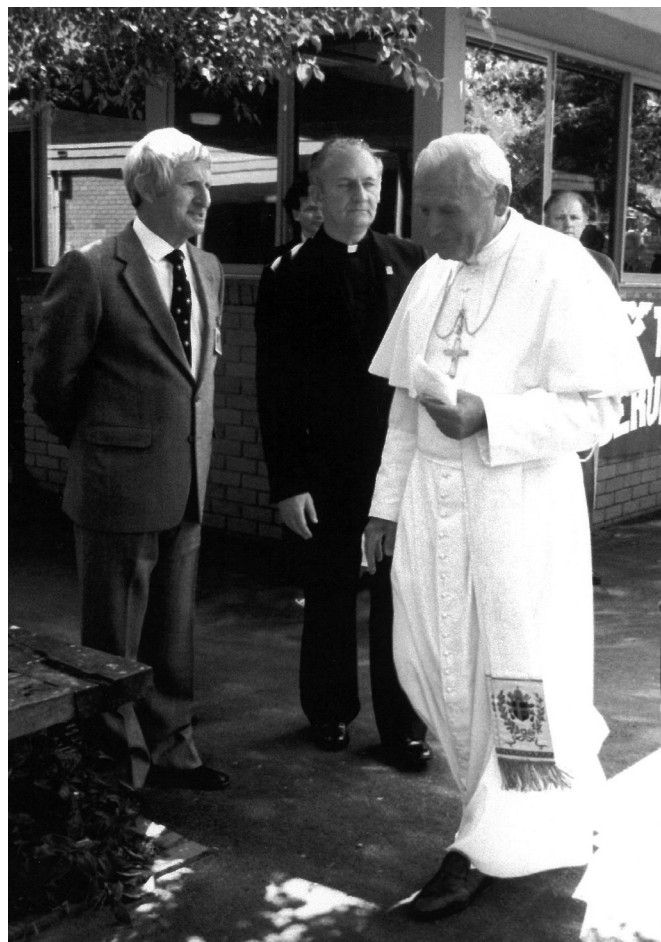
Ozanam Board

John served as Vice President under three Society Presidents: Jim Carroll, Bill Kinsella and John O'Brien. Although approached to stand for presidency, he knew he could not take this on given his work commitment with the fire brigade.

While Vice President to Jim Carroll, Jim asked John to fill in as President of Ozanam Board after the incumbent died. This was to be a temporary arrangement until a replacement was found. John groans, recalling that in the short period he was "minding the role," the staff went on strike due to security concerns. He was particularly upset because the Society was given no warning and staff went to the Archbishop before speaking to the board. The strike also kicked off when the Society's bicentenary celebrations were being held in Geelong, so State Council and many others were caught totally unaware. The board arranged for volunteers to keep Ozanam House open as there were hundreds of men living there at the time.

John recalls this event hurting the Society, as the media ran with the story, painting the Society in a bad light. Jim Carroll negotiated with the union and agreement was reached after the strike continued for about ten days. It took its toll on the volunteers as well and the board considered closing Ozanam House at one point.

"I still look back at this as a thorn in my side. However, it was one of those things that happened. We got over it and have never looked back."



John with Pope John Paul II, Ozanam House, 1986

On a more positive note while on the Ozanam Board, John was the key contact working with the Federal Police in organizing the Pope's visit to Ozanam House in 1986.

John attributes this visit to the initiative of the Ozanam President, Lee Hames who had the insight to suggest it and followed through with all the protocol steps involved in making the request. John still vividly recalls the day she excitedly told him approval had come through, "The Pope's coming, the Pope's coming!"

There were great logistical hoops to negotiate in organizing the event but John remembers clearly some of the amusing and poignant moments. On the humorous front, he recalls that as the cavalcade moved towards Ozanam House, the police contacted John by walkie talkie, saying there was a bus load of men in funny red hats following the pope mobile at close proximity. John had to explain they were cardinals. Cardinals or not, the police said, if not on the schedule, they won't be getting off the bus. John was able to negotiate for several of the most senior cardinals to alight and accompany the Pope on a tour of Ozanam House.

The police contacted John by walkie talkie, saying there was a bus load of men in funny red hats following the pope mobile at close proximity

John most clearly remembers the beautiful moments. One such moment was when the Pope knelt with an Ozanam resident, a Polish man himself who was very ill. The two prayed together. The man died two days later.

The Pope also took time to pray before the wall which marks the names of all deceased residents. Later, he moved amongst the men and staff, comfortable in everyone's presence. It was a private and unscripted visit that was seen as a resounding success for the Society.

Many other achievements

John has played a role in many, diverse special works and Society initiatives. A short selection of these is listed below.

Commemorative services

John recognized the importance of commemoration and honouring services. He instituted the mass for the deceased Vincentians after spending time with a visiting American priest who told him about the approach in America. The mass continues to be held every year at St Francis Church.

With the assistance of past President, Heber Boland, John enhanced the Society's involvement in the Feast of the Sacred Heart which over time, and with assistance from the Mission of Sacred Heart, became the date for the Mass for the Poor.

Society Congress, Exhibition Buildings

John was also involved in organising a congress in 1984, at the former Exhibition Buildings under the guidance of State President, John O'Brien.

Every part of the Society was showcased and it was a marvellous example of the Society's ability to work together to achieve a great outcome.

Recalling all the different stands on display such as domestic violence, migrants and refugees, the centres, the archives, disaster management, the mobile centre in Portland, Ozanam House, the Daughters of Charity and

Ozanam Industries, is a wonderful reminder of the breadth of the Victorian Society's conference and special works.

The congress concluded with a mass on Sunday and there were many opportunities to catch up with Society friends.

Flood and Fire relief

John was also involved in the Society's response works following natural disasters. He recalls in particular, conference efforts to assist families in the Macedon area following the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires and also statewide flood relief in 1993. These floods were some of the worst ever recorded and affected large areas of northern and north eastern Victoria.

Special Roles

During his time as Vice President, he variously took on additional roles, including the portfolio of special works and youth. John always had a view that where there was an identified need, the Society must act to respond to it. He has lived by this principle throughout his six decades of service.

Order of Australia

In 2008, John was awarded an OAM, for service to the community, particularly in relation to the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria.

VACRO and the Order of St John of Jerusalem

John was always prepared to answer the call for assistance, whatever its nature as long as he could clearly articulate what it was the Society would provide. He received a call from the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, (VACRO) asking him to join the committee. This made sense as Pentridge was the main prison and close to John's conference.

John rang the VACRO President, Michael O'Brien. They agreed that it would be beneficial for John to meet with VACRO so they could understand what the Society could offer.

John found the committee very approachable. It mainly comprised judges and lawyers apart from John and one other committee member, a waterside trade union official. Sometimes John and the union official found it hard to follow the discussions but everyone got on very well.

John identified early on that VACRO worked for the offenders. He made it clear that the Society would work to assist their families in tandem with VACRO's support. The conference provided transport to family members wishing to visit their loved ones inside.

John continued as a committee member for many years. On two occasions, the committee told John they wanted to nominate him for a knighthood with The Order of St John of Jerusalem. John didn't want any of this at first but in 1983 they asked him again, pressing him to accept. He was embarrassed but they were adamant and he accepted.

After initially feeling in two minds, he concedes he was very privileged to be knighted especially as it was the same night that Sir Weary Dunlop was also awarded this knighthood. John sat on the same table with this great man of service to his country.

Khan's Thunder

John's love of horses saw him and Margaret enjoy attending many race meetings over the years. Margaret particularly enjoyed the social aspect of these events. They bought a share in a horse called Khan's Thunder which proved to be a highly successful racehorse, winning considerable prize money. It was voted Best Australian Pacer in 1994. John still listens to the races.

Conclusion

John's dedication to the St Vincent de Paul Society is reflected in an approach that aligns with the Society's patron, St Vincent de Paul – "Say little; do much."

John's story reflects the changing face of the Society's work and even with the changes and dwindling numbers involved in conferences, his involvement, like so many of his brothers and sisters, endures.

His contributions have been diverse and as with his career in the fire brigade, he continues even in retirement to pass on all he has learned through volunteer safety talks.

John's Society work is the same; if asked he will speak at a Society event and is always happy to be involved in any way his skills and experience can



John and Family at John's 80th Birthday, 2012

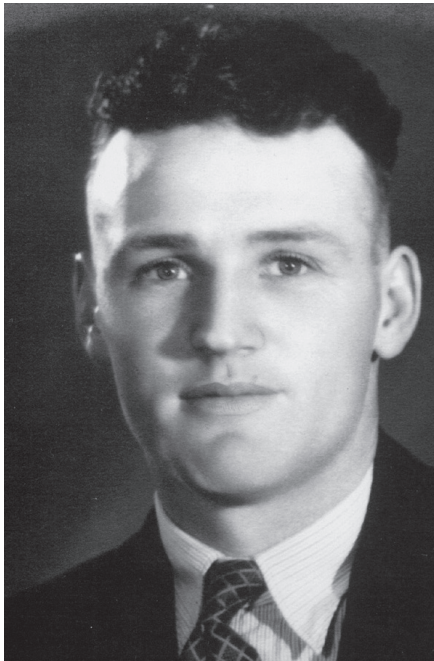
be utilized. He still goes out most days doing home visits with conference brother, Bob Messina as they have done for many years.

He understands times have changed. He hopes that more will become involved to keep the wonderful organization that is the Society, alive and meaningful.

1952	John joined St Ambrose's Conference, Brunswick
1962	John joined St Oliver Plunkett Conference, Pascoe Vale
1967-71	Conference President
1969-71	Special work undertaken, Broadmeadows Migrant Hostel
1973-77	President, Brunswick Regional Council
1979-83	Archdiocesan Council of Victoria President
1983	Awarded the Order of St John of Jerusalem
1997- current	Conference President
2006	Awarded Order of Australia

Jack Dillon

An enduring influence



Jack Dillon as a young man

**“Good, better, best.
Never let it rest.
‘Til your good is better
and your better best.”**

Many who grew up in the early 1900s remember the ‘Good, better, best’ rhyme. It was widely known as the motto borrowed by the old Furphy water carts. These carts were used extensively to carry water in military camps in Australia and overseas during World War 1.

Born in 1905, Jack Dillon was one who knew this motto well, often quoting it to family as an example of how to live one’s life.

In his own rich life based in Geelong, he accomplished much across different spheres. These included his devotion to family, his work, his achievements as a champion road cyclist and in his unstinting commitment as a Vincentian, caring for people and giving direction and drive to many causes and projects.

The Society’s history in Geelong is a rich one. After Australia’s first conference, St Francis in Melbourne, lapsed in 1858 following the death of founder Fr Gerald Ward, St Mary’s Ladies Conference in Geelong was the next to be founded in Victoria in 1874. It continued for over 100 years before merging with the men’s conference in 2001. Fr Ward himself had a connection with Geelong. He was parish priest there in the early 1850s.

Jack Dillon continued that magnificent Vincentian tradition. He was a central and influential figure in the Society’s Geelong history during a large part of the 20th century.

Jack’s early life

John (Jack) Dillon was born in Rushworth in 1905. He was the eldest of five brothers. His father was ‘Engineer in Charge’ of the reservoir construction of the Waranga Basin, at the time one of the largest projects of its kind in the world. The family moved around, according to where reservoirs were being constructed, settling for a few years in Anakie with Jack ending up living most of his life in Geelong.

As a young boy, Jack boarded during the week in Britannia Street, Geelong West while attending St Mary’s Christian Brothers school. His mother would drive him there at the beginning of the week in the horse and buggy. As he grew older, Jack would ride his bike home to Anakie on Fridays and back on Mondays, a distance of some twenty miles each way. Gaining this sense of freedom and independence early in life possibly accounts for what was to become his lifelong love of cycling.

At fourteen, his father died and Jack left school, virtually taking on the role of bread winner for the family and as father figure to his three younger brothers. One brother had died aged around two years of age. After a few temporary jobs he didn't particularly enjoy but stuck with to support his family, an opportunity arose which enabled Jack to follow in his father's footsteps. Jack would devote 52 years of his working life to the Geelong Waterworks and Sewerage Trust.

In 1920, Jack joined the Geelong West Cycling Club. He showed extraordinary promise from the outset and went on to become one of the top track cycle racers in Victoria. He faced setbacks early on however, contracting rheumatic fever, which put him out of action for over a year. Still, his cycling prowess was such that he beat cycling legend Sir Hubert Opperman many times in road races. 'Oppy' as he was affectionately known, was also a Geelong boy. He won many Australian Road Championships in the 1920s and defeated the best European endurance riders in the 1931 non-stop Paris-Brest-Paris road race, breaking all previous records over this distance. It was no mean feat to beat Oppy.

A second bout of rheumatic fever ended Jack's incredible competitive cycling, but he remained a keen cyclist all his life, right up until a few years before his death. His early success had enabled him to purchase a house with the prize money. He remained an active supporter and official of the Geelong West Cycling Club.

Jack married Eileen in 1936 and they moved in with Eileen's mother, to help care for her. Their marriage was a very happy one, although in Jack's own words, they were not blessed with children. Jack consequently took an interest in every child on both sides of the family, as if they were his own.

His niece Valerie Gibbons speaks fondly of her uncle, who she still misses keenly. He was her mentor and he always had time for her and her siblings. He used to call in on his way home and showed interest in her school work, encouraging her to be and do her best in all endeavours. He would also enthral the children with imaginative bedtime stories about kangaroos. Each instalment was eagerly anticipated by the children.

"I remember so much of his kindness, even today. Auntie Eileen made the most wonderful sponges and she'd put a piece in Uncle Jack's lunchbox. My family didn't have much and Uncle Jack would always save the cake and bring it to our place in the evenings for the kids to share."

In 1971, Eileen had a brain haemorrhage and together with his sister-in-law, Jack helped nurse her for more than eight years. His caring nature was again evident when his mother's health was failing. He visited her every day, providing care which mirrored his mother's care when she nursed him back from illness in his early life.

Joining the Society

Unable to join the armed services in the 2nd World War due to the recurring rheumatic fever, Jack's desire to assist the less fortunate of this world led him to join the St Vincent de Paul Society in 1944, a membership he retained and valued until his death 55 years later.

Jack's compassion for those who were not blessed as he was with a strong family contributed to some of the areas of service he dedicated his efforts towards.



Loading bales at the Geelong Centre in Ryrie St

Jack joined Sts Peter and Paul Conference, Ashby, in 1944. He was a member of this conference for nine years before joining Holy Spirit Conference, Manifold, in August 1953, as a founding member and president.

Interviewed many years later, Jack recalled that the plight of the less fortunate at that time was etched indelibly in his memory. He always remembered one instance when the Society had been asked to help a family in Autumn Street, Geelong West. "It was a man and wife and their two or three children. There were bags for beds and practically no furniture or food"

Jack recalled that the plight of the less fortunate at that time was etched indelibly in his memory



When the Geelong Particular (Regional) Council was formed in 1956, Jack became president after a few months and remained in that position until 1973. During this time he was very active in many aspects of Society work. Several of them he initiated himself. By his own admission, Jack 'broke all the Society's rules and regulations.' As has been said of him, he was a 'mover and shaker.'

One of the first initiatives of the Council was to establish a used furniture and clothing centre in Corio Street. Previously all of the six Geelong conferences had the traditional 'wardrobes' or storage spaces at parish halls or often at nearby members' homes. Then, in April 1957, Ted Pawson of Belmont Conference offered his shed which soon filled with all kinds of donated goods for conferences to 'call on'. Soon this was unable to accommodate all donated goods. The rear of a shop at 72 Moorabool St in Geelong City was then offered without cost. When this 'store' became too small within a few months, the Society was offered an old but ideal building, again in the heart of the city at 27-29 Little Ryrie Street. Jack Dillon with other members of the Society but principally with Jack Nolan, established this building as a Centre in July 1958. It became a lifeline for the Society's work of helping the needy of Geelong. After supplying the needs of poor families, there was a small surplus of goods and waste products which could be sold to the public.

Late in 1958, the Society's Spiritual Director in Geelong, Dr Dean Greenan suggested it would be a very charitable work for the Society to establish a night shelter for homeless men in Geelong. A stately old weatherboard home "Lauriston" (erected in 1853) at 1 Halstead Place in Geelong West, part of the 'Cary Estate', was purchased from funds raised at the Centre. A few weeks after the sale was finalised, a 12 room hostel building was purchased from the Shell Refinery. However, before this building could be moved to Halstead Place the Cary homestead, which had been vandalised, had to be demolished. The only parts of the original buildings to be retained were the kitchen, store and ablution block. With the aid of big machinery, the plot was cleared and levelled. In Jack's words,

"Almost all the work of clearing, levelling, renovating, fencing, building retaining walls, concreting, gardening, painting, asphaltting and dozens of sundry jobs over two years was carried out by voluntary labour, either by inmates of the Geelong Training Prison, under the guidance of their officers, or members of the Society and other voluntary helpers."

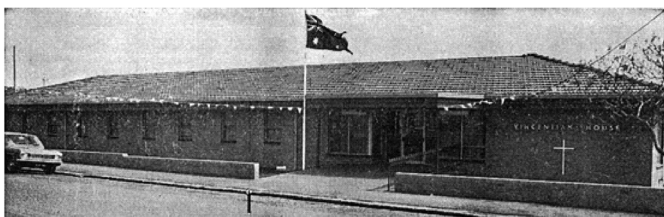
The Shell building was renovated and erected on the site to provide accommodation for sixteen beds. Jack himself worked in clearing the area in Halstead Place and in the erection of the buildings.

St Vincent's Hostel received its first residents on the 5 February 1962. It was blessed and officially opened by His Lordship Bishop Fox on Sunday 22 July 1962. The Hostel provided an evening meal, hot shower and a bed and breakfast for free on a nightly basis.

After about 12 months, it was found that only about four rooms of the hostel were being used. At this time, Jack was a member of the Committee of Management of Grace McKellar Home for the Aged where there was an acute shortage of beds for the elderly of Geelong.

Jack utilised his knack for identifying unmet need and moving quickly to fill this need. After discussions with staff at Grace McKellar and at Regional Council, Jack suggested that a few of the men on the waiting list at McKellar be accommodated in the spare rooms at the hostel. The Society thus took the first steps in caring for the aged when eight elderly men on the McKellar waiting list were transferred into the vacant rooms at the hostel.

With the continued success of the Corio St Centre and also the collection of waste products proving very profitable, the Regional Council had during this time, established a building fund. Various projects were discussed and in 1968 it was decided to investigate the possibility of the Society itself building an aged care persons' home with the assistance of the Commonwealth Government's two for one grant, under the Aged Persons' Homes Act. Advice to purchase extra property in Villamanta St, which abutted the two properties comprising the Hostel, was accepted. On 30 July 1970, plans and tenders were finalised to construct Vincentian House Hostel for the Aged for 31 residents (15 men and 16 women) at 58-62 Villamanta St, Geelong West. The home 'Warwick' at 58 Villamanta Street was built in 1853. The homes at 60-62 Villamanta Street were erected in 1852 and, on the 1 October, 1855 they became the original site for Geelong Grammar School.



Vincentian House Geelong



Jack Dillon with Archbishop Knox at the official opening of Vincentian House

Foundations were laid in September 1970 and finally the beautiful building was completed, carpeted throughout and elegantly furnished. The garden and lawns on the outside and inside the lovely courtyard were tastefully laid out. Residents began moving into this modern home with every comfort and a kind and understanding staff. On 22 November 1971, at 7.30 pm in the presence of a large and representative gathering, the Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr Knox, blessed and officially opened Vincentian House. The cost of the building and furnishings amounted to approximately \$218,000, financed by the Regional Council and the Commonwealth Government. Jack Dillon had given direction and drive to the project and with fellow members brought the work to a highly successful conclusion.

“The overall expansion in members, conferences and special works are positive attributes to your Vincentian purpose, zeal and devotion”.

Shortly after this opening, Jack became ill and spent time in hospital. The State President of the time, Heber Boland, was concerned that this illness may have been exacerbated by the work undertaken by Jack in bringing the building to its conclusion. In a letter to him at this time he wrote:

“There is little doubt the worry and strain of the past two years associated with the tremendous amount of detail during the building and finalising of Vincentian Villa has taken its toll, and we all hope you will now relax and carry out your intention to be relieved of the burden you have carried for so many years.”

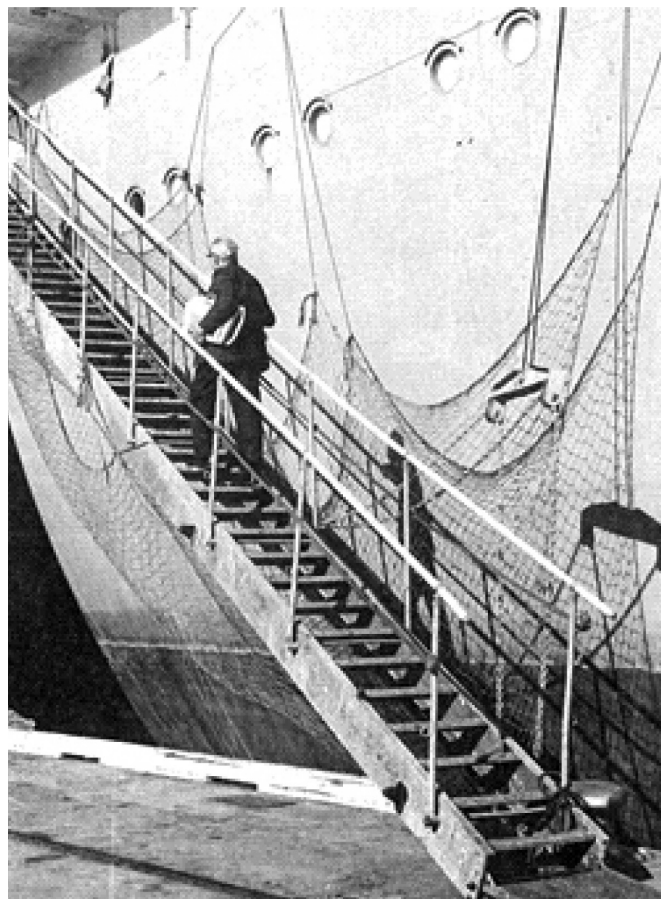
In completing his 17 year term as Regional Council President in 1972, Jack received a letter from Vin Thomas, State President at the time. In it he wrote:

“On behalf of the Archdiocesan Central Council of Melbourne, I feel it is my bounden duty to record our mutual Vincentian gratitude and appreciation to you for your unstinted and dedicated services to the Society, so positively and practically manifested during your term as President of the Regional Council of Geelong, which you have just completed. The overall expansion in members, conferences and special works are positive attributes to your Vincentian purpose, zeal and devotion. Vincentian House is surely monumental to the grand achievements of your office and crowns your efforts to make the Society so vital an agency in the work of God’s poor.....”

It was not long before it was discovered that demand for places at the Hostel was such that many applicants could not be accommodated. Plans were drawn up for additions to Vincentian House. Called the ‘Jack Dillon Wing’, the new wing was finally blessed by Archbishop Little and opened by Gordon Scholes, MHR, on 17 November 1975. Accommodation was then provided for an additional 26 permanent residents, with two respite care rooms. Records held in the Society’s archives reveal how centrally Jack Dillon was involved in all of this.

During his long period as Regional Council President, Jack regularly attended meetings of the seven conferences of the Society in Geelong, encouraging members in their work and involving them in the special works he had established. In September 1972, total membership of the Geelong conferences numbered 79, with 16 honorary members. Many of the members were rostered for duty on the special works, such as sorting the daily collection of goods at St Vincent’s Centre on five nights a week and serving customers at the centre on three days a week. Likewise, prison visitation was carried out by two groups, each doing alternate Sundays. The Night Shelter was operated each night by one member. Each conference had done a regular night since the shelter was opened 11 years before. Hospital visitation was mostly shared by members from St Mary’s and St Bernard’s conferences, whilst visitation to the Grace McKellar Home for the Aged was shared by the Holy Spirit, Manifold and the Holy Family, Bell Park, conference members.

Jack personally visited hundreds of ships in the Port of Geelong, distributing literature to seamen and arranging for the transport of many of them to church services. He also assisted in a variety of ways in their entertainment and conduct on shore.



Jack visiting a ship at the Port of Geelong

He regularly received letters from all over the world from friends he had made among the seamen. This cause was another example of Jack’s awareness of the loneliness of those without or far away from family. His concern and dedication to this cause was passed on to his niece. She and her husband have continued on with this work as volunteers at the Missions to Seamen.

Jack served for many years on the Victorian State Council as President of the Council’s ‘Care of the Aged’ Advisory Committee. On his retirement in 1986, State President Jim Carroll wrote that:

“Jack has given great leadership to the Society in its care of these special people. At 81 years of age, I can only say that Jack has been and still is an inspiration to us all.”

During Jack’s stewardship of this committee, he presided over the building and opening of three Vincentian aged care hostels, Bailly House in North Melbourne in 1973, O’Mara House Traralgon in 1976 and VincenPaul Hostel in Mont Albert North in 1978, plus the extension to Vincentian House in 1975. There is little doubt that Jack’s experience in the planning and building of Vincentian House would have inspired and encouraged those involved in the construction of these later aged care facilities.

Jack's long service to the Grace McKellar Home for the Aged in Geelong was recognised when he was appointed a Life Governor in 1985.

Apart from the Society and his 52 years of service with the Geelong and District Water Board, Jack's enduring pastime was cycling. In an interview with the Geelong Advertiser in 1994 to recognise Jack's 50 years with the Society, it is recorded that he was a life member of Geelong West Cycling Club and the League of Victorian Wheelmen. In his younger days, besides competing with his old mate 'Oppy', he also had a hand in the brilliant, but tragically short career of young Geelong-born Olympian Russell Mockridge, who was killed in a road race in 1958.

An article in the Geelong Advertiser in 1999 entitled 'Pedal Power: Geelong's proud bike racing history', highlights Jack's talent as a cyclist:

"During his time as a top Australian cyclist, he rode as a scratch man in all Victorian open races, some of his best performances taking place at the Geelong Drome in 1928 when he won match races against such renowned riders as Opperman, Eric Gibraud and NSW cycling champion Jim Beath. So superior were his performances that at one stage Drome promoters were unable to obtain matches for him."

Jack was awarded the British Empire Medal in 1973 New Years Honours List 'for services to cycling and the community.'

As he approached 90 years of age, Jack was still riding his 1927 Malvern Star from his Manifold Heights home to Vincentian House. "Not interfering," as he said, "just checking that everything was running smoothly."

He thought nothing of attending call outs from Vincentian House when a boiler wasn't working. Fearing the residents would not have hot showers, he often went there at 5am, utilising his water know how to fix things. Just shy of ninety, he was even once found lying on the ground, fixing a resident's bed. There is a certain irony that as an old person himself, Jack was still fixing things in a facility for old people, many younger than him.

He lived through many significant changes. Two world wars and the introduction of many modern conveniences designed to make life easier. He often talked of the divide and bigotry between Catholics and Protestants, felt personally when one brother married an Anglican and the Catholic family members were not allowed to enter the church. He embraced anyone in need, regardless of race or creed, perhaps more vehemently because of his own firsthand experience.

Finally, in 1998, Jack himself became a resident of Vincentian House. As his care needs increased, he later moved to Catholic Homes Maryville aged care at Western Beach, Geelong. He died in St John of God Hospital, Geelong on 31 January 2000, aged 94.

In December in 2009, at a naming ceremony and Mass for the new Vincentian Village aged care facility which replaced Rosalie House and Vincentian House, the activity area was named 'Jack Dillon Central', in recognition of Jack's pivotal role for the Society's care of the aged of Geelong.

Prepared by Society Archivist, Kevin Slattery, with input from Barry Hill and Ian Baulch, Manifold Height Conference and Jack's niece, Valerie Gibbons.

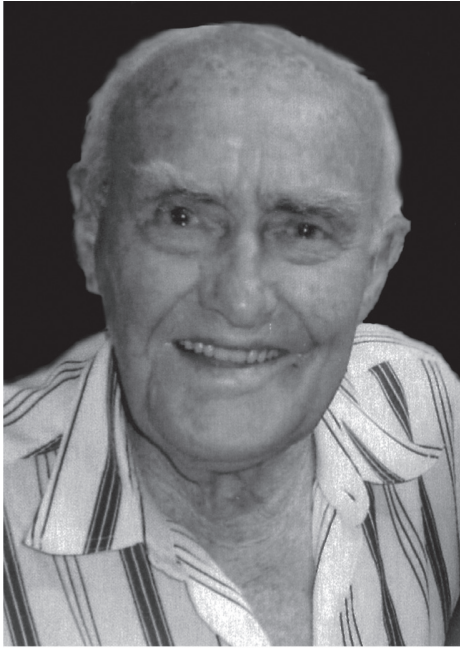


Night Shelter with rooms for the elderly at the rear

- 1944 Jack joined Sts Peter and Paul Conference, Ashby, Geelong
- 1953 Joined Holy Spirit Conference, Manifold, as a founding member and president.
- 1956-1973 Appointed President, Geelong Particular (Regional) Council.
- 1958 Established with fellow Vincentian Jack Nolan, first official Geelong centre.
- 1962 St Vincent's Hostel, Geelong West opened.
- 1970 Vincentian House hostel opened.
- 1973 President, Care of the Aged Advisory committee.
- 1973 Awarded the British Empire Medal for services to cycling and the community. Jack also became a resident at Vincentian Village Hostel.
- 2000 Jack died aged 94 on 31 January

Des Holford

His legacy lives on



Des Holford, 2012

There was no shortage of needs the Mooroopna Conference would find itself addressing when it was first established

St Mary's Mooroopna Conference

The St Mary's Conference was started in 1975 at the initiative of the then parish priest, Fr Maurice Duffy. Des Holford was one of the six men Fr Duffy approached to help start it. For Des, this would be a continuing and enduring focus for the remainder of his life. Until only a few months before Des's death in July 2012, he remained actively involved in the life and success of his conference.

Mooroopna is approximately 180 kilometres north of Melbourne, on the banks of the Goulburn River. It lies opposite the larger town of Shepparton and is in the midst of a major food producing area with many orchards and crops made possible through the rich farming land. It is an area that has been hard hit by drought and flood.

Rural towns have faced considerable hardships in recent times, both economic and natural. A range of circumstances leave many crying out for the kind of help an agency such as the St Vincent de Paul Society exists to provide. There are many itinerant workers, relying on casual work such as fruit picking. Often in the country, people are unwilling to ask for help and welfare agencies need to find ways, including utilizing informal networks, to seek out and help these people.

There was no shortage of needs the Mooroopna Conference would find itself addressing when it was first established. This tradition of serving anyone in need continues today.

A country upbringing

Des Holford, while born in metropolitan Oakleigh in 1925, was country through and through, spending most of his life in rural Victoria.

From the day he was born, it was evident he had staying power. Weighing only 1.5lbs, he was transported home in a shoe box which the family placed in the oven in order to keep his tiny body warm.

He lived mainly with his grandparents in Lakes Entrance and Bruthen until he was twelve or thirteen. Although a non-Catholic, he magically converted every Friday as the Catholic kids were excused from religious instruction and were allowed outside to play sport. In later years, this pragmatic approach to Catholicism would be transformed into a deep and abiding faith.

His family recall many events from Des's childhood, even the nicknames of his close mates. Who could forget names like Stinky, Buzzy, Pooley and Rat; the latter even had a sister affectionately known as Skank. These names conjure a certain era and place, now kept alive from generation to generation through the rich exchange of Holford storytelling. Like so many Vincentians of his era, Des always had great tales, which were told in his trademark, low key manner.

A love of horses and droving

In his early teens, the family moved to Bairnsdale. By fifteen, Des had left school and would soon become a drover. This was a natural path for Des who had been known as 'horse boy' at school; such was his



A young Des with family pets 1927

affinity with horses. Riding a horse was second nature. He even tried his hand at roughrider rodeos as he was growing up.

In the late 1930s, he worked for a while doing the mail run on horseback, riding from Bairnsdale to Ensay. He would visit farms along the route and collect the mail. He retained impressions from this first employment as a young boy, such as the spinster couple who always spoiled him when he dropped in at their farm.

The legacy of his country upbringing meant that it was second nature to be comfortable with any challenges thrown his way and to always make time for others. These early lessons persisted throughout Des's life.

He enjoyed the mail run, returning to the same homes the next day, where he would pick up the mail for posting. It was an early taste of an independent life and a sense of being in charge of one's own destiny. It was also an early indication of Des's capacity to take things in his stride.

Although always prepared to try his hand at any task, Des's real love was always droving. As a young boy, he would drive the horse-drawn food cart ahead of the drovers. These horsemen covered huge distances such as Bega to Broadmeadows. They would pick up a mob and take them on to Bendigo. Des's family recalls hearing a great deal about these long trips, such was the happy reminiscing Des enjoyed sharing.

Des loved to tell everyone when driving along Melbourne's busy multi-laned roads, "I used to drove along here." He always painted a vivid picture of the past as he took his audience back to a time when major arterial roads were simply dirt tracks.

He continued droving through the 1940s, recalling the precautions that were required during wartime. One evening when the drovers had set up camp, an air raid warden came along and told them to put the fire out because of the requirement for black outs.

Another story involved an older drover, so proficient a rider and so at one with his horse, that after a long session at the pub,

the drover fell asleep on horseback and his horse brought him safely back to camp.

Des then became a butcher in Bairnsdale, adding more practical skills to those he had already acquired, travelling around Victoria. He even had a go at working in the fishing industry. Des would try his hand at anything.

He was called up for national service but didn't pass the army's medical because his foot had been run over by a railway trolley when he was a teenager. The army decided he would not manage the extensive walking required. Des always challenged that decision with a touch of humour, saying he didn't think he was meant to kick anyone to death, just shoot them.

Aileen, marriage and family

At 21, Des and a mate were on their way to Queensland when they gatecrashed a party in Melbourne. This is where he happened to meet Aileen Collins. He never made it to Queensland.

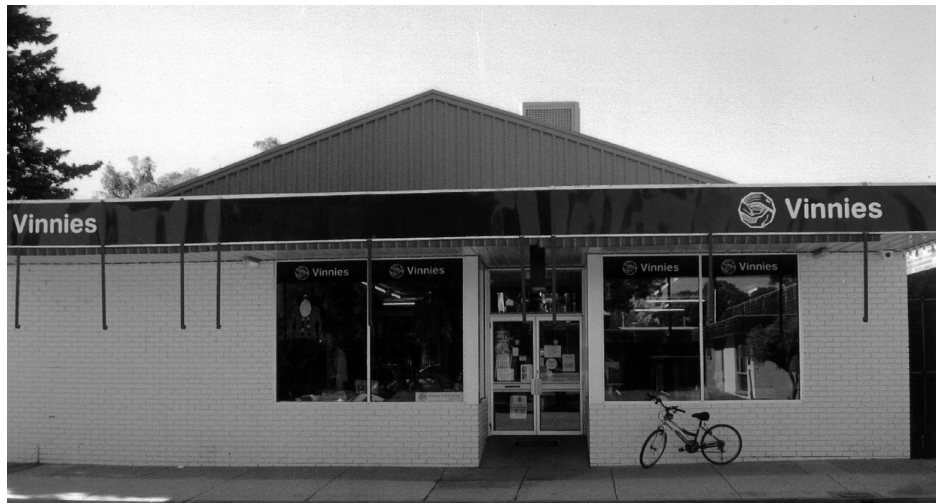
He found work in North Melbourne at the McKenzie Food factory. Aileen and Des married six months later in August 1948. Des chose to become a Catholic, making his first communion the night before they were married at Aileen's parish, St Augustine's in Yarraville.

After they married, Aileen and Des moved to Gippsland taking over a share in the farm from Des's mother and partner. First child Coralie was born in this time. Des then took up a farm hand position on a dairy farm in Bundalaguwah with Dave Mathewson. After three years, Des went to work at a local sawmill until the Mathewson family convinced him to return to work at another of their farms at Boisedale. This was the start of a wonderful relationship between Des and John Mathewson and an enduring friendship for their families as well. There are many stories of good fun, rowdy parties and one particular recurring tale about a Shetland pony often found in the lounge room with young passengers on board.

After 45 years farming in the district, the Mathewsons decided to leave and move to a better climate up north which would be kinder to their asthmatic son. Without much thought or consultation, the Mathewsons assumed their friends would join them and the Holfords moved to Ardmona.

There are many stories ... and one about a Shetland pony often found in the lounge room with young passengers on board.

Aileen recalls the farmer ordered three vans and without a second thought, Des and Aileen packed up and left with them, to start afresh in a new country region.



Mooroopna Centre

Holfords move to Mooroopna

It was 1956, when Des and Aileen, now with young Coralie and Bryan in tow, moved to Mooroopna. The Holfords shared the Mathewson's house for six months until their own house, a worker's hut from the Eildon Dam project, was delivered to the property. The two families retain a strong bond today. To be blessed with such a strong and abiding friendship was always a reminder for Des that not everyone was in the same fortunate position.

Des and Aileen had two more children; Adrian and Christine. The Mathewsons also had four children so there was never a shortage of playmates. The now adult children often recall their happy childhood, growing up in the country with the Mathewson family.

Life was busy and fulfilling for the Holfords. Des worked hard, always taking on other jobs to supplement the family income, such as fruit picking; whatever he could fit around milking.

Joining the Society

In 1975, when Des was aged fifty, Mooroopna parish priest, Fr Duffy decided to establish a local Society conference. Early meeting minutes record the Conference's appreciation of Fr Duffy's guidance.

Fr Duffy was seen as a progressive parish priest who was well respected by parishioners. He tapped a few men on the shoulder about his plans. Des, Vin Grant, Jeff Knight, Kevin Malane and Jack Walsh were all at the initial April meeting of interested parishioners. This group of five, who were responsible for

founding the Mooroopna St Mary's Conference under Fr Duffy's guidance, continues to be referred to respectfully as the old gang. The conference would go on from strength to strength over the years.

Jack Walsh is the only one of the old gang who is still alive. He remains actively involved, doing the bread run and working at the Centre on weekends. As Des's family talk about this, there is a strong sense of the baton being passed on to the next generation with the original men now almost out of the picture.

In the early days after Des joined the conference, - in fact at all times; - he was happy to be in the background of operations. He did step up dutifully to assume leadership positions such as Conference President and Vice President when required but this was not his natural bent. His strength was always to quietly get on with things, behind the scenes and attend to any task he could perform which contributed to the whole effort of the Conference.

There is a strong sense of the baton being passed on to the next generation

All Mooroopna Conference members in those days were of working age so conference work was done in the evenings. For Des, his conference activities began after milking and dinner. He and Kevin Malane always did their visitations together.

Records from the weekly conference meetings reveal that Des hardly ever missed a meeting. In later years, when women became part of the conference, Aileen was also always there with Des.

Minutes from 1975 reveal some of the usual challenges all new conferences face as they find their feet and adapt to whatever is before them. Shepparton had traditionally visited patients at Mooroopna Hospital. On establishment of the new conference, Shepparton handed this over to Des' conference and it became one of the initial areas of work it undertook.

Mooroopna Conference appreciated the guidance received from Shepparton in the early days on how to run a conference. Other conferences such as Bendigo were also always there, willing to assist in different ways. This is a normal practice between old and fledgling conferences and ensures the wisdom



Des and Aileen with other husband and wife volunteers, Mooroopna Centre

and good practice of old hands is passed on to new members. In true Vincentian spirit, the exchange of knowledge focused on the important aspects of the nature of the relationship between conference members and those they assisted.

Minutes relating to visitation by Mooroopna St Mary's Conference record the advice of Shepparton as follows:

“Dignity of people to be given every consideration, secrecy of utmost importance, and not to force ourselves on people.”

There were also words of advice about issues conferences have universally faced at one time or another.

“Sometimes the Society is taken advantage of but we must give people the benefit of the doubt.”

There was also awareness of worrying trends and the impact that decisions in the town might have on the Society's work. One meeting discusses Rumbalara, the Aboriginal housing co-operative, which still operates today providing a range of services and support. There was concern about the impact on co-op members as the local cannery was soon to close.

Mooroopna Centre and the development of the St Mary's Conference

In the early years of the Conference, attention focused on establishing a centre to raise the funds needed to do the work of the Society.

The Conference also considered other ways to raise funds for special works and weekly bingo started in

1977, operating from the church hall every Saturday. Des was a permanent fixture, involved with this until shortly before his death.

Bingo has been a considerable fundraiser for St Mary's parish. Over the years, more than half a million dollars has been raised and directed to the parish. It continues today and is a popular social event. Over the years, some of the routines have changed. Aileen always brought milk straight from milking for the cups of tea in the days before occupational health and safety guidelines prevented this.

Fr Brian Connell who followed Fr Duffy as parish priest, held the licence. The licence authority inspector would visit occasionally and one night wanted to know why the license holder wasn't present. Des explained he was saying mass at that moment. The inspector was not satisfied that everything was in order when the licensee was absent so the licence was transferred to Des.

When they first started the conference, all members had day jobs, so did visiting after work. Like many conferences, Mooroopna operates in two distinct areas: assisting the poor and disadvantaged in the local community, mainly through visitation and material and financial assistance, and through operation of a centre.

Establishing the Mooroopna Centre

The first Mooroopna Centre started from a small shop, then moved to 3 O'Brien St and then to McLennan St which was formerly the baker's shop and residence. The evolving success of the Mooroopna Centre has meant that the hunt was always on for larger, more appropriate premises.

Des was always on the trail of potential suitable new premises. In late 1982, the present site at 2 Northgate Street was purchased for \$25,000. Conference members sought donations from locals and from other conferences to pay for the site.

In February 1983, Vincentian Vin Grant, also the manager of the Mooroopna State Bank, arranged a loan for part cost of the building of the present Centre. The Society also contributed an interest free loan of \$20,000. The new building was built by a local builder for a cost of \$70,000. It has proved to be a great investment.

The new Centre opened for trading in February 1984. The Centre was blessed by the Most Reverend Noel Daly, Bishop of Sandhurst and officially

opened by the Hon. Senator Donald Grimes, Minister for Social Security, with many dignitaries present.

Considerable thought went into current needs of a centre. An office was included where people could be interviewed and assisted and there was also a pantry where food and groceries were stored and distributed. Mooroopna has always been a very successful centre, raising large amounts of money and benefitting from many volunteers having retail expertise.

In 1982, a decision was made to allow women to become members of the St Mary's Conference. Des's wife Aileen joined in 1984 and became actively involved in many aspects of the life of the Conference, along with Des. Her particular involvement related to the Centre and a number of social activities which added to the life of the Conference, while also often raising some funds.

In 1987, the Centre was extended, adding a section at the rear. This provided a much needed area for storing goods and for parking the truck which was purchased in 1993.

In 1991, Des retired at age 66 and then turned his efforts more fully to the activities at the Centre.

Social activities of the Conference

There are many dimensions to involvement and participation in a conference and the social aspect is one which is highly valued by members. Having women join as members at St Mary's opened up the Conference to new possibilities, often adding a social element to fund raising activities.

There were road trips and the annual Bear Fair which Aileen instigated and has remained involved in



Des and Aileen with conference members on Christmas Mystery Bus Trip - 2005

over the years. As well, fashion parades and pleasant Sunday afternoons, have added to developing a close bond between members and volunteers of the Mooroopna Conference.

The Conference also often joined with other conferences in making bus trips to Melbourne to learn more about special works and government funded activities of the Society. This opened members' eyes to a range of works, including the operation at Ozanam House, some of the aged care facilities and the Compeer Program.

Highlights

Master of the bales

Donated goods that don't meet quality considerations required for sale in the Centre are either discarded or forwarded to the Society's warehouse in Melbourne for the export market. Des had particular expertise in preparing the surplus material for dispatch.

Des had mastered many practical skills from farming and butchery work he had done over the years. He always tied butchers' knots when using rope and in relation to packing and distributing surplus material, was famous for his meticulous sewing of the bales. Des spent hours sewing up the bales and mending those that were often ripped. He would sit quietly, carefully making the bales secure. He was a perfectionist with this task and the Centre was always happy to leave this to him because of his obvious flair. Others' attempts rarely passed muster with Des.

He was also known somewhat notoriously for another aspect of his bale work.

Before he could sew up the bales with his trademark, perfectly tight stitching, he prided himself in packing as much as possible in each bale. This required the goods to be flattened and this was where his contentious approach caused some controversy. Des would simply jump up and down in the bales. This had been tolerated with humour until the occupational health and safety guidelines suggested otherwise. There were obviously genuine concerns for his safety especially as needles were involved but Des continued with this practice, well into his eighties. Aileen recalls Des coming home one day and admitting he felt a bit sore. On questioning him,

he admitted he'd jumped in the bales again. Aileen replied "You're 84 years old!"

He was also known somewhat notoriously for another aspect of his bale work

Des's daughter Christine remembered that Centre Manager Joan Trevaskis and Bernie Trevaskis would often quietly ask family members to have a word

with Des as they were worried he'd hurt himself. Christine was never sure that Des knew that Joan was aware of what he was doing, so discreet was her handling of this situation.

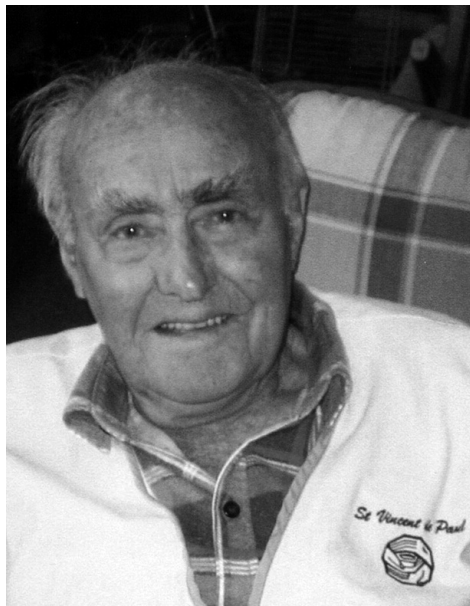
On the surface, Des appeared to adhere to this advice. The challenge was that Des was a man who believed firmly in doing a job well and he knew his approach allowed more goods to be packed in each bale. It remained the one act of rebellion from a man who otherwise abided by guidelines that although sometimes tedious, he conceded may have merit and were introduced for sound purposes. For example, Des would spend time without

complaining, moving all the coat hangers to ensure they were spaced out by a distance of two fingers in accordance with Society guidelines. He didn't quibble about these rules, always prepared to do his bit towards making the display look good while complying with regulations.

The lady in the caravan park

Des came across many people seeking assistance through the Conference, many of whom were living in desperate and stressful circumstances. No matter what prevailed, he quietly focused on ways to ease their hardship and remained involved over the long term.

The Conference was told about a woman in her sixties living in the caravan park. She had severe spinal injuries and was confined to her bed which was actually an old car bench seat. Des and a fellow Vincentian visited her and found her stretched out on this car seat in her small caravan. The seat was not long enough for her and was awkward to lie on. Her day mainly consisted of watching TV. She had rigged up a makeshift arrangement for operating the TV, with wires running everywhere in an extremely dangerous fashion.



Des wearing a Centre vest

Over a beer after bingo, Des talked about this woman's predicament and asked if anyone had ideas regarding obtaining a television with a proper remote. One woman from the Conference was also a member of the Soroptimists. She made a request for assistance and the Soroptimists supplied a TV with a handpiece.

After Des had helped with this, the woman was constantly on the phone, asking for his help. She stipulated that he could visit anytime, but not between 4.30-5pm when her favourite TV program, 'The Bold and the Beautiful' screened.

Des suggested getting her a bed but she didn't want one. When the car seat wore out, they found her another car seat, this time a back seat out of an old station wagon. This remained her bed of choice. In telling others about this woman's circumstances, Des always painted a picture of this woman with her feet dangling over the end of the seat.

The woman then started visiting Des at the Centre, having a carer drive her there. She would come to the back of Vinnies, either for provisions or practical help. One time, the ramp outside her caravan needed painting and she asked Des to purchase some special non-slip paint. Des recalled her voice from the station wagon, with her feet up near the driver. She had a mirror and talked to people through the mirror. She had no family. Des could never fathom how the carer managed to transfer her onto a trolley, down the ramp and into a car.

The family with twins

Another case involved a couple with three children who were expecting twins. Des and Aileen would mind the kids when the father was visiting his wife in hospital. Another long term member, Bruna Ryan was also greatly involved in assisting the family. Aileen recalled how the father always had the children bathed, fed and in their pyjamas when Des and Eileen turned up.

Three months after the births, one of the little twins died. The members were concerned that the parents couldn't afford a funeral. Des, Jeff Knight and Brian



Ducks waiting for leftover bread from the bread run

Treacy visited the funeral director who waived his fee. The Society paid for the plot. The Conference organized the afternoon tea for the funeral. The Holfords and Bruna maintained contact with the family.

The members were concerned that the parents couldn't afford a funeral

Des had a number of routines which he stuck by which made for smooth operation of many conference and centre functions. His daughter Christine recalled that every Thursday when she was a schoolgirl, Des involved her in packing food parcels. In those days, members did this in their own cars. It was one of the routines she now remembers fondly. Her father would always use his trademark butcher's knot to tie any articles which required secure fastening.

Des was involved in delivering bread on the bread runs for many years. Even the ducks became familiar with this routine and always waited expectantly for the leftovers when the truck drove in.

Community award

In 2005, Des was a joint winner of the McLennan/Kiwani Club Annual Community Award for thirty years service to the Society in Moorroopna. Des was in hospital on the night of the award. Regional President, Bernie Trevaskis and Aileen and Des's daughters Chris and Coralie visited him later that



Des and Aileen and family

night to present his award. Aileen laughs recalling that Des was asleep, woke up to see them all gathered around his bed and thought he must have been dying.

His family and Conference brothers and sisters were thrilled at this recognition of Des's contribution, particularly as he was someone who achieved a great deal, usually staying out of the limelight. They see the award as fitting recognition of Des's caring nature and his tenacity when it came to seeing things through to their proper conclusion, no matter how difficult.

Recollections of Des

Centre volunteers have an enduring memory of Des in the back of the Centre, quietly sewing the bales. They also remember him, regular as clockwork, turning up out the back. He became hard of hearing and would constantly announce in a loud voice, "Not much furniture in here today."

As Des's health and mobility declined, he started using a 'gofer'. It was a familiar sight to see Des come in the back door of the Centre, sign the book, park his transportation and offer to give rides. A few were happy to have a go but Des was the king when it came to nifty, tight manoeuvres.

Centre volunteers have an enduring memory of Des in the back of the Centre, quietly sewing the bales.

Des remained active and interested in the life of the Centre after he retired from involvement in the Conference, regularly assisting there until he went into hospital in June 2012. The Mooroopna Centre remained a big part of Des's life and a big part of who he was as a man. As his daughter Christine explains: "Dad gave two hundred percent to the Vinnies."

Conference friends recall his funny sense of humour and that he was never rude to anyone.

He had a strong sense of right and wrong and was a stickler in ensuring a Conference member was always part of a home visit. It was one of his firmly held beliefs which he practiced in the days he was active in the Conference. He believed he should always go if approached.

His practical skills were invaluable and he applied all he knew to the benefit of the Society and the people it served. He was always quick to act; for example, bringing the tractor to help with the sandbagging during the 1973 floods and again in 1992.

His family and friends recall his strong work ethic

and willingness to always help in any way. He could always find something to do and as a consequence, did not tolerate laziness. He lived out this ethic in his work - both paid employment and as a Conference member. After work, or time at the Centre, he would hurry home to help out with the milking. He was never idle.

He was a legend at growing vegetables and could be found tending his vegie patch if not needed elsewhere. It seemed he could turn his hand to just about anything practical.

Even when seriously ill in hospital, he learned that the hospital was throwing out some old beds. He rang Bernie Trevaskis, told him they were good beds and asked if the Society needed any?

He was a devoted husband to Aileen, loving father to his four children and doted on his thirteen grandchildren and nine great grandchildren. Towards the end of his life, he went into care. Aileen broke her arm around this time after a fall and they were put in separate care facilities. Aileen describes being separated as the worst experience for them.

All who knew Des well speak of him as a man of simple tastes, who appeared to take things in his stride and didn't like fuss. He had an inherent kindness, which motivated others to follow his example. Many in his extended family have become involved in the Society as a result of Des and Aileen's example.

Conclusion

Des died in July 2012 but his spirit lives on at the Mooroopna Centre. Everyone there has a story about Des, particularly in relation to the bales. Visiting the Centre, a volunteer produces an old biscuit tin. Across the top is written, 'Des's needles. Don't touch.'

Inside are the large needles that Des used to sew up the bales. It is an enduring and lovely reminder that each person has their own special gifts and of the gift of self that is the mark of a true Vincentian.

Des touched many people's lives in many positive ways. His eulogy recorded many of his special gifts;



Des with his great grandson Jack at his 80th birthday party

his selflessness, his incredible work ethic and no fuss approach to solving a problem.

A plaque at Des's grave site states simply the mark left by Des

"So much you gave, so little you asked,
Left our world, but never our heart."

For many, Des remains that country boy who loved horses, grew into a man who loved his community and did all he was capable of doing to make his part of the world, a better place.

In a poignant acknowledgement of his early life and enduring love of horses, a friend placed a stirrup in Des's grave.

Travel lightly Des.

1975	Des became a foundational member of the St Mary's Mooroopna Conference
1977	Involved in establishing Saturday evening bingo, St Mary's Parish
1988-89	Vice President, St Mary's Mooroopna Conference
1990	President, St Mary's Mooroopna Conference
1991	Vice President, St Mary's Mooroopna Conference
1992-94	President, St Mary's Mooroopna Conference
2005	Awarded McLennan/Kiwani Club Annual Community Award for thirty years service to the Society in Mooroopna
2012	Des died aged 87 on 1 July

Brian Lenten

Friend of those in need



Brian Lenten at home 2012
Photo courtesy Bendigo Enterprise
Business Review June 2012

To meet Brian is to be
engulfed in the
warm embrace of a
country welcome

A welcoming presence

At Brian Lenten's front door are two doormats, both bearing in bold block letters the word WELCOME. There is no better signifier of the man who lives here. To meet Brian is to be engulfed in the warm embrace of a country welcome.

A house blessing inside continues this theme: "And bless each door that opens wide, to stranger as to kin."

Brian's home exudes old-fashioned hospitality. Brian took up cooking when his wife Margaret broke her leg and hasn't stopped. No visitor leaves without a good feed and there is always something cooking in the kitchen. He describes himself as a man of simple tastes, an ordinary person. He doesn't drink himself but keeps a full bar for guests.

When Brian is in the garden, he likes to chat to passersby. He has three conversation starters: where they grew up, what is their career and which football team they follow.

Early years: Growing up in Bendigo

Brian was born in Bendigo in 1934 and has lived in Bendigo all his life. He was educated by the Mercy sisters at St Kilian's primary school and then the Marist Brothers. As it turned out, his future wife, Margaret Green was also at St Kilian's – they made their first Holy Communion on the same day in 1941. Years later, their courtship blossomed at dances and social gatherings organized by the Young Christian Workers and National Catholic Girls Movement.

He has many happy memories of growing up in Bendigo. He paints a picture of a bygone era when kids roamed free around the streets. There was always a football to kick, a game of marbles, and comics to swap. Most Saturdays, a gang of boys would ride fifteen kilometres out to Uncle George Gleeson's farm at Strathfieldsaye and go ferreting. Brian remains great friends with many from those early days including some famous sporting mates: cricketers John Pete Davis and Hank Watts, and Graham Arthur, former captain and coach of Hawthorn. Ron Slattery is another long standing friend who is a cousin of John Moore, who was a former New South Wales State President and President of the National Council of the Society.

Brian retains many wartime memories as the Bendigo showground, near where his family lived, was an army training ground. Soldiers

often came to his home for a meal. He remembers the armoured cars up and down the street and the troops parading, marching out at 6am to catch the train on their way to active service. The townspeople would turn out to wave them on their way.

At fourteen, Brian was diagnosed with rheumatic fever. He spent six and a half months in Bendigo Base Hospital. In the time he was there, the doctors ordered bed rest. He lay flat for the entire period of confinement. He couldn't feed himself and became very attached to the nurses. He still marvels at the wonderful care they gave the patients. He remembers them sitting and talking to him in a ward of adult men. He was smitten with a few and suffered terribly when they were moved to other wards. He kept in contact with many of the nurses throughout their lives. In the time he was there, twenty-eight patients died in his ward.

He went home, ordered to rest for another twelve months. Although he had thrived at school, missing a year and a half made it hard to go back. At sixteen, he joined the workforce.

Working life

Brian's first job in 1950 was as a clerk at the Commonwealth Health Laboratories. He typed up test results on an old typewriter and at the end of the day delivered them on his bike to the various doctors in the Bendigo area. He had plenty of spare time during the day and he and the senior clerk would read their books, hastily hiding them when they heard the chief medical officer approaching.

In 1951, he took a job as projectionist at the Plaza Theatre, covering the matinee and evening sessions and assisting at the Lyric and Royal Princess Theatres when there were staff shortages. It was a good job but watching the same film night after night became tedious.

In 1952, he was called up for national service. Brian loved this experience. After three months basic training at Puckapunyal, there was a monthly local parade and fortnightly camps for the next two years. He still catches up with a "nasho" mate at the RSL every month.

He left the theatre after six years and took a job with

Stramit Roofing Systems where he worked for thirty years. Stramit built a house on site for Brian and his family. He was second in charge at Stramit, and worked well with management but he always remained close with the workers.

He also managed to fit in being a local footy umpire between the ages of thirty-six and forty-nine until a car accident ended this interest.

Again, with his practical approach and experience, he found employment relatively easily.

In 1989, at fifty-five years of age, Brian left Stramit and began looking for somewhere to live. He had never taken out a loan and had no idea how to go about obtaining one. His daughter Natalie and son-in-law Denis were aware of a house on the market and helped with the practicalities. So Brian and Margaret bought the house and have lived in Rowan Street ever since.

After his time at Stramit, he wondered what he would do next. Again, with his practical approach and experience, he found employment relatively easily. Within a short period, he became the property officer at Catholic College Bendigo, a school with two campuses where he oversaw all cleaning, gardening, maintenance and other functions over both sites. He worked there for fifteen years.

Brian reflects on how much harder working life is for people these days. Without any formal qualifications, he marvels over his fifty-one years of constant



Brian and Margaret and their young family 1960s

employment. There was always work to be had and it didn't take much looking. He believes having a no nonsense approach to life's ups and downs has helped him. This has been shaped in part by the practical example of Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

Marrying Margaret

In 1956, Brian married Margaret. They lived with his parents while he built their home. From an early age, he was made aware how crucial it was to own one's home. His mother and father had been hit hard by the Great Depression and lost their home in 1930. Even later, when his father had two jobs - working in the local preserving factory by day and doing bar work at night they still rented. The importance of a secure home as a solid foundation is a constant theme in Brian's approach to helping people. Without this, everything else can crumble.

Knowing nothing about building, he obtained a book on carpentry. He read the first two chapters and decided to build his own home. Over eighteen months, he built their two bedroom house on a block he bought for £200 on the outskirts of Bendigo. He did all the work himself, other than using an electrician. As a projectionist, he could commit a large part of his day to this work. He would rise early and work on the house, dragging beams delivered down the road, to his block. He borrowed a wheelbarrow and a mixer and collected sand from a hill behind his block. Back and forth he went, shovelling the sand and then shovelling cement.

Margaret was working as a hairdresser and still does. She also did several nights a week as an usherette. They paid for the house as it was built; the idea of taking out a loan was foreign to them. Brian completed the house in about eighteen months.

Moving in was an exciting time, small and modest as the house was. It was refurbished three times over the years, and decades later Brian's youngest daughter Bronagh lived there for a time.

Margaret and Brian had nine children, born over fifteen years. The first in 1957 was Mandy, then Natalie, Damian, Aidan, Michael, Bronagh, Timothy, Rebecca. The last, Paul, died at birth in 1972. In Brian's own words, "He was perfect." They have twenty-two grandchildren and three great grandchildren. Brian and Margaret care for one grandson three days a week. Family is a constant presence and topic of conversation.

Brian credits building his home as one of his best learning experiences. It enabled him to gain and retain employment and to find practical solutions to

problems. He looks back often, pleasantly surprised at how he managed to build the place on his own.

Joining the Society

Before he joined the St Vincent de Paul Society, two Vincentians visited Brian to introduce him to the ways of the Conference. They told him that joining the Society was "for his own spiritual sanctification". This left him completely in the dark. But rather than waiting for all to be revealed, Brian rolled up his sleeves and got on with being a Vincentian, intuitively responding to people's needs as best he could. He still hasn't figured out what that phrase meant even though he has been attending weekly Conference meetings for more than four decades.

Brian joined the Golden Square Conference in 1970 when he was thirty-six. At that time he didn't know what belonging to a Conference entailed. A workmate invited him so he went along. He knew he wasn't interested in joining if it was only to sell 'The Advocate' after Mass or to help out on the piety stall. If he was to be involved with something linked to the Church, he wanted it to be real and practical. This never meant all hard work and no play. Brian is widely known as a practical joker and he has many accomplices in a prank, spread across the Society. Brian finds that humour and taking the mickey are a form of social currency and oil the wheels of working well with people.

Over the years, he has been involved in many facets of Society life through local Conferences, Regional and State Council. His 44 years as a Vincentian are filled with stories and lessons; many relate back to his own early life, to what he saw and learned as a young boy, and to the importance of relating to people with respect and compassion.

Reaching out to people and giving of oneself are intrinsic to the Society's approach, embedded in The Rule, an important guiding text for Vincentians www.vinnies.org.au/the-rule-national. Its principles are second nature to Brian, after years of contact with people in need. He has learned to approach each case on its merits. He recognizes that very few of those the Society assist have any family support they can call on.

He doesn't see flaws in people - only pain and suffering and what he and the Society can do to alleviate this. He hasn't always operated this way though; it has taken time to learn.

He describes his early days and his first home visit with another Vincentian one Christmas. They arrive at the address and by Brian's own description, see

“a big, flash car, a caravan and a boat parked in the driveway”. They decide they have the wrong address. Soon afterwards, Brian discovers it was the right address. The main breadwinner’s business has recently failed. They go back and give the man £25 to help with essentials. This was the first of many valuable lessons Brian learned as a Vincentian.

He doesn’t see flaws in people; He hasn’t always operated this way though; it has taken time to learn.

Involvement and Achievements

From the very beginning, Brian became heavily involved in Society work. The St Mary’s Conference, Golden Square, met every Monday evening and Brian admired the wonderful group of dedicated men there. This Conference remains an extremely busy one, due to a large Office of Housing development where, in the early days, they delivered food and bread every evening. At that time, most Society activities were done after the men had finished their day jobs.

In 1975, Brian was elected President of the Conference and also accepted the position of Secretary of St Vincent de Paul Village, an aged care facility in Bendigo. The Village is a four acre site donated by the Sandhurst Diocese. At the time it was a vacant parcel of land. He acknowledges the leadership of Bill Burton Clay who was regional president at the time. Over the years, government funding was obtained and 30 independent living units were built. The feasibility of maximizing the site’s future use has been considered a number of times and Brian is pleased that responsibility for future directions is being handled by VincentCare, an agency of the Society which manages funded services. Brian has remained as secretary for almost 30 years.

Brian was elected President of Bendigo Regional Council in 1985. All regional council presidents had a seat on Central Council, so this also involved North Eastern Central Council meetings three times a year.

Passing on the insights of Vincentians who see the reality at close range is vitally important.

Throughout his time, Brian has given many addresses and presentations at Masses, local forums and Statewide events such as government inquiries

and state congresses. While he did not initially feel the orator role came naturally to him and he still admits to nerves in these situations, he knows he has some worthwhile messages he can pass on. He is well known for his opening jokes which build rapport with his audience. He believes the message can be powerful if it is kept real. Passing on the insights of Vincentians who see the reality at close range is also vitally important.

Brian is at pains to emphasise that while many initiatives occurred on his watch, they were always the sum of concerted efforts of many – both Vincentians and volunteers. He credits Margaret with providing enormous back-up and support.

His five years (1991-1996) as State Centres’ President took him all over Victoria and away from Bendigo most weekends as he and Margaret travelled to Society events. During this term, twenty new centres were opened and several relocated. Brian travelled 250,000 kilometres in this portfolio. In relation to his own region, the North East Central Council covers a huge area: Swan Hill to Mansfield, Wodonga to Castlemaine. As well as the vastness of the area, it has recurring, significant issues specific to a rural setting such as floods and drought.

In his time with the Society, Brian achieved a great deal. During his presidency of Bendigo Regional Council, (1985-1990) his achievements included:

- the prison visitation group being re-formed to become a successful and active group
- a catering committee formed to cater for all Society functions
- new centres opened at Bendigo and Eaglehawk.

Another achievement was obtaining three caravans in the period after the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires. These were located in Bendigo for emergency housing. Brian was actively involved as President of Bendigo Urban Emergency Accommodation Resource Committee, which was the forerunner of Loddon Mallee Housing which today is a significant housing provider.

Housing achievements were many. For example, two x two bedroom units were purchased for emergency accommodation adjoining the Bendigo centre. A house for students and apprentices from outside Bendigo was purchased and set up with a house mother. A fortuitous outcome of this purchase was that the Society’s pre-auction offer of \$40,000 was refused. At auction, they were the highest bidder with a \$33,000 bid.



State Council (Brian Lenten, third from left), Vinnies Ball 2007

Other achievements were realised through negotiation and compromise. For example, at one stage the Society employed a former high profile manager with a private retail background to assist with Centre activities and future planning. He decided to sell the Collingwood Centre, which had been started by the legendary Margaret Oats. Margaret died in 1998 and is to this day known as the 'Angel of Collingwood', such is the legacy of her volunteer work with the poor over forty years around inner Melbourne.

The retail manager, thinking he could operate autonomously, had a 'For Sale' sign hung up. This gave rise to a Saturday morning meeting between Brian, State President John O'Brien, the parish priest and Margaret Oats. The locals were not happy with a decision they felt had been imposed on them by head office. Brian and the Centre's people tried to explain that it was time to relocate to a better, purpose-built centre, but Margaret would not have any of this. Her people related to the original centre. It stayed and is still operating.

Yet another significant achievement was the choice of Bendigo as a site for Compeer, a Society program which matches companions with socially isolated people with a mental illness. Brian's son Tim, a Senior Psychiatric Consultant with Bendigo Health, was instrumental in obtaining suitable office space free of charge.

Other incidents show Brian's belief that the best chance to effectively help someone is to respond to their individual circumstances. For instance, he heard of a couple known to the Society who had hit hard times and were at risk of losing their home. Brian responded quickly, knowing time was critical in this case. He rang the five Regional Council Presidents

who agreed that the family be given \$2000 to meet arrears payments. Regional presidents have discretion to allocate large amounts of money in certain circumstances. As it was a Saturday, discussions ensued about obtaining this amount in cash. One ever resourceful Vincentian volunteered her own cash, which she fortunately had stored in her home.

Brian then drove the 150 kilometres to visit the couple. He wanted to be home in time for evening Mass, so could only make a brief visit. He had a coffee with them and inquired unobtrusively about how they were going. As he left, he placed a brown paper bag containing the cash on the kitchen table. He knew this averted a crisis situation and was confident they would not require further help from the Society. It had meant investing more than some might feel was warranted. But in Brian's experience, directing more support initially, which may be purely financial, reaps dividends. He sees fewer repeat visitors when the Society has comprehensively helped a person over a particular crisis.

Other incidents show Brian's belief that the best chance to effectively help someone is to respond to their individual circumstances

Yet other achievements were based on Brian's recognition of the importance of strong partnerships: much more can be done when the Society joins forces with others. He recognizes that in some circumstances a level of professionalism is needed. He is always willing to involve others with skill and acumen who can lighten the load and convince the funders and decision-makers that the Society has what it takes to deliver.

This is exemplified in a united effort with local Rotarians. The Society had assisted a particular family for many years. The father's only employment was as a taxi driver, two nights per week. Brian learned that this man had died on his taxi round. His wife Donna was pregnant with their seventh child. The Society visited to see how they could assist her. Brian discovered the cramped conditions the family was living in, with the boys sleeping in a dilapidated caravan which was a fire risk.

Brian decided to contact a local Rotarian, Leon Scott. Brian and another Vincentian met Leon and a fellow Rotarian in the family's backyard one cold wet Bendigo morning. A basic plan was drawn up and seventeen tradesmen agreed to donate their skills. At very short notice, a total of thirty-five volunteers came together and built an extra bedroom, new kitchen, bathroom and laundry. Almost all materials were donated, with Leon calling in many favours. The Society paid for remaining items needed, and the total cost was \$8000.

Brian still has a photograph somewhere of his good friend, former State President, Syd Tutton, nursing the newborn baby. Brian feels immense pride in such efforts by Conferences. It was not only the building work – Vincentians provided lunches and “smokos” for all the workers. This illustrates the Vincentian tradition of fellowship and hospitality. Brian doubts whether he went through normal council permit processes as he knew they would take too long. He always prefers to strike while the iron is hot to avoid momentum and good will being lost.

The event illustrates two of the principles he has lived his life by – never wait to be asked and it is often better to seek forgiveness than to seek permission.

All these achievements are acknowledged by Brian's Vincentian brothers and sisters. They speak of him as the 'go to' person when a response is needed, the person who allows choices and ensures that people are treated with dignity, not told what they should expect or can receive. He is generous, giving of himself freely and bringing others together, facilitating responses that are stronger because many are involved. Brian crosses all borders: ecumenical, gender, age. Getting the job done well is what counts. His seemingly laid back and at times mischievous manner belie an approach which is compassionate and pragmatic.

The event illustrates two of the principles he has lived his life by – never wait to be asked and it is often better to seek forgiveness than to seek permission.

Leadership

Brian has held many leadership positions in the Society. However, his view is that although holding office allows more influence in decision-making, the call to serve is the same for every Vincentian and rank and titles are irrelevant.

He believes in the importance of keeping an eye out for new and emerging leaders and mentoring them. Succession planning is very important to him. He acknowledges the help and guidance he himself received from Vincentians such as Allan McCarthy. Allan taught Brian much about how to support and respect those seeking assistance and so Brian strives to put in time with others himself. He is always keen to encourage volunteers to consider joining a Conference; many want to contribute more and only need encouragement.

He feels he has developed his skills in selecting the best people. He made a mistake in the past which cost him a friendship and a great deal was learned in the process. Luckily, there have been many successes.

In his role as a leader, Brian points to the good fortune of having a treasurer, Ivan Carucan, who before retirement had worked in the corporate sector. Ivan had particular financial know-how and a certain appetite for innovative solutions



Working Bee at Donna's house 2005

which helped the Bendigo Regional Council secure government funding for the St Vincent de Paul Aged Care Village. The Council had to demonstrate they had two thirds of funding in order to be granted the remaining third. Ivan contacted all conferences and recorded their balances as liquidity. The Regional Council was then successful in receiving funding under what was called the Red Scheme.

The money was supposed to be used for painting. Some creative footwork saw it instead used to start the drainage work at the site.

As Brian recollects: “A few years later, we had to hurriedly throw some paint on the walls of the centre when we heard the funders were to pay a visit. Act first and seek forgiveness afterwards.”

Brian believes that it is important for leaders to recognize that times change and so do needs. Activities and programs sometimes run their course or become irrelevant to current needs. Sometime they are so inextricably linked to a person - perhaps the founder - that they fizzle out when that person is no longer involved.

The Society often takes time to reflect on contemporary needs; those which are being met and those which are not. Many Conferences have devised special works as a direct response to an unmet need they have identified. Innovative responses have been a hallmark of some conferences and can still effectively run alongside the staple of conventional Society activities.

As a leader in the Society, Brian acted on the principle that the Society should be flexible and change course from time to time. New needs emerge and often require a fresh solution or response. He cites the example in the early years of when the Conference came across a young boy, constantly in trouble with the police.

Brian recognized the boy's lack of purpose. He had dropped out of school, could not find work and had too much spare time. He was making poor choices. In a departure from normal practice but in a response that was tailored to meet a need innovatively, the Conference bought the boy a bike and a ferret. This new pastime gave the boy a more constructive and purposeful way to spend his time and was the end of his trouble with the police.

Brian acted on the principle that the Society should be flexible and change course from time to time

The Vincentian Ethos

“Be aware of all the new forms of poverty”

Brian gains constant inspiration from Blessed Frederic Ozanam's words. He is amazed at how relevant Ozanam's thinking remains today. He cites one of his favourite Ozanam quotations from 1833: “Be aware of all the new forms of poverty.” www.vinnies.org.au/frederic-ozanam-vic

Brian believes in justice. He understands that while hand-out relief through material and financial assistance is critical, what is equally if not more important is the hand up - the longer lasting measures and structural change that can make a difference to many. This is why he values the policy and advocacy work of the Society, such as the work of National Chief Executive John Falzon and Victorian Research and Policy Manager Gavin Dufty. Their advocacy work has alleviated hardship of the poor and the struggling in tangible and practical ways and will assist future generations. If people are to get ahead in life, they need both: the hand out and the hand up. This is summarized in another Ozanam quotation: “Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is justice's role to prevent the attack.” Or as Brian sees it in terms of conference work, “It is not enough these days to simply hand out bread.”

He believes that Vincentians cannot be effective if constrained by rules which demonstrate a lack of generosity. He works in a way that respects a person's dignity and that often means ignoring certain conventions. He is a staunch believer in several principles which he lives his life by such as ‘God doesn't have time for paperwork.’ This is code for just get on with whatever needs doing.



Brian with fellow Vincentians John McCarthy and Maurie Taylor at the Society's annual Social Justice Forum 2004

He advocates that Vincentians use discretion when helping people. Rules can be broken or at least bent if this allows a person to be treated with dignity and compassion. He won't limit how many groceries a person in need can take. This goes against the grain. Let the person work out what they need. In his experience, people in need rarely take advantage of the Society. Even if they do, he believes, it's not worth worrying about and in giving people the benefit of the doubt.

In support of this view, he explains that if he helped twenty people and nineteen people ripped him off, he'd still be comfortable knowing he had helped one person in genuine need.

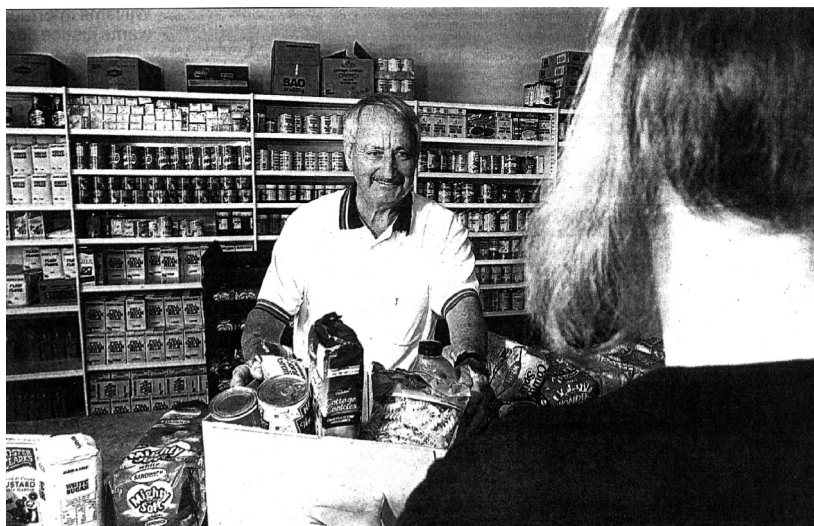
He advocates that Vincentians use discretion when helping people. Rules can be broken or at least bent if this allows a person to be treated with dignity and compassion.

Brian is ashamed when people in need are treated badly by Vincentians. An example is the plight of a woman who was assaulted and robbed at an ATM. She was left with no money to feed her three children. The woman accepted an offer of assistance from a Vincentian who went ahead to the centre and asked that she be allowed to make her own selection of food. Then, in Brian's words, "World War III erupted!" The person on duty insisted that the woman be interviewed to determine what she would be entitled to receive. Fortunately, the Vincentian intervened to ensure the woman could make her own selection.

A devoted fan of Blessed Frederic Ozanam, Brian regularly refers to the many books he has on the much loved founding father of St Vincent de Paul Society. He recognizes the ageless wisdom of Ozanam and his enduring legacy as a role model for Vincentians. Brian strives to live by Ozanam's ethos and believes that selfless giving of oneself is the greatest gift that most closely resembles Ozanam's example.

New challenges

Brian is keenly aware of new challenges faced by the Society. He has been very involved in drought and flood relief and sees these areas as ones that will continue to require particular responses. Knowing the importance of a rapid response, but the inherent



Brian prepares to make a bread-run. (Bendigo Advertiser, 4/3/05)

difficulty for tiers of government and insurance companies to move quickly, he believes the Society will continue to be challenged with these issues. While the crisis response itself is less complex, the ongoing response is always hard. The Conference sees people, two years after the last floods, still battling to have their lives and homes returned to pre-flood situations. It is frustrating to find that relief monies have not been allocated and yet many live in great need. Brian is currently doing all he can to distribute funding to families affected by the 2011 floods in Rochester and neighbouring areas.

When Brian started with the Society, unemployment was rare. He mainly saw people who were in trouble because of family difficulties such as alcohol and drug misuse or relationship breakdown. Now, unemployment is a big challenge and domestic violence adds a complexity to cases.

He believes women are nearly always the victims when a relationship fails. "A relationship breaks down, the woman is left to provide for her kids. She often has to decide whether they eat or she pays the rent, so it seems like an easier option to enter into another relationship. The cycle continues. The woman loses every time. Car breaks down, someone gets ill. It is a constant juggling act."

Brian sees as positive that social issues are now talked about more openly. There is less stigma and more accountability. Often, in the past, where there was violence in the home, for example, nothing could be done unless the mother was prepared to speak up.

The Society would try to help out in practical ways including dropping off food parcels. Luckily, more is possible today and there are interventions available where there is violence and abuse.

People in need often have a complex array of issues they are tackling. This is why the Society needs to retain flexibility in how to respond.

A lack of secure, affordable and decent housing is another ever present issue. Some people are sleeping in their cars. Caravan parks are relied upon too much for permanent housing and the overall housing situation according to Brian is worsening. Some emergency housing that is available is shocking. He is appalled at what a person has to accept, often for as much as \$250 per week for only a room with no conveniences. This leaves very little for other necessary expenses.

People in need often have a complex array of issues they are tackling. This is why the Society needs to retain flexibility in how to respond.

Conclusion

Brian has had a long involvement with the Society and it continues. He talks a great deal about the efforts of others - the hours worked by many, even though the Society encourages their members to cut back. He is both proud and humble about all that has been achieved. Like so many of his Vincentian brothers and sisters, he is a model of how to live out the foundational principles of the Vincentian life - giving of oneself, meeting each person with compassion and advocating for greater justice.

Brian knows that the old ways sometimes need to be challenged. There is always more that can be done.

He remains involved in his conference, attends the Bendigo Assistance Centre every Monday interviewing and doing follow up visits. He remains active in the Bendigo Regional Council and the life of Bendigo and the region. He still manages to play tennis during the week and mind grandchildren regularly. Keeping it real remains important to Brian.

After countless home visits and encounters with people in need, he never tires of the chance to engage with and help as many as he can. Brian believes he learns more from these encounters than he contributes. These experiences have shaped his life.

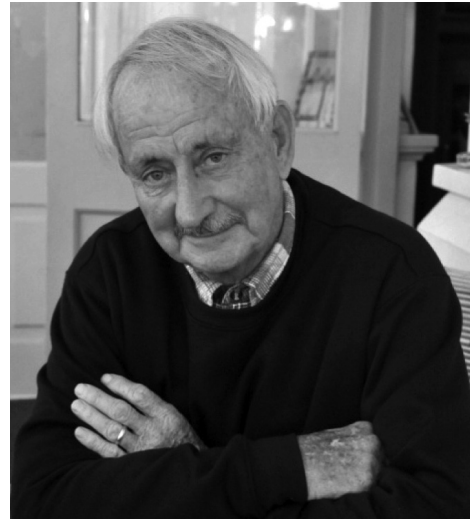


Photo courtesy Bendigo Enterprise Business Review June 2012

- 1970 Brian joins St Mary’s Conference, Golden Square.
- 1987 Appointed Vice President to State President, Bill Kinsella.
- 1991 Appointed Vice President to State President, John O’Brien. Also that year appointed State Centres President.
- 1996 Appointed President, Sacred Heart Cathedral Conference. Held position until 1999.
- 2001 Again took on President’s role at Sacred Heart Cathedral.
- 2002 Appointed Vice President to Bendigo Regional Council.
- 2002 Appointed President, Bendigo Regional Council.
- 2003 Appointed as North Eastern Central Council representative on Social Justice Committee.
- 2005 Elected President, North East Central Council.
- 2006 Elected Vice President to Regional President, Mary Sullivan.
- 2009 Elected Vice President to Regional President, Carol Messer.
- 2012 Elected President, Sacred Heart Cathedral Conference.
- 2013 Appointed Treasurer, Sacred Heart Cathedral Conference.

Sr Toni Matha

An abiding commitment



Sr Toni with statue of Mary Ward, Loreto Foundress

All (opportunities) were taken with characteristic good grace and open embrace of change and ... were to be life enhancing

Introduction

Sr Toni Matha, a Loreto sister, has been closely involved with many significant aspects of the Society's programs and service to the poor over several decades. Indeed, her life has been dedicated to service to others and her story here, attempts to capture the extent of her support and care of many people and agencies.

Growing up in the country

Sr Toni knew from an early age that she wanted to help people in some way. She grew up in a loving family with one sister, living in West Wyalong, eight hours west of Sydney. Her father was active in his local Society conference, which was the start of Sr Toni's affinity with the Society. Her parents operated a retail fashion store in their home town.

A Loreto education

Sr Toni was sent to Sydney as a boarder to be educated by the Loreto Sisters at Normanhurst. After school, she began training to become a physiotherapist, but after eighteen months, she responded to a deeper calling and entered religious life. The choice of which Order was an easy one. Sr Toni had spent a happy six years as a boarder, with cousins also pupils and with many other girls from the country. It was a wonderful introduction to the Loreto ethos and commitment to education, freedom, justice and sincerity. These early lessons have stayed with Sr Toni throughout her life.

Sr Toni's teaching life as a Loreto began with a move to Ballarat. There, she undertook teacher training and in 1959, was sent to Mandeville Hall, Toorak for her first position as a grade three teacher. A lifelong connection to the school sprang from this early appointment. In 1961, she became principal of the junior school, a position she held until 1972.

Working with adolescent offenders

Consistent with choosing a religious vocation, Sr Toni's life has been guided by many ideas others had in mind for her. She chose to always see these as opportunities, even when they presented as difficult forks in the road of her life. All were taken with characteristic good grace and open embrace of change. As a result,

these opportunities were to be life enhancing, both for her and those who came into contact with her.

In 1967, Sr Toni commenced in the role of youth chaplain at Winlaton in a part time capacity while remaining as principal at Mandeville Hall's junior school. Sr Toni also undertook a Diploma in Social Work in this period, which she completed on a part time basis.

She remembers with enthusiasm, the short social welfare course, offered by the Victorian Social Welfare Department she attended in Hawthorn. Sr Toni felt this course provided her with valuable insights into what would be required.

Throughout her spiritual and professional life, Sr Toni has demonstrated her keen desire to give her best to anyone in need by continuously undertaking learning and training.

Winlaton

Females under the care provisions of the Social Welfare Act were accommodated in different locations according to their age. The babies were placed at Allambie and the adult women were sent to Fairlea Women's Prison. Sr Toni soon recognized these two groups were either too young or too old for what she had to offer. Until now, adolescent girls had been housed with the boys at Turana but recently, Winlaton Home for Adolescent Girls had been established to provide a girls only facility for those aged between fourteen and eighteen. This facility, now closed, was located in Nunawading and was where Sr Toni would focus her attention for many years.

The girls living at Winlaton were either juvenile offenders or there because they required care and protection from abuse. Sr Toni realized that while the circumstances for these girls were in stark contrast to the girls in her care at Mandeville, both groups of girls needed similar things; most importantly a safe, stable and loving home life. Sr Toni provided as much care, both professional and personal as she could.

Sr Toni still has contact with women whom she knew as girls at Winlaton. One girl, Liz, rings her every year on her birthday. Sr Toni recognizes that she was in effect the only 'family' many of these girls had.

In 1972, Sr Toni was asked by her provincial to move to Adelaide. She moved there for four years as Superior, Loreto College. On her return to Melbourne in 1976, she undertook specialized training in family therapy with the Bouverie family

therapy program. This placement involved intensive work with families and added a further dimension to Sr Toni's skills. In this time, she also undertook a placement at the Royal Women's Hospital Melbourne, working in the Intensive Care Unit with premature babies.

Joining Catholic Social Services

Sr Toni's personal demeanour and skills are such that she has always been in demand. She has never refused a request for assistance. By 1980, Archbishop Little had created the new role of Episcopal Vicar, Social Welfare, in recognition of the Church's important role as a provider of welfare services and advocate for the poor. This role offered great opportunities to build on and promote the breadth of work done by many Catholic agencies across Victoria. Catholic Social Services (CSSV) was



Sr Toni with Bishop Prowse and Marg Casey, CSSV gathering

created to coordinate and fulfill this desire to further this area of the Church's work.

CSSV set about bringing these agencies under the one umbrella, peak agency. Episcopal Vicar, Fr Kevin Mogg knew he needed someone with networking skills who could bring people and agencies together. In establishing this base, Fr Mogg invited Sr Toni to help build a cohesive sector, explore common ground and inspire the Catholic sector to collaborate and speak with one voice, in advocating for those on the margins.

Sr Toni became the inaugural Executive Officer of Catholic Social Services, a role she held from 1980 to 1986. She also joined the board of Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) in order to support opportunities for Catholic agencies to participate actively in the wider community services sector.

It was also the time that the Church was encouraging parishes to become more actively engaged in social welfare work and to see this as integral to being Catholic. Holy Spirit Parish in North Ringwood was one example where the parish community was keen to live out the gospel in this way and Sr Toni was involved in this development work between 1981 - 1987, as a pastoral associate.

The Church was encouraging parishes to become more actively engaged in social welfare work and to see this as integral to being Catholic.

In 1979, Sr Toni had also become the Vice-Principal of St Mary's College, a Catholic hall of residence for girls at Melbourne University. She remained in this role until 1981, again demonstrating her ability to juggle many roles at the one time. During her time at St Mary's, she also completed her Bachelor of Social Work. This achievement distinguished her as one of the first generation of Catholic religious to complete tertiary social work qualifications.

Sr Toni approached her role at CSSV with her usual enthusiasm and positive outlook. She recalls being astounded at how many agencies there were within the CSSV network. Some were large and some quite small, worryingly so in terms of ongoing viability, particularly given the policy directions that many felt were likely to be implemented in the future.

CSSV was keen for the small agencies to be better supported by larger ones. They set about exploring opportunities for partnerships, auspicing, sharing knowledge, mentoring - all manner of ways to build this supportive home base for some of the very small agencies doing exceptional work with the most marginalized Victorians. While realizing the small agencies needed support, they also wished to promote the unique and often innovative and ground breaking models of service and engagement, practiced by small agencies. All agencies could learn something from each other and this desire saw CSSV foster a wonderful cross sector purpose.

CSSV set up meetings with staff and volunteers from across these agencies. Sr Toni recognized the contribution of these personnel and consulted in a meaningful way to find possibilities and ways of bringing like agencies together. This building work would prove to be more critical than anyone could have imagined given what would follow in the next few years. As Victoria came to terms with its financial woes, the newly elected State Government commenced funding cuts across many government and government-funded agencies, making for great uncertainty and many service closures.

It is clear that Sr Toni's collaborative style and marvellous networking while at CSSV benefitted many Catholic agencies in the 1990s era of government rationalization of community and Church services. The Society is one such agency which certainly benefitted from the support and advocacy which occurred under Sr Toni and Fr Mogg's stewardship of the Catholic sector. Their approach developed a more unified Catholic community sector and gave it a strong voice with which to speak out on issues of disadvantage.

Return to Sydney Loretos

In 1987, Sr Toni's Provincial asked her to return to Sydney, to take on the role of Superior at Loreto Kirribilli. This would see Sr Toni back in Sydney for six years.

During her time in Sydney, in characteristic fashion, Sr Toni did not let the grass grow under her feet. She looked for ways in which she could put her combined teaching and social welfare skills to effective use.

The Society's Matthew Talbot Centre in Woolloomooloo was one example of a special service visited by the girls.

At Kirribilli, she coordinated a social services program for Year 10 students. This brought this group of privileged girls into contact with people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Friendships were fostered between the two groups, some of which Sr Toni proudly declares have endured until today. Most importantly, she believes these kinds of initiatives enlivened the broader school community to the possibilities and privilege of becoming



Sr Toni Matha with Benita De Vincentiss and Syd Tutton - VinniesYouth Ball 2004

acquainted with people outside their usual day to day existence. The Society's Matthew Talbot Centre in Woolloomooloo was one example of a special service visited by the girls.

Sr Toni also established a solo parents' support group at the school. She recognized that this was an issue where a number of parents would benefit from a sense of belonging. As with every appointment she has undertaken, at Kirribilli, she influenced the girls and families she came into contact with, in a number of positive ways.

While in Sydney, she was invited to join the board of Australian Council of Social Services, serving as treasurer from 1988-1993. Sr Toni had a keen desire to influence policy directions and advocate for structural change while at the same time, devoting her energies to support individual needs, be they in schools or the wider community.

As is evident across her entire working and spiritual life, it is her innate sense of compassion which compels her to seek out and work with those on the margins. It is not enough however to simply care; she has dedicated considerable energy in roles such as board membership of ACOSS and VCOSS, in order to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged members of the community. Similarly, she has dedicated her efforts to many advisory educational and welfare positions within Loreto organizations.

Colleagues and friends have reflected that many past students of Sr Toni's have carried some of her qualities with them, as a result of her example. There are many who also became active in social justice.

Joining the Society

In 1993, Sr Toni returned to Melbourne and began her work as a volunteer with the Society's Ozanam Community. She also accepted the offer of the CSSV Executive Officer, Sr Anne McPhee, to become a spiritual advisor to volunteers. Member agencies of Catholic Social Services rely heavily on the wonderful support of volunteers and Sr Toni was able to bring her special personal gifts and welfare expertise to this role.

The Society is the Catholic agency with the largest volunteer workforce, including conference members and the army of volunteers who expressly seek to be involved in particular special works. Since Catholic Social Services (now Catholic Social Services Victoria's) inception, the Society has been represented at the governance level and in advisory roles. Sr Toni was a member of the Formation Committee. Her involvement with CSSV is where her initial contact with Ozanam House began.

Sr Toni speaks often and with high praise for the significant contribution made by volunteers. She sees training and understanding of the ethos of the organization as critical for volunteers. Her involvement with Ozanam Community brought her into contact with many volunteers and former staff. She valued the contact.

She recalls Jimmy, a former long standing resident of Ozanam House, who came back as a volunteer. Every Friday, he would be there helping her and



Housing Minister, Ann Henderson, Sr Toni, Tony McCosker and Deb Donovan

others in the kitchen, making what she describes with passion as "thousands of salmon patties!"

Ozanam Community

Melbourne's Ozanam Community today comprises Ozanam House and Ozanam Community Centre, both located in North Melbourne. Quin House, formerly known as Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Mission, was also originally part of the Ozanam Community. The community centre came into being under the guidance of Gerard Dowling, past President of the Society's State Council and the

Ozanam Community Board. All three services are now part of the suite of programs managed by VincentCare. Quin House is often used by men who are former residents of Ozanam House and referrals also come from Ozanam Community Centre and other agencies.

For many, Ozanam House is the flagship of the organization, bearing as it does the name of the Society's revered founder. It was the only special work of the State Council until 1995.

Ozanam House was first opened in 1953 by the Society. Initially, it was funded entirely by the Society's Melbourne Central Council. Gradually, donations and bequests started coming in. It attracted significant government funding later in its history, commencing in the 1980s when the new Commonwealth Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) came into being. Government funding always comes with obligations and the Society needed to meet the standards set by SAAP for homeless programs. This meant that Ozanam House had to increase staff levels and competencies and improve the quality of care it provided. As funding increased, the expense of running Ozanam House increased proportionately.

Ozanam House has always assisted some of the poorest and most disadvantaged men. Sr Toni recognized that this must always be the mission of the service. There is no doubt that Blessed Frederic Ozanam would have endorsed this direction.

Since 1953, it has undergone a number of transformations. In the beginning, it was a temporary night shelter for 50 homeless men. During the 1960s, the number of men seeking accommodation rose and consequently, capacity at Ozanam House was expanded to 150 men.

Then, in 1978, further additions provided a new chapel, day centre, administration offices as well as accommodation for an additional 50 men, taking the total capacity to 200.

During the 1980s as the house's capacity increased, this focused attention on what needed to change. While it was continuing to meet men's basic needs for food, shelter, security and companionship, it was not addressing the underlying reasons for their homelessness.

In those days, the accommodation was predominantly dormitories with the men having access to showers and free meals. The men were locked out of the building during the day. The meal service, operating from the premises was providing on average, 10,000 meals per month, to the residents

and other homeless men. Even today, it continues to be one of the best known works of the Society.

A familiar tension, implicit in the early challenges of Blessed Frederic Ozanam, continued to appear. Charity work should not be done without justice work. The two should be inseparable. Within the very real constraints of what could be done to best assist this group of homeless men, Ozanam House recognized that wherever possible, the injustices that caused and contributed to the men's circumstances, should be investigated and corrected.

The back story is often important as a way of understanding what the present is attempting to achieve and resolve; there are often historical motivations and current needs to balance. Ozanam House was wanting to offer more and was preparing to adapt to changes in government policy.

Ozanam House recognized that wherever possible, the injustices that caused and contributed to the men's circumstances, should be investigated and corrected.

Ozanam House, the Gill Memorial and Gordon House were the three main homeless shelters in Melbourne and it became apparent that they were no longer adequately meeting the changing and diverse needs of the homeless population, particularly in light of the impact of deinstitutionalization.

Out of this, came a desire by the Society for Ozanam House to more strenuously focus on developing aligned programs which could assist the men back into the wider community. In the 1990s, there were concerted efforts to relocate many of the men into more appropriate long-term housing options which would enable independence. In the same period, Ozanam House was closed for two years for major renovation, re-opening in 1994. The old building now offered mainly private rooms with smaller numbers accessing showers, kitchenettes and sitting areas. There was a genuine attempt to cast off the institutional blanket and provide greater privacy and amenity.

This sets the scene for what was before Gerard Dowling, State Council President and the Ozanam Board as Sr Toni commenced her work with the Ozanam Community. Collectively, all sought to establish a stronger sense of community and belonging for the many displaced, homeless and marginalized people who would benefit from a drop in centre where they could have meals, relax, seek advice and support as well as accessing medical, dental and allied health services.

All sought to establish a stronger sense of community and belonging for the many displaced, homeless and marginalized

Sr Toni as Chairperson, along with the Board of Ozanam Community, believed that such a facility would be more appropriate if separate from Ozanam House as inviting others into Ozanam House was an intrusion into the men's home. Increasing the number congregating at Ozanam House was also likely to fuel tensions and potential violence.

This is why the Ozanam Board decided that the Ozanam Community Centre would be more appropriate if operating from another location. Reading through the many papers archived about the process of making this decision, it is clear that the Society put a great deal of thought into developing the concept for a community centre. There were several feasibility studies undertaken and a pilot project developed.

The care and concern for the dignity of each man supported within the spirit of Ozanam is also evident in the evolution that has occurred at Quin House. This program originated after a bequest to the Society expressly requested that the proceeds be used for purposes in relation to the alleviation from the effects of alcohol and drug use.

Many speak of Sr Toni's legacy at Ozanam House as very personal in dimension. She tried to address the inherent loneliness and isolation for many of the men, making connection where she could, with

families and focusing on reconciliation wherever possible. The all too frequent funerals she became involved in organizing were always marks of respect and a chance for friends, family, staff and volunteers to participate in a way that honoured these men's lives.

Sr Toni recalls a man whose family were in New Zealand. She was able to make contact with a sister and she came to Melbourne for her brother's funeral, staying at the Loreto community in Albert Park for the duration of her stay.

Sr Toni recalls many residents and their stories. A man she knew well at Ozanam House relayed to her how he and a friend in 2005, on hearing of the appointment of Pope Benedict, headed to Crown Casino at 2 am to celebrate.

The man fed all the money he had into a poker machine and won \$200. He kept playing and lost all his money. Yet, he still described the night as one of celebration. Sr Toni by contrast, said she listened to the news and went off to sleep as usual.

Sr Toni recognized that Ozanam Community had traditionally catered to men and therefore evoked a strongly, masculine atmosphere.

She, along with others, worked to achieve a community centre where women would also feel welcome and safe. Today, the centre has many regular female visitors and word of mouth brings new ones there as well.



l to r Compeer team, Geoff Brown, Ann Tan, Sr Toni and Gordon Carter

Compeer program

In 2003, under the leadership of State President Syd Tutton, the Victorian State Council began considering the feasibility of starting the Compeer program in Melbourne.

Compeer is a volunteer program that matches volunteers with people recovering from mental illness. It is designed to provide friendship and social support to people who are often extremely lonely and socially isolated as a result of their mental illness.

This was an example of Syd Tutton's desire to broaden the scope of volunteering activities and to focus resources on some innovative approaches that still adhered to the Vincentian ethos. It was decided to start the program in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, which coincided with a decision by State Council to relocate head office from Little Collins Street to Box Hill.

Sr Toni acknowledges the invaluable work of Compeer's first manager, Geoff Brown whom she worked alongside in the initial, establishment phase.

It was a mutually supportive and respectful relationship which allowed a thorough examination of the feasibility and the eventual establishment of the program.

Compeer has grown into one of the success stories of the Society

Compeer staff and volunteers cite Sr Toni's combination of professional and personal - her social work skills and her encouragement and affirmation at every stage- as what made for a positive and empowering experience for everyone involved.

She assisted with the recruitment and support of volunteers and facilitated many sessions with volunteers requiring de-briefing, often of quite complex cases. She was also only ever a phone call away if a volunteer needed advice regarding contact with a Compeer participant.

Just as importantly, she helped State Council come to terms with key decisions regarding the program's implementation. Since it began, Compeer has grown into one of the success stories of the Society and now operates a second program in Bendigo.



Sr Toni with her Order of Australia

Order of Australia

In 2007, Sr Toni was appointed a Member of the General Division of the Order of Australia (AM) for service to the community, particularly the provision and development of services through the Society to people suffering from mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction. Her contribution to girls' education was also recognized.

St Francis Conference

Sr Toni remains an active member of the St Francis conference. This conference was originally devised as a support to the General Secretary and State Council, particularly in the days when head office was based in the city. It has evolved to be much more, with a strong focus on social justice advocacy and the organization of many key events in the Society's calendar. Sr Toni has always played a key role in planning and encouraging others in major Society events such as the Society's Jubilee celebrations.

Conclusion

Besides the very significant personal qualities Sr Toni brings to every situation, the most striking impact she has had on the Society is the marriage of these qualities with her considerable, professional expertise as a social worker and ready affirmation of everyone she comes into contact with. Her willingness to share these personal gifts marks her as a true Vincentian.

Throughout her early work as a teacher and school principal, and later with Catholic Social Services, Sr Toni developed a vast network of friends and contacts that she willingly utilises for the benefit of the Society.

Her capacity to connect with all kinds of people is extraordinary and is in no small way due to her grace, compassion and genuine love of her fellow human being. She is always ready to assist anyone she knows to be in need and has counselled and supported innumerable people across the many settings where she has practiced her vocation and commitment of service to others.

In 1987, Sr Toni was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She talks of her choice to 'befriend' this disease, rather than embark on a battle. Her approach is yet another significant example of grace and acceptance which she has demonstrated throughout her life and service to others.

Beneath her quiet demeanour is a resolve to achieve better outcomes for those the Society serves and to always work with integrity and professionalism.

Her professional and spiritual life is characterized by adherence to the centrality of Jesus Christ and the Society's foundational story in all she does. This means always aiming for high standards and encouraging a fellowship of people who share the same principles and commitment to those in need.

Sr Toni recognizes that while practical assistance is all important, what is key is the sacred personal connection that is made, which can alleviate loneliness and the hunger to belong.

Sr Toni continues today to live out the Ozanam foundational story.



1954	Sr Toni joined the Loreto Order
1961-1972	Principal, Loreto Junior School
1967	Chaplain, Winlaton
1972-1976	Superior, Loreto College, Adelaide
1976	Placements and training Bouverie Family Therapy Program and Royal Women's Hospital
1979-1981	Vice-Principal, St Mary's College, University of Melbourne. Completes Bachelor of Social Work
1980-1986	Inaugural Executive Officer, Catholic Social Services
1981-1987	Pastoral Associate, Holy Spirit Parish, North Ringwood
1987-1993	Superior, Loreto Kirribilli
1993	Commenced voluntary work with St Vincent de Paul Society, Victoria Joined St Francis Conference
1998-2003	Chairperson, Ozanam Community Board
1998-2003	Member, State Council
2007	Appointed as a Member of the General Division of the Order of Australia (AM)



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

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|-------------------|--|
| 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 |



St Vincent de Paul Society

good works

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