

A CALL TO SERVE

VINCENTIAN STORIES

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



- Frederic Ozanam



St Vincent de Paul Society
VICTORIA
good works

2017 CHAPTER

CONTENTS

Our mission, vision and values	4
State President's message	5
Stories	
Jim and Judith Grealish	7
Nourell Davies	20
Beth Devine	33
Frank Mullins	41

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, joy and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

OUR VISION

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

OUR VALUES

Commitment

Loyalty in service to our mission, vision and values

Compassion

Welcoming and serving all with understanding and without judgement

Respect

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

Integrity

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

Empathy

Establishing relationships based on respect, trust, friendship and perception

Advocacy

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

Courage

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



STATE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear members, volunteers and staff,

On 5 March 1854, under the servant leadership of Father Gerald Ward, the St Vincent de Paul Society opened its heart and doors to the people of Melbourne and Australia by establishing its first Australian Conference at St Francis Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.

Our first conference was established six months after the passing of the Society's founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam in France. Guided and inspired by Frederic Ozanam's vision, Fr Gerald and his companions established the first conference in response to the suffering of the poor and disadvantaged and, in so doing, provided practical assistance, offered friendship during difficult times and sought to redress the inequalities suffered by people in need by advocating publicly for a more just and fair society.

Since 1854 the Society and the people we serve – our companions – have been blessed by the countless number of Vincentian men and women who have each given compassionate service and dedicated their lives to making the world a better place for all.

This is the fifth year in which the Society's Victorian State Council has sought to honour such members. We also recognise them for being modern-day examples of servant leadership in our Society and, more broadly, within their respective communities. The richness of each of these lives cannot be overstated.

It is clear from these five stories that while changing times bring about different realities and new needs, Vincentians continue to be guided by Ozanam's example. As Ozanam himself was challenged, so, too, are our Vincentians in addressing immediate, pressing needs while seeking to address underlying causes. Perhaps it is this balancing act – the hand up versus the hand out – that continues to be the key underlying challenge for our Vincentians.

I congratulate each of the honoured members for their service, as well as their families for their part in supporting the work of the Society to help those in need.

I also wish to express the Society's sincere appreciation to Anne Tuohey for her thorough research and interviews, and for bringing such heart to each story.

Michael Liddy
State President
St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria



JIM AND JUDITH GREALISH

SIDE BY SIDE

Commitment, grace, compassion, respect and empathy—Jim (RIP) and Judith Grealish embody the values and virtues of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Their unwavering faith and spirituality are reflected in their hospitality, which is legendary, be it extended to the Society family or to those on the margins.

Judith and Jim both grew up in New Zealand and met each other at their local tennis club. Neither were brilliant tennis players. It was Jim's humour and the fact that he was an avid reader, like herself, that sparked her interest.

Jim and Judith married on 20 August 1960 and went on to have four children. Jim and Judith settled into family life in New Zealand, but when Jim received a great job offer abroad, they made the tough decision to uproot the family and move to Australia in 1988. Judith can still recall very well the sense of loss and upheaval involved in the move, especially in that first year.

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.”

Approaching Judith's front door, the gentle tones of Chopin float from the house. The Grealish home is full of light, warmth and many sunny nooks that look out over Judith's beloved garden.

There are lots of photos. The house is a celebration of Judith and Jim, their family, the many chapters in their lives where they met many wonderful people, and their garden. Judith produces bundles of papers that chronicle the breadth of Jim's involvement in the Society. Judith and Jim attended and participated in countless events and activities:

commissioning masses, celebrations, thanksgiving masses, ordinations, planning days, lectures and other special events. A mountain of booklets demonstrate the geography covered and the dedication to honour those serving the Society.

Other papers record the key critical issues Jim oversaw and managed when society treasurer and later as state president; such as restructuring of the Society and modernising systems to comply with GST; embarking on a comprehensive re-founding exercise, Black Saturday bushfires, and the Victorian Society's 150th year celebrations.

Leafing through photo albums there's further evidence of the high volume of Jim and Judith's involvement in attending Society events and celebrations. It's breathtaking what they packed into almost two decades.

Wherever Jim went, Judith was right beside him. There's a sense they enjoyed every moment in each other's company. Judith describes their active involvement with the Society as probably the happiest period of their retirement years.

“Where there is doubt, faith”

Jim was an avowed change-maker and a centralist. In a geographically-dispersed organisation such as the Society, Jim was acutely aware of an outpost mentality that existed in some pockets. Conferences could be oblivious about the fact that they ultimately reported to a higher body. Many conferences accustomed to running their own shows without reference to State Council, were resistant to change. There was in-fighting, dissent and plenty of vitriol. Jim did not have much patience when he knew what he wanted to achieve and his path was blocked.

In the 1980s, like many well-established organisations, the Society membership wasn't only run, but also was solely populated, by men, and while Judith never courted controversy, she also passionately believed that women had much to offer conferences.

“I was new to the country, new to bayside Melbourne, and wanted to become involved in worthwhile activities. After mass, I approached Bernie Morrissey, Stella Maris Beaumaris Conference president, and asked him if I might join the conference. Well, his eyes nearly popped out of his head!”

Bernie Morrissey was an ardent, old school member of the Society. He and his wife had no children and the Society was their life. Confronted as he was initially, he was all for Judith seeking membership along with the men. He encouraged her to come to the next meeting advising her to meet him outside. He would not give the men prior warning. Judith braced herself for a less than enthusiastic reception from the conference members.

“There was only one other woman in a room of elderly men and it was clear we were there to make cups of tea. I sensed immediately women really weren't welcome. But Bernie, bless him, persevered and supported me all the way.”

“Where there is sadness, joy”

Judith is an accomplished pianist and organist, and she enjoyed playing old songs, such as ‘The Road to Tipperary’, for those she visited during home visits, or hospital and aged care visits.

Jim was not able to be involved initially in Society work due to his work commitments. Within a few years, this would change and the Society would benefit from his high level financial and governance expertise.

In 1995, Jim left his job and joined a finance committee at central office.

Jim realised local conference involvement was neither his real interest nor where he could put his talents to best use. He joined Stella Maris Conference, mainly as the first step to membership, but did enjoy accompanying Judith on home visits. She shielded him from the minutiae of conference life, knowing he wouldn't have tolerated the, at times, parochial nature of conference affairs.

Jim's eye was always squarely on the big picture; the far-horizon view. It wasn't long before he was co-opted onto committees such as finance and marketing where he could serve the Society.

When Jim finished his stint as state president, he joined Cheltenham Conference, one that's very involved in social justice and advocacy. It was a better fit. He was rostered for regular home visits.

“Where there is hatred, let me sow love”

Judith was part of the Olive's Place Support Group—a small but dedicated group of women Vincentians who visited offering friendship to women and children escaping domestic violence. Olive's Place was originally an old-style refuge that has, in recent years, been replaced with purpose-built accommodation, managed by VincentCare.





Judith loved this involvement and both Judith and Jim tried to be simply there the person. In the spirit of Frederic Ozanam, these visits were always non-judgemental offers of friendship, companionship and fun. Judith herself remembers taking a few turns on a trampoline with the children, all part of providing some fun for children who experienced trauma as a result of abusive home lives.

“Where there is injury, pardon”

Another treasured area of Society involvement for Judith was doing prison visits with Jim on Sundays. Judith had hoped that she and Jim would continue doing these after Jim retired from the Society. They both had a strong sense of gaining more than they gave from the time spent at what was then the Melbourne Remand Centre. While Judith has discontinued her involvement with this special work, she retains immense admiration for this area of work of the society. She hopes that the Society is still active in this field of mission as she found it to be a true enactment of journeying with people on the margins.

Judith acknowledges Maurie Taylor’s considerable leadership in his ministry to prisoners through this special work of the Society. His work now continues under the guidance of Gerard Wilson who has taken over organising prison ministry of all prisons.

There has been a growth in the number of prisons across Victoria as governments focus less on rehabilitation and more on a tough-on crime stance. The demand and the pressing need for Vincentians to journey alongside and offer friendship to the men and women on the inside cannot be underestimated.

Sr Mary O’Shannassy GSM, long-term Catholic prison chaplain revered by generations of inmates and awarded an OAM for services to prison chaplaincy, supported Judith in those visits. On Sundays, Fr Joe Caddy would say two masses and, after each one, the visitors would join inmates for

morning tea. This was where Judith really shone.

“Prison visits confronted me at first. The first time was emotionally overwhelming. Sr Mary took me aside and I cried. With her guidance, I came to love these visits with the men. They were people just like Jim and me. They may have made one mistake and their life has taken a horrible turn for them and their families.”

Facing the cruel reality of a sentence takes its toll. Chaplains, such as Sr Mary O’Shannassy continue to journey with the men and women in Victoria’s prisons, offering grace and solace where there may be little on offer.

Jim tirelessly advocated for a better deal for the men and women who spend many years within the confines of the prisons. He often used to say: Justice delayed is justice denied. It bothered him that he met blokes who had been on remand for long periods waiting to go on trial.

Both Judith and Jim tried to do what they could to soften the blows and bring God’s grace into the lives of the people they met.

SPECIAL ENCOUNTERS

“Where there is darkness, light ”

Judith cherishes the many friendships she and Jim developed through the Society network; including staff and State Council members. Many encounters have left an indelible mark and Judith still maintains regular contact with many of these people.

She counts Sr Toni Matha IBVM as a wonderful friend and can still recall the first time Jim brought Sr Toni to their home. Sr Toni has been a constant support since Jim’s death. Judith marvels at her sense of humour, dignified presence, wisdom and positive outlook. Judith and Jim also enjoyed

their dealings with the Catholic Aboriginal Ministry. Judith, in particular, remembers Vicki Walker. There were many other special events, too numerous to mention, but some remain prominently in her memory—meeting a number of Sudanese women at an event in Sunshine, youth ministry and the wonderful youth balls—Judith always encouraged everyone to get up on the dance floor.

DEVOUT FAITH

“Where there is doubt, faith”

Religion has always been a key aspect of Jim and Judith’s lives, both before they met, and as a couple. From a young age, Judith has said the St Francis of Assisi prayer, “Lord make me an instrument of your peace”. It was as a young mother that it came to mean a great deal to her. She has always kept a copy on display in her home. It represents for Judith how she has aimed to live her life. Judith always speaks to God before going to Cabrini Aged Care to give communion to patients.

Jim’s mother was very devout and hoped her son would join the priesthood. Jim was very well educated in the Catholic system and was one of the very few of his group to go to university.

While Judith misses Jim every day, there are particularly times that she misses him most. They had a lovely ritual of praying together, reading over the morning prayers for mass. She misses the chance to ask Jim what some of the scriptures mean. He was well versed in theology, enhanced by formal studies, and she always benefited from his clarity of interpretation and persuasive self-belief. Also, when times are challenging, and when she has news to share, she feels his loss deeply. Jim had a great love of the Catholic faith and of the Society. Jim made light of his investiture as papal knight, Order of St George in 2010, but privately was very moved and humbled by this acknowledgement. Judith recalls discussing with him how proud his mother would have been. Jim was an honest, wise

person who was able to sum up people quickly. He wasn’t always tolerant and could be black and white on some topics.

*“He had a razor sharp mind, incredible intellect and memory. I could go to Jim with any question and he could answer it for me. He could be blunt, demanding people cut through the bulls**t and get to the point. Still, I miss discussing events in the current political landscape with him.”*

A shared pleasure was travel. The last trip they made together was to Norfolk Island. Another great love of Jim’s was reading. He was widely read – biographies, fiction, non-fiction. He’d come home with half-a-dozen books. It was an interest he shared with Syd Tutton, Victorian state president 2001-2006, and they could often be found discussing what they were reading.

FOR THE LOVE OF OTHERS

Judith loves to engage with people and help them – whether it be visiting people in their homes, the women and children at Olive’s Place or the men in prison.

GETTING THE BOOKS INTO SHAPE

Jim’s skills derived from his many years in the corporate sector as an investment manager for Colonial. He was a clear, objective and unemotional thinker when it came to finances and governance, making the often hard business decisions that needed to be taken. He applied this approach to his Society involvement as well. In the late 1990s, while a nominal member of Beaumaris Conference, Jim was spending most of his time at central office, then in Little Bourke Street. State President Gerard Dowling appointed him state council treasurer.

To Jim’s surprise, he had discovered that the Society’s finance records were not computerised. This was one of the first major tasks he turned



his mind to, working closely with the finance manager. At the same time, he tackled front-on the misconception many conferences held, that money they raised was theirs, not the overall Society's.

Each centre (known as Vinnies Shops or conference assistance centres) in those days had its own committee which may or may not have been responsible to its conference or State Council. In Jim's view, the administration of centres at this time was a shambles. Jim learned there were many different forms of governance and what can most kindly be called 'pseudo governance'. There was no consideration of occupational health and safety considerations. People were cavalier with the centre's money; all sorts of inappropriate arrangements existed, such as paying money on the street to people directly from centre's tills without going through the accounts.

In 2005, Jim engaged a consultant, Paul Maguire who wrote a report advising that the centres were in a parlous position. The report recommended they be centralised and responsible to State Council.

Jim recognised in his last year of Society involvement that there were still some conference members who believe the conference owns the centre. It was a battle to end all battles, but eventually centres were brought under the control of State Council.

"It was almost eerie. A series of satellites all doing their own thing, with no overall sense. Strange arrangements. There would be a pensioner in the area that the conference would take pity on and invite her to work for the centre and pay her a couple of hundred dollars from the till. No PAYE arrangement, no nothing in relation to employment protocols. The whole operation was often totally shambolic," (Interview Jim Grealish, 2013).

Jim exposed many deficiencies mainly relating to a lack of proper governance; recruiting practices were hit and miss and accountability was pretty thin on

the ground in many areas. It is not an exaggeration to say that some of the longstanding members saw it as a war Jim and central office were imposing on the conferences and there was considerable resistance.

Jim's strength was being prepared to take people on in order to move the Society into the 21st century. Specifically, the Federal Government had announced that GST would be introduced on 1 July 2000. The Society would never have complied without the changes, such as implementing a computerised finance system and documenting governance policies and practices. More significantly, it was potentially facing certain collapse as a viable agency.

He also backed a move to professionalise boards and committees. In particular, he recognised that the Ozanam Board, while an adequate committee of management for Ozanam matters, was not best placed to manage the increasing interface with government tendering-out services to the not-for-profit sector.

He was instrumental in moving to establish a separate entity, initially known as St Vincent de Paul Aged Care & Community Services, now VincentCare, as the vehicle to manage all government-funded programs of the Society.

Jim went out on the road, talking this initiative up and selling it to the conferences. He had the backing of Syd Tutton and others on State Council and was determined to see this through.

RE-FOUNDING THE SOCIETY

Around 2009, the national Society commenced a 'refounding journey' designed to ensure all State and Territory conferences explored ways to best embed the foundational story in all they did.



*“During the Black Saturday bush fires in 2009
173 people died and more than 400 were injured.”*



WEY 234

BLACK SATURDAY BUSHFIRES

This was a wonderful opportunity for Syd Tutton, always a proponent of fresh thinking, to drive the refounding as national president and to work with Jim as state president. They had always worked well, often over a glass of red or whisky, Jim appreciating Syd's passionate vision and ability to let others get on with making things happen. They both adhered to a sense of the Society as 'pilgrim people'; a people on the move not clinging to the past, but well aware that first and foremost, the Society is a spiritual organisation.

Neither was afraid to make tough decisions when required. Both Syd and Jim instilled a maturity into the Society, tackling obstacles that stood in the way of genuine ministry to Christ's poor.

Like Jim, Syd could be very direct. He made it clear the refounding journey was not to be an exercise in nostalgia. State councils and conferences needed to go back to the core reason they existed while discerning how they could bear witness to this in a new contemporary context.

Syd often reminded those assembled at gatherings that the Society was a radical organisation, always prepared to change to meet the times. The mission remained the same, but there were different ways of achieving it. Jim shared this world view.

Jim initiated a root and branch refounding process, engaging conferences, staff and State Council. The outcome was a strong re-stating of the Victorian Society's reason for being and a renewed connection with the founding story. Jim also recognised the future of the Society depended on engaging with younger people, and he was an ardent supporter of Young Vinnies and mini Vinnies.

Being a leader can often involve taking on the unexpected, and the kind of events it's hard to plan for. While the Society is used to providing an emergency response to natural disasters, no-one was prepared for the ferocity that would come to be known as the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires.

Jim was at the helm as Victorians watched in anguish at the heavy toll of devastation across many areas of their State.

This fire is considered by many to be the worst Australian bushfire disaster with the highest ever loss of life recorded-173 people died and more than 400 were injured. While certain regions were most hard hit, in particular, Kinglake, Marysville, Central Gippsland, the fires were scattered across the State. It was like a runaway train. The general community responded spontaneously and generously wanted to help.

Jim oversaw the implementation of a number of measures to help coordinate these efforts. A Victorian man offered his warehouse at Rowville to the Society, which proved to be an absolute necessity as donations of goods and clothing appeared and kept rolling in. State Council, conferences and Box Hill staff swung behind Jim in responding swiftly, agilely and courageously to the immense call for help.

The Society recognised the personal toll would continue to be felt for many years. A number of Vincentians contributed their time, energy and dedication around the clock, to be there for victims.

Jim was conscious of the efforts of the volunteers and remained the chief fan and motivator of what came to be known as 'Team Vinnies'. A 'thank you' event was held at Box Hill with Jim presenting certificates to staff who had contributed their time and efforts to this intense and ongoing area of need.

Many people remember that day fondly. Pulling together achieves so much more than working in silos and Jim was a master of leading by example.

A HIGHLY VISIBLE PRESENCE

In the finest tradition of State presidents, Jim was 'out and about' often and everywhere, celebrating conference jubilees and officiating at Society openings. He was also active in advocacy and management of the Society's financial matters. He was insistent that the Victorian Society remain visible and active in its deliberations with government.

Almost always at his side, was Judith. Naturally self-effacing, she speaks with great admiration of Jim's accomplishments. Jim, in an interview from 2013, echoed similar appreciation of Judith's unique gifts.

"As he explained: Judith is actually quite a retiring person, but when you put her with someone she treats them like they are the only person in the room. When her father was in an aged-care facility, in a room with six or so other men, all the men would light up when she came in. She can mix with kings and paupers equally well."

For a long time Judith was a talented organist and played at Mentone parish. She also takes communion to the elderly in the aged-care facilities. She loved her involvement with others, such as with the women and children at Olive's Place. Wherever we went around the State and nationally, Judith was always there, helping people feel comfortable and included. Looking back, Judith remarks that her involvement in the Victorian Society was a rewarding experience for her. She enjoyed all aspects—home visits, prison visits, the celebrations; meeting people in different settings including on the political stage.

She and Jim knew that everything they did was made possible by the committed team in central office and other parts of the Society, who were

responsible for the planning and implementation of events and so much more. They both always emphasised the importance of acknowledging everyone's efforts and contributions.

There are many fine Vincentians who have left their mark on the Victorian Society. It is an organisation that embraces a high level of individualism in its leaders. Every state president is remembered for a particular legacy and for particular personal qualities. In Jim Grealish's case, his legacy is tied up with Judith. The double act of Jim and Judith Grealish has added layers of incisive decision making, warmth of welcome and graciousness that are now embedded in the Society's fabric. There may never be another Jim and Judith but their impact—both overt and subtle—will continue to be felt across many areas of the Victorian Society.

JUDITH GREALISH

1988—2014 member Beaumaris/Black Rock Conference

2017 awarded Emeritus Vincentian

JIM GREALISH (1935—2014)

1996—2014 member Beaumaris/Black Rock Conference

1997—2000 state council treasurer

2003—2014 member Melbourne Conference

2006—2010 state president

2006—2010 member, National Council

2010 awarded Papal Honour of Knight Commander of St Gregory



NOURELL DAVIES

DRAWN TO HER LIGHT

Some people lead; some follow. Nourell Davies definitely belongs in the first category with a leadership style of drawing people in with her enthusiasm, joyous nature and generous heart. As one colleague reflected: “We were drawn to her light”. She was, in today’s language, an early adaptor, embracing new ideas and constantly trying new approaches. She enriched many lives with her happy disposition and generosity of spirit.

EARLY YEARS

Ella Nourell Davies, better known as Nourell or Norrie-grew up in North Fitzroy, the eldest of four. Her mother died when she was nine years old. At 12, Nourell was looking forward to starting at the Mercy’s Academy school in Fitzroy. She had attended her enrolment interview, and had her uniform laid out when her aunt and uncle announced they were moving back to their old home to care for the children.

From a young age, as older sister, Nourell was a mother figure to three brothers. She also took little girls from the neighbourhood to morning mass, enchanting them with stories. On Sunday mornings, Nourell would tell them Our Lady was rising as the sun appeared to touch Mary’s crown depicted in the stained glass.

She joined the Children of Mary, a sodality for young, single ladies. She often reminisced about parish fund-raising, carnivals, balls and the names of priests and assistant priests who served in the parish.

Nourell moved out of home at 15 when her father remarried. These formative years impressed upon her the importance of family and the stability that

family provided. The church and the parish of Our Lady Help of Christians East Brunswick were central to her family’s life. The gold leaf statue of Our Lady on top of the dome has always been a significant landmark and a beacon of faith.

In a 2011 publication celebrating the Centenary Year of Our Lady’s, Nourell talks about some of the influences on her early life.

“I remember my first day at school when my mother took me to Our Lady’s Primary in Barkly Street. The sister who taught us was Sr Eugene. She was absolutely beautiful and so nice to all of us.

Principal, Sr Imelda, always insisted that we look after each other when we were playing in the playground and if there was anyone standing around and not playing, we were told we had to invite them into our games,” (Upon this rock...Our Lady of Help of Christians Parish, East Brunswick. Celebrating 100 years, 1911 - 2011).

While Nourell’s sense of responsibility and organisational skills were developed by her family circumstances, her schooling and parish involvement also contributed to her leadership potential.



JOINING THE CONFERENCE

In 1969, Nourell returned to her family home in May Street in North Fitzroy with her husband Laurie and their five children and this marked a return to the parish in the same year. Nourell and Laurie were actively involved in parish life, opening the church every Sunday, preparing the altar, doing readings and counting the collection. Nourell was also a special minister of the parish.

At the first Sunday mass after moving back to North Fitzroy, assistant priest Fr Kevin Kinna appealed for new Society members. Nourell and Laurie joined immediately.

Laurie and Nourell embraced the work of the Society, although Laurie's time was constrained by work commitments as a police officer. They served on the St Vincent de Paul piety stall after mass. Parish involvement and Society involvement overlapped.

In the 1970s, the conference instigated some new activities; visits to the Little Sisters of the Poor's St Joseph's Elderly People's Home in Northcote. As well, visits to Ozanam House commenced with members serving meals and chatting to the men.

In 1979, Nourell became the first female president of a mixed conference, a rarity for many years and a fact she was immensely proud of throughout her life. She served two terms until 1985.

Another initiative around this time was conference member Mario Follachio's trips with elderly Italian members to the Italian Club in Thornbury every week.

In the 1980s, while the conference did not have its own Centre of Charity, there were two nearby. These became a new avenue of referral for people requiring assistance.

Nourell and Laurie were on the first Christmas lunch committee in 1990 and helped for four years with celebrations for people in the community who would have otherwise been on their own. Unlike many charities then, the lunch was held on Christmas Day. Volunteers rearranged their own family gatherings to accommodate this event. The first year, the volunteers over-catered and took to the streets, inviting people along. The following year, more than 100 people turned up, with numbers swelling to more than 200 the following Christmas. These lunches soon became known for their welcoming atmosphere.

An off-shoot of the Christmas event was 'Soup on Sundays' where parishioners made and served soup after the 11.30 am Mass for residents in nearby public housing and rooming houses. Members remember Nourell arriving with a large pot of soup and engaging enthusiastically with those she served. The parish kitchen underwent a fit-out to become a proper soup kitchen.

Former East Brunswick Conference president, Brian Dethridge has written a comprehensive account of the Brunswick and East Brunswick conferences which provides wonderful insights into the energy of the conference and Nourell's positive contribution.

"Nourell valued close relations with the parish priests of the day, such as Father who threw the weight of the conference behind such parish activities as picnics and retreats. Client families were usually invited on these trips. She also introduced the custom of giving an extra voucher to regular clients at Christmas," (One Hundred Years of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Brunswick and East Brunswick).

Both neighbouring parishes had a large contingent of Italian parishioners who have contributed greatly to the life of the parishes. Daughter Carmel remembers the Our Lady Help of Christians presbytery was filled with the busy, warm and buzzing energy of Italian parishioners gathered



Pic: Maureen O'Brien



together drinking espresso coffee and eating biscotti. As a small child, Carmel's son spent a great deal of time there with his grandparents and loved this environment.

Horrie Palmieri joined the conference in 1981. He served as treasurer for 30 years and credits Norell with making his time there so enjoyable.

“She was welcoming and inclusive and I immediately took a liking to her. She was a down-to-earth person and understood the complexities of life as she herself was a mother with a large family. She had a lot of compassion for the people we visited and would always speak her mind about social injustice.”

These themes are echoed by other members: Norell was open, friendly and always had a broad smile on her face. But behind this lightness there was a more serious side. Members could discuss any concerns with her and knew Norell would go that extra mile for someone in need. She always stood her ground on matters of principle and was not a stickler for the rule book, and always put the person before the policy.

Horrie remembers being inspired by Norell's devotion to St Vincent de Paul. On every Feast of St Vincent de Paul, Norell quoted a particular de Paul maxim, part of which is quoted below. It was a way of encouraging members to go that little bit further; to seek to be the best they could be in the service of others.

“It is not sufficient to do good works, we must do them well, after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom it is written that He did all things well. We should therefore endeavour to perform all our actions in the spirit of Jesus Christ; that is in the manner in which the Redeemer acted, with the perfection, and for the ends that he proposed to himself, in everything he did; if we do not, our very good works will draw down more chastisements than rewards,” (124 Spiritual Maxims, 30).

In July 2009, the Brunswick and East Brunswick conferences, which had always worked closely, formally amalgamated. By this stage, cases had changed, partly due to the gentrification process across the inner city, but also in keeping with wider trends which have continued. Today, there are now far more older people seeking assistance. Loneliness is at epidemic proportions. There are more migrant families, less chance of work and ongoing challenges.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

In the manner of Frederic Ozanam, Norell recognised the importance of understanding a person's unique situation and responding to these particular circumstances. She never shirked a need no matter how challenging it was. Norell could be feisty and never worried about whom she might offend if it was a matter of justice.

Daughter Carmel remembers that her mother would always make special efforts to ensure communities on the fringes were included. Norell embraced people of other faiths and was always interested to learn more about other faith traditions. She particularly enjoyed a visit to a mosque undertaken by the parish's interfaith group.

The Davies family were a supportive and loving family. They were always keen to spend time with their grandchildren. If there was ever a crisis in the family, Norell and Laurie would be in their car and travelling to help. Two children moved to Mt Isa, in far north Queensland, and they thought nothing of travelling there if required.

It was not only family that was supported; their home always had an open-door policy; there were often children from children's homes staying-every Christmas, they hosted a child from an orphanage-and there were always extra people around the table in the evening. Her daughters remember as young children that their mother would care for an elderly neighbour. This woman would not have been



able to stay in her home if not for Norell's constant assistance.

Laurie and Norell took it upon themselves to transport a woman to church who others were reluctant to drive. She suffered from mental health issues, was incontinent and often forgot to wear underwear. Discreetly placing protective material on the seat of the car, they collected her and drove her home for many weeks. Gestures like these were never any trouble for Norell and Laurie.

So of course it came as a surprise to Carmel when Norell-by this time in her 80s-wasn't keen on taking in an Italian student who was desperate for accommodation. Carmel stated that even a week would help, but Norell resisted. She felt she was too old and didn't want the hassle and pressure of a new person. Carmel pressed her mother, but still Norell wouldn't budge.

And then, after Saturday night mass, Norell admitted that the priest's sermon about the responsibility to help asylum seekers had touched her. Claudio moved in, staying more than three months. Norell loved having him, waiting eagerly for his return each day.

Daughter Laurelle believes it was the strong role model provided by her mother that led to her joining the Manifold Heights, Geelong Conference.

"She inspired us all in terms of what she was able to accomplish and she understood the nature of hardship."

HUMILITY AND DISCRETION

Norell did not talk about what she did: many never knew the extent of her contribution. Her humility was legendary, as was her ability to keep a secret. Carmel and Laurelle discovered a great deal about their mother's works when she was dying, hearing

accounts from others, many deeply affected by her example. The breadth of her contribution was humbling.

Among other things, Norell and Laurie both volunteered at St Mary's House of Welcome, collating relevant press clippings from newspapers; Norell helped with activities at Little Sisters of the Poor in Abbotsford and was an active participant at Willowview Adult Day Centre. Norell was always taking up a new cause and stuck with it. She and Laurie were enthusiastic supporters of 'Hands on Healing', an initiative of the parish. Masseurs and other therapists donated their services to enable people to receive a range of remedial therapies.

"Mum and dad would pick people up from the flats and bring them for some pampering. My parents thought it was marvellous. They were quite progressive in their thinking." (Carmel)

Helen Lynch, now treasurer, first met Norell and Laurie when they took her in after a troubled time in her early life.

"They were like parents to me, very generous with their time and support. During the more than 40 years I knew Mrs Davies I only discovered she was with the Society two weeks before she died."

Maureen O'Brien, who became conference member in 2016, met Norell through the parish 27 years ago. She remembers her as a sunny presence who was very family orientated and also never spoke about her Society involvement.

"A real skill was her ability to get on with everyone, young and old, of any background. Norell was always lovely to my grandchildren with one, Henry, very taken with her, inviting her to his birthday party."

OVER THE YEARS

Helen Lynch emphasises the difference in how the conference operated in the early days of Norell's involvement and today. Then, there was only a very small call centre. Calls for assistance came from the parish priest, nuns and the parish school. Members went out whenever required. It was not unusual for Norell and Laurie to visit people at night in an emergency. Visits included seeing people who were bereaved, sick or recently out of prison.

Today, the call centre sends requests for assistance to the relevant conference at 3.15pm. The conference roster allocates visits. There are fixed days and members adhere to this routine.

The conference does not see very many people, perhaps two or three per day on average. A lower number is preferable as it allows sufficient time to better understand individual circumstances. Usually there will be a special case that requires more time and intensive support. In the spirit of Norell, conference members try to go the extra mile to accommodate needs while at the same time, encouraging self-help. Utility bills have for many years remained one of the key reasons people request assistance from the Society.

There are many more refugees requiring assistance. The conference is asked to provide furniture, as often people are living with very little. Home visits used to focus primarily on public housing. Now, the conference visits many people in private rental, many of whom are seeking rental assistance.

East Brunswick Conference struggles at times like most conferences. Like any organisation, it needs a driving force, usually the president. Sometimes the leader gets too old and it is challenging to find an enthusiastic replacement. 'Last man standing' is often used to describe how a member becomes President. Somehow though, the spirit and willingness of all the members carries the

conferences. Former president, Brian Dethbridge sums up this driving force at East Brunswick eloquently.

"The main lesson the author takes...is of the sheer dogged determination of members of Conferences at all periods to stick with those we help... As amateurs many of our members were and are true professionals." (One Hundred Years of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Brunswick and East Brunswick.)

When Norell's second term as president was coming to an end, she recognised Horrie was needing a break and suggested he take six months off. She would take over as treasurer, a position difficult to recruit at the best of times. It was a case of Norell placing a colleague and friend's predicament ahead of her own.

As Norell became older and frailer, she struggled to participate actively in the conference. The conference was reluctant to lose her. Members picked her up every week and brought her to meetings so she could remain involved. Everyone benefitted from her energy and positive presence. Norell remained a conference member until 2009. She was 89 years old.

ALWAYS A PLACE FOR HUMOUR

Norell had a lovely sense of humour and laughed a great deal. She could lighten situations and had a knack for making others laugh. It was often while enjoying a meal that this quality was on display. She was a natural storyteller and would regale her audience with her anecdotes-without ever breaching confidentiality.

THE LAST CHAPTER

In 2012, Carmel organised an exhibition of Norell's street. It would become a valuable social history.





“I went up and down the street seeking residents’ participation, with Mum really the main focus. A photo and the story of each household was documented.”

The exhibition, supported by a council grant, was a great hit with former and current residents. As she grew older Norell vehemently resisted going into aged care; some of her family did not support this wish. Norell insisted Carmel photograph her when she was in hospital and then at home, enjoying a glass of wine. The difference in her demeanour was striking in that photo. She instructed Carmel to send the photos to the doubting family members to set them straight.

Carmel and Laurelle provided and coordinated their mother’s care enabling Norell to remain at home until she was in a wheelchair and unable to walk. She then graciously accepted that aged care was the best option and moved there for the last year of her life, still spending weekends at home. Neighbours visited and had afternoon tea with Norell. It was happy to the end.

Her family brought her home after she died. Her grandchildren placed roses from the garden around their mother. People bid farewell to a wonderful neighbour, friend and advocate for justice.

Her funeral procession drove along May Street. Neighbours walked behind the hearse; others gathered at their front gates to pay their final respects. As a result of the May Street exhibition, connections developed between the neighbours that had not previously existed, and the street became very sociable. Many May Street residents attended a neighbour’s wedding in Jaipur. It was another example of Norell playing a central role in drawing people together through her presence.

At the back of the church, there’s a stained glass window depicting the Crucifixion. It contains a stained glass chalice. Jewels from earrings of

Norell’s have been placed in the stem of the chalice, providing an everlasting presence within her church. At Norell’s Funeral Mass offered at Our Lady Help of Christians Church, one of the Prayers of the Faithful reads as follows:

“We pray for Norell’s friends in the neighbourhood, in the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, and at Willowview and at Little Sisters of the Poor. Their lives were enriched by her generous spirit and happy nature.”

Norell’s life was indeed one of giving and one rich in what she received in return. She had a quality about her reminiscent of fellow local humanitarian and Society member ‘the Angel of Collingwood’, Margaret Oats.

There was nothing she wouldn’t do when she came across need, be it within her family, friends, neighbours or conference clients. She was a true Vincentian, never judging, willing to adapt to change and always placing great importance on understanding a person’s individual circumstances. Her legacy lives on.

Norell Davies (1920—2016)

1969—2009 *member, East Brunswick Conference*

1979—1985 *conference president*

Laurie Davies (1935—2005)



BETH DEVINE

A STEADY PRESENCE THROUGH CHANGING TIMES

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

EARLY LIFE

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

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

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

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

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

JOINING GOOD SHEPHERD CONFERENCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE ENTERPRISE MIGRANT HOSTEL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ALWAYS GOING WHERE THE NEED IS

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

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

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



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

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

THE KNITTING GROUP

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

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

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

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

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

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

STEADY AS SHE GOES

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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







FRANK MULLINS

SOUP VAN MAN-OAM

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

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

EARLY CONTACT WITH THE SOCIETY

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

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

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

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

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

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

determined to make this a reality.

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

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

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

A TRULY SPECIAL WORK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

CONNECTING WITH THE VOICELESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

and grace, the likes of which sometimes astounds him.

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

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

CHANGING TIMES: CHANGING TEAMS

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

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

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

Australia for service to the Fitzroy Soup Van.

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

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

GOING THAT EXTRA MILE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

BUILDING CONNECTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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