



A
CALL
TO
SERVE

VINCENTIAN
STORIES

2016
CHAPTER



St Vincent de Paul Society
VICTORIA

good works

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Contents

State President's Message	5
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Stories

Annette Burkhalter.....	6
Hugh Cushing.....	14
Jack Daffy	21
Dick Pepper	27
John Robinson	35

Our Mission

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

Our Vision

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

Our Values

Commitment	Loyalty in service to our mission, vision and values
Compassion	Welcoming and serving all with understanding and without judgement
Respect	Service to all regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender or political opinions
Integrity	Promoting, maintaining and adhering to our mission, vision and values
Empathy	Establishing relationships based on respect, trust, friendship and perception
Advocacy	Working to transform the causes of poverty and challenging the causes of human injustice
Courage	Encouraging spiritual growth, welcoming innovation and giving hope for the future



State President's Message

Dear members, volunteers and staff

On 5th 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 Frédéric Ozanam in France. Guided and inspired by Frédéric Ozanam's vision, Fr Gerald and his companions established the first Conference in response to the sufferings and cries of the poor and disadvantaged and, in doing so, provided practical assistance to alleviate immediate needs, 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 have been blessed by the countless number of Vincentian men and women who have given compassionate service and a dedication to make the world a better place particularly for the poor, the lonely and marginalised in society.

This is the fourth year in which the Society's Victorian State Council has sought to honour members for their dedication to service, and for their compassion, courage and selflessness. We also recognise them for being modern day examples of servant leadership within their respective communities and in our Society more broadly. 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 counter underlying causes. Perhaps it is this balancing act: the hands 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 wish to express the Society's sincere appreciation to Anne Tuohey for her research and interviews, and for telling each story in a way that enlightens us when we read them.

Michael Liddy
State President
St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

September 2016



Annette Burkhalter

A full life

Some people come to the Society early in their life, perhaps through their parish and a friendly tap on their shoulder; others in retirement. Annette Burkhalter's path was circuitous but logical. She spent over 15 years supporting a range of disadvantaged causes, which proved to be the best apprenticeship and what would in the end, instinctively, draw her to join her local conference. The experiences she has had and the people she has met through a number of services overlap and form a complete picture of a life of service well lived. It has been a broad education.

Her drive, outgoing personality and deep-seated compassion have made her a natural for conference work. A range of experiences has given her an inherent understanding of homelessness and its many causes and consequences.

On her fridge, she has some good advice she read that a grandmother had given to a young child. Annette refers to it regularly: 'Wash what is dirty, water what is dry. Warm what is cold, feed who are hungry. Guide what goes off the road and love people who are least lovable because they need it most.'

This is Annette's story.

Annette Mahar's life began in a Melbourne that was a very different place to today. She was born at the former Mercy Hospital in East Melbourne on 10 February, 1946. At the time, it was one of the first of a new generation of modern Australian hospitals, where approximately 3,000 babies were born each year. Today, it is part of the St Vincent Health Australia suite of health services and has been redeveloped to incorporate luxury apartments.

Her first years were spent in Collingwood and Flemington, in the days when these inner-city suburbs were uniformly working class. At seven years of age, Annette and her family moved to Preston, which was where Annette would spend the remainder of her childhood and young adulthood.

Annette was the eldest, with three brothers, Ian, Alan and Bruce, and a sister, Marilyn.

She attended Sacred Heart primary school in Bell Street and Preston Girls Technical School in Cramer St. Preston was also very much a working-class suburb then and there were none of the significant landmarks, such as Northland, that people today associate with the area.

Annette recalls that the family didn't have much but hers was a wonderful childhood. She and her siblings made their

*Love people who are least lovable
because they need it most.*

own fun and, unlike children today, were unaware and unconcerned about money and consumer items:

We had a wonderful Mum and Dad. Dad worked two jobs to bring in extra money.

It was a time before television with the refrigerator probably the most trendsetting and envied piece of technical equipment most families saved up to buy. Annette recalls the legacy of those first years in Preston:

While I grew up with mainly boys around me, having 3 brothers and their friends to play with, I still have two girlfriends, Diane and Maree from those days. We've been friends for 63 years. My sister came seven years after me so we weren't really close growing up, although we are best of friends now.

Our neighbours were nearly all blue-collar people. Mum was a machinist in a factory down the street for many years and then went to Kodak and worked in the canteen.

Annette left school at the end of Form 4 (Year 10).

Working life

Annette's first fulltime job was at Tip Top Bakery in Brunswick as a junior. Tip Top bakeries, which no longer operates in Melbourne, produced one of the most popular breads at the time. Their famous slogan was 'Tip Top's the one, good on you mum!' Annette recalls they had hundreds of delivery drivers. It was a big company then.

Again, this was a different time, before the trend towards smaller, chain bakeries, artisanal breads and boutique bread shops started to appear in much of Melbourne. After four months at Tip Top's, Annette was promoted. Her new role involved doing the calculations for the loading sheets from the baker's run. She enjoyed using the old manual 'click, click' adding machines. She was also trained to do switchboard relief. These were the days of pulling out the ctords and flipping switches. She absolutely loved this. Halfway through the year, she was transferred to Preston. Not long after moving offices, the company started cutting staff positions.

Annette then took a job at Trunklines, part of the old PMG, managing the old fashioned trunkline calls. She stayed there for six months. A major car accident in which Annette was thrown through the windscreen meant she was unable to work for six months.

After her convalescence, she went to work with Commonwealth Industrial Gases (C.I.G.) in Preston for 3 years. She worked in the equipment division where humidicribs were made. Annette copied drawings, did some typing and loved being part of a large organisation. Annette has always enjoyed working with lots of people. With a strong work ethic and ability to get on with most people, she has never had trouble finding employment.



Husband Geoff, sister-in-law Heather, Annette and brothers Alan and Bruce.

Marriage and family

Preston was a close-knit community, like many Melbourne suburbs then. Annette knew most of the young people that lived close by. One was a boy named Geoff Burkhalter who had moved into the area as a teenager and lived around the corner. He and Annette got together when she was 16.

In 1967, they were married when Annette was 21. They rented for a while and had their first son Mark, born 7 December 1967. In 1969, like many newlyweds, keen to buy their home, they moved further out, in their case to Lalor. Second son Glenn was born 2 January 1970.

In those days, Lalor was bush or what the real estate agents called, 'semi-rural.' There were roads made as the subdivisions were released. Annette remembers they had cows in a paddock across the road from their home.

Even when the boys were young, Annette always worked. After Commonwealth Industrial Gases, she took an office job at PortaGas in Carlton. Her CV recalls a Melbourne before many government-run entities became corporatized and privatised.

She then started doing delivery work, first driving for Auto Clutch and then for Kevin Dennis Motors delivering spare parts. Who could forget Dennis the Menace? The entrepreneurial used-car salesman, operated a number of used-car and new-car yards with a flair for publicity before falling foul of Consumer Affairs. Oblivious to all this, out on the road, Annette was pretty much her own boss and loved the pace and variety of driving around and delivering orders. It was a further chance to engage with different people.

In the early 1970s, Kevin Dennis closed down. Annette was offered an office job in Alkon Sales in West Heidelberg. She stayed there for almost 15 years until, when the company hit a bad patch, many people were retrenched and it eventually closed down.

In 1994, she then joined Ajax in Richmond as a casual. Through a series of mergers, splits, relocations and in 2009,

a massive downsizing from 300-400 staff to only 40, Annette remained on the payroll until 2015 but juggling hip problems made it very hard for her to get around. She retired gracefully in 2015 after 21 years in the job:

I missed work for a while, the contact with people, being busy and helpful, and would have liked to stay on, but it wasn't practical. Looking back, I always had jobs that involved front-line contact with people. I loved the old days of operating a switchboard and reception duties. I'm still in contact with my work mates and am now enjoying retirement.

It was in 2013 that the pain and lack of mobility Annette was experiencing was first diagnosed as chronic rheumatoid arthritis. Annette underwent a successful hip replacement in March 2016:

I feel like a bird out of a cage now.

Attending St Bridget's Catholic Church Greythorn would bring Annette into contact with a woman who would provide Annette's entry into charitable works.

In the late 1980s, Annette and Geoff moved to Doncaster. Attending St Bridget's Catholic Church Greythorn would bring Annette into contact with a woman who would provide Annette's entry into charitable works and open her eyes to a different world. Following on would be a string of significant encounters, all paving the way for Annette to become involved in her local conference.

First volunteer work

Annette came to know St Bridget's inspiring pastoral associate Sister Gabrielle Jackman. Gabrielle, a Presentation nun, was involved in helping the homeless through street work and later took on managing two houses for homeless women. Annette remarked:

Getting to know Gabrielle and witnessing her work, sparked my interest in this kind of volunteer work. If I'd been younger, I feel sure this is the field of work I would have loved to work in.

Keen to assist in practical ways, Annette started collecting clothes and Christmas gifts. She loved doing this and gained a strong sense of purpose right from the start.

Through a work contact, Annette heard about volunteering opportunities at St Mary's House of Welcome's drop-in centre in Fitzroy. This is one of the special places in Melbourne's homelessness service system that has built and maintained relationships with people who benefit from the sense of belonging this place provides. Annette had for some time been dropping off clothes there and thought she'd like to become involved. They were looking for people to join. This led to Annette, in 1999, starting to come to St Mary's House of Welcome every Saturday to serve breakfast, morning tea

and lunch. She continued this weekly routine until 2007 when she needed time to care for her mother. She has maintained some contact since then.

Like the Society, St Mary's House of Welcome grew out of a faith-based mission, started in 1960 by the Daughters of Charity. Its mission is very much centred on a strong sense of relationship and of standing with

disadvantaged people and offering support and hope. Annette came to understand the sense of refuge this drop-in centre provides for those who lack the safety and stability of home and family that most people take for granted. It was another layer in her education about the personal crises and complex issues that can lead to social exclusion. CEO of St Mary's House of Welcome, Tony McCosker describes the valuable work staff and volunteers provide:

The people we support here are excluded from other communities – we are their place, their support, their stability. (St Mary's House of Welcome)

Annette particularly enjoyed working there on Christmas Days as well as finding clothes and any other items that could bring some welcome relief and fill a gap.

Annette started to gain a reputation as 'the woman who distributes clothes to the needy'.

Annette started to gain a reputation as 'the woman who distributes clothes to the needy'. She had a good network through friends, family, the parish and other avenues, and yet more people would keep finding her and bring her stuff. Soon, she could hardly enter her spare room, packed as it was with all manner of adult and kid's clothing, toys and other items:

People at the church are always offering clothing to me. Recently, a lady gave me a beautiful hand-knitted blanket and I was able to give it to a little girl, one of four whose mother had recently walked out on the family. I hate to think of people being cold and forgotten.



Sr Gabrielle Jackman PBVM.



Interior St Mary's House of Welcome showing link to St Vincent de Paul Society.

The soup van and Avalon mobile clothing service

The St Vincent de Paul Society soup vans are an important part of the response to homelessness and loneliness. Before joining a conference, Annette had been out on the Footscray van a few times through meeting vannies at St Mary's House of Welcome. Through this experience, she came to know Debbie Holmes, who founded the Avalon mobile clothing service that follows the soup vans. Annette contacted her and discovered they were always looking for people to go out with them on their van. Annette went out a few times until she was unable to climb into the van when her rheumatoid arthritis became worse. She was still able to supply clothes she was collecting from her donors.

She remembers lots of contact with people through Avalon and the street stops. For some reason, she always remembers the one at the park near the North Melbourne Housing Commission flats. People would always stream through the park towards the vans in search of food, clothing and companionship.

She remembers one woman with children. Her little girl would approach Annette stating she needed size 7 shoes: a child well trained in survival skills! Annette admits she's a softie. She'd locate items like these shoes and have them delivered the next day.

Annette found the experience of the Footscray Van an eye opener

Annette found the experience of the Footscray Van an eye opener: the boarding houses; the Blue Moon caravan park; the way people subsisted on very little. She remembers many

incidents — one was a man she met who was an airforce bomber pilot in WW2. There were times she felt concerned about children and what they were exposed to. The experiences could be very confronting.

One particular place left a deep impression on many levels. It was a boarding house on Racecourse Road, North Melbourne with windowless tin sheds out the back. It shocked her that people lived in them and that the landlord charged people to live in such substandard accommodation.

The vannies knocked on the front door of this big old house and a client, barely dressed, took them down a laneway to these sheds. They handed meals out to people 'living' there.

The kitchen in the main house was indescribably filthy. She remembers it had an Early Kooka stove. She hadn't seen one in decades and she'd never seen one in this state:

I wondered how the landlord could sleep straight in his bed at nights. He wasn't worried about anything other than the \$150 plus per week he received from every lodger.

Annette was discovering that people don't know how others live and she hadn't known herself, even though she thought she had plenty of life experience. The Vinnies and these other charities have been, and continue to be, a major part of Annette's broad education.

Joining Greythorn Conference

Annette enjoys the reflections at these meetings and the ritual of saying the Society prayers.

It was as her time with St Mary's House of Welcome, Fitzroy came to an end in 2007, Annette joined her local conference, St Bridget's Greythorn:

I decided the time was right and I have never looked back.

Conference meetings are held monthly after Sunday mass so it is easy for Annette to attend. Parish priest Fr Dennis Rochford is very supportive of the conference.

Annette enjoys the reflections at these meetings and the ritual of saying the Society prayers. Blessed Rosalie Rendu, Frederic Ozanam's mentor, always strikes a chord with Annette's focus on women and children.

Annette is the liaison person between St Mary's House of Welcome and the conference, and so enjoys being able to keep this connection going.

The current conference has 15-20 members and numbers have remained steady. Not everyone can make it to the meetings but everyone turns up for the end-of-year function and it is good to get together.

The conference follows up with the Society when people have additional requests for items such as bedding.

The conference also took responsibility for a refugee group that had been transferred to the Greythorn area, so everyone focused on what they could obtain that could be of use.

Annette recognises there is a balance between pragmatic solutions and genuinely helping a person. She understands items such as flat-pack furniture sound like a good solution but she finds people don't always know how to assemble them.

The Vinnies stores sometimes have furniture such as large wardrobes and lounge suites that may be too big and bulky for people living in small accommodation. Trying to match people's needs is a challenge that the conference works to improve.

Annette is always looking for the best solution and lives by the motto: 'There is always more to be done.'

Home visits

Considering how much of Annette's volunteer work has centred around Fitzroy, it seemed an unsurprising, natural outcome that her conference conducts home visits in the Fitzroy, North Fitzroy area. Annette goes out with different people, usually on Saturdays. They set out around 9.30 am and, depending on the number of calls, normally three or four, she is home by lunchtime.

The experience of home visits has developed Annette's understanding of disadvantage even further.

The experience of home visits has developed Annette's understanding of disadvantage even further. She has been particularly confronted by some of the boarding houses she has visited over the years and the public housing estates, which seem to have entrenched problems and no one is offering an alternative experience: everyone who lives there has their own complex struggles:

I've been in some pretty grotty places, believe me, and I've seen things that shocked me but, over the years, I am prepared for just about anything.

She recalls many people she has encountered; most often it is women and children that have left the deepest impression. It is

very hard for the children to hope for a different way when no one is presenting an alternative example of how a life can be.

These visits cause her to reflect on the current state of Melbourne as a whole. The Society gives her money to buy doonas and bedding for people who have so little. She knows many people could not imagine that women sleep in cars with their kids. It sometimes feels like a losing battle, a band-aid effect:

It feels like we're never catching up and, at the other end, the well-off keep getting better and higher salaries.

She has heard people reflecting on the Society's CEO Sleepout. She saw the media coverage with protesters unhappy that this was a poor attempt — insulting even — at trying to replicate a 'homelessness' experience. Annette agrees this kind of sleeping out where people can go back to their warm houses and their jobs the next day is not the real experience. She knows that the Sleepouts do raise awareness and much needed funds.

Still, vexed as it is, she constantly wonders how best to influence people to have more compassion and understanding of homelessness.

Perhaps it is the repeated experiences of people like Annette and the many other conference members, who visit people in these different circumstances, and the other volunteers and workers at the coalface who can only ever be the ones who come close to a true understanding. In the midst of all this bleakness, Annette often marvels at how people can manage and even enjoy a moment of optimism when life to the outsider looks pretty grim.

She remembers visiting one place where a mother lived with her children. She needed money. A cardboard box near Annette's feet moved and startled her. There was a child sleeping in it, under a thin piece of material. As they left, Annette recalls her conference companion saying: 'Don't you feel you want to go back and do more?'

Going the extra mile

Annette has at times turned around after a visit and gone back. This is not the conference policy but some people's circumstances affect her deeply and she can't leave them in the lurch. She talks about Monica.

Annette often went back to Monica in North Fitzroy before she died of cancer last year. Monica was a hoarder and had a little dog living among her piles of belongings. Her place was cold and Annette's mother gave money so that Annette could buy warm bedding for Monica. The place had mice running around because Monica left food out for the dog. Monica would often ask for something in particular. Annette just wanted desperately to make life a little more comfortable for her:

Annette just wanted desperately to make life a little more comfortable for Monica.

One time she asked for some clothes. The only clothes I had were men's clothes in the boot of my car. Monica wanted to look at them and she took the clothes. It didn't matter they were men's: they would keep her warm. I couldn't help but respond to Monica's requests.

Another incident, which prompted Annette and a member to return after a visit, was at a North Fitzroy boarding house. The kitchen had lockers. There was nothing usable in sight. A man they visited had no cooking utensils, no way of making himself a meal:

On the way home we stopped at a Vinnies centre in Kew. We had to convince a volunteer who we were so that she would give us a frying pan.

Annette was not impressed that they had to work so hard to get the volunteer to part with the frying pan. The man in the boarding house couldn't believe it when another volunteer returned with the pan.

These experiences always make Annette feel it would be preferable if they knew in advance what people really need. Then they could have with them, for example, bedding and clothing.

Annette mentions this dilemma often and believes many conference members feel the same way. There is always so much more to be done. It usually comes down to the judgement of the member as to what extent the home visitors help:

But we can't fix all the problems. We're not qualified social workers. It often feels like a band-aid effect but you do what you can. Some do rot the system. You can't help but judge but you keep the judgement inside of you, try to never show it.

On resisting judgement, she remembers one man they gave \$40 to who was living in a nice house he owned. He told them he needed more money and this wasn't enough; and in the same breath announced he owned a second house. It is hard not to judge sometimes.

Annette's husband Geoff is often roped in to help as well. A car mechanic by trade, now retired, he can fix things for people. He recalls fixing a car door that wouldn't open. The people were very appreciative. Then the next day, someone ran into the same door. He muses that some people seem to attract a run of bad luck:

There's an old saying. 'If it wasn't for bad luck, they'd have no luck at all.'

Practical help makes the difference.



A man selects from donated clothing, Fitzroy, 2016.



An all too typical scene around Melbourne streets.

Annette was also involved in a modest bread run for a couple of families in Balwyn North. A local bakery provided bread every Wednesday night for many years until in November 2015, uninsured, it burnt down.

It was through the bread run Annette met another inspiring woman, Sr Zita, a Good Samaritan sister. Some of the bread used to go to Collingwood Cottage, an old cottage behind St Joseph's church, Collingwood. Sr Zita used to give out a range of food from there. She'd set up trestle tables and people could help themselves.

Annette admired Sr Zita's inventiveness in sourcing donated food. She still provides food, including vegetables, to anyone in need but now from a different location.

As more people learn of Annette's clothing supply, she finds it a great introduction to more support agencies.

She has taken lots of items to the Bethlehem Shekinah Homelessness Service. She had women's clothes and beautiful handbags someone had donated. She was thrilled to see the high quality accommodation these women, many who previously lived on the streets, now call home. She has come to know a few of them. She likes the drill here: the women have to earn their keep, each cooks once a week, and they keep their rooms clean. They have a beautiful garden. She reflects that it is a lovely place for the women to live out their last years.

She finds it unbelievable the number of people sleeping rough.

Homelessness and substandard housing

Annette believes that, over the years, very little progress has been made in ending homelessness. She finds it unbelievable the number of people sleeping rough on the streets:

It shouldn't be like this, not in our supposed lucky country. And imagine this winter, how cold it has been.

A woman Annette has met from her St Mary's House of Welcome days has left a deep impression. Annette would see Kath, in her sixties, around the place and at Sr Zita's. She had lived on the street for four years and said she felt safe there as everyone looked out for each other. Then an agency found her a flat in Brunswick. She was so used to sleeping rough, mainly in Carlton Park, it took a long time before she could sleep in a bed. She had a fight with someone when she was put in shared accommodation and found herself at risk of homelessness. It was a recurring pattern.

Kath had a beautiful speaking voice, for which she credited the nuns who educated her in Perth, which belied the terrible life she has endured. She finally ended up in a derelict boarding house, a form of slum housing really, behind the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

In the backyard, there was a big shed divided into two with a thin partition. Kath had a bed and her belongings. A man lived in the other half. There was only one toilet and a wash basin in the backyard that everyone shared. There was no privacy. Kath went to All Saints Church for a shower.

Annette visited regularly and told Kath she could ring her in an emergency. 'Emergency' usually translated as needing

cigarettes. Annette would take her out for coffee and remembers one day telling Kath she could choose where they went. Kath picked a very exclusive place. Annette stuck to the deal and told Kath she could order anything she liked.

Within six months, Kath disappeared. Annette never found out what had happened; whether she had died or moved interstate. Annette was struck that hardly anyone would miss her.

Loneliness at the heart of the problem

Annette knows that whenever they visit someone with particular financial or material needs, there is nearly always another issue. People are, almost universally, very lonely. She and other members recognise people need someone to talk to almost more than anything else. And loneliness doesn't discriminate. Her conference has visited locals in the Greythorn area, who appear to be well provided for but they miss companionship.

The conference is always trying to address gaps as well as they can but there are limits.

Annette is a naturally curious person and has learned a great deal about the range of needs and issues people have to confront. The conference is always trying to address gaps as well as they can but there are limits.

Annette is the 'jockey' - the one who carries the bags that contain the histories of people being visited and essentials such as food vouchers.

It usually depends on the discretion of the person I'm with regarding working out how much assistance we can provide. My belief is the money we have is there to be used.

Annette knows the Society does not pay people's chemist bills. She comes across people struggling to pay for their methadone treatment. It is expensive for someone on a Centrelink payment and it seems like a worthwhile cause to Annette to support trying to kick a debilitating drug habit.

Conclusion

Annette views all she does from a standpoint that she is one of the lucky ones: she has the added joy of a total of eight grandchildren and four great grandchildren. She reckons she's had a good life and a full life. This is perhaps why her mission is always to do more, go back, better meet a person's need and make their life more comfortable. Her actions are really a demonstration of deep respect for every person she meets. Her way of operating embodies the spirit of Frederic Ozanam, Rosalie Rendu, and Louise de Marillac. Her actions are coupled with deep questioning about disparities and inequities and how we as a society could and should work to alleviate these gaps. A fundamental issue she identifies is that some people have no idea about money and live for the day. Surely through education this could be addressed?

Annette has made many good mates through being a Vinnie.

Annette has made many good mates through being a Vinnie. They often have coffee after visits. Recently a group went for Sunday afternoon tea at Box Hill RSL. Three or four times a year, they go out for a Chinese meal. She loves getting people together.

She acknowledges all the people she's met along the way who have helped and inspired her. She dedicates this story to her parents, now deceased, her wonderful family and friends who have collected clothing, bedding, toys-all manner of items, which enable her to help many people in different ways. She acknowledges the wonderful group of people at Greythorn Conference and thanks them for her nomination. She could not do what she does without everyone's donations and support. It is a team effort. She gives thanks for all she has and all she is able to do. To everyone from Annette, God bless.

2007

Member Greythorn Conference



Hugh Cushing

Gentle servant of Jesus

Hugh Cushing joined the Society at the uncommonly young age of 18. More a 'doer than a pray-er' he saw this act of service as the best way to live out his faith. A gentle, steady tower of strength, he is a constant support to other conference members and the people they assist.

Hugh resists taking individual credit for anything; he is adamant the strength of a Conference is the 'we' not the 'I' and he acknowledges many people he has met through conference work as magnificent members. Hugh has a humility bordering on blind-spot that only allows him to see others' contributions.

He lives by a beautiful, simple philosophy: that we can only do the best we can and then it's over to the Lord. This is Hugh's story.

Hugh Cushing was born in Ararat in 1933 to parents Hilda and Hugh. When Hugh was young, Hugh senior, in his role of commercial traveller, moved with the family to Warrnambool where Hugh attended St Joseph's primary and Christian Brothers. At 11 years of age, the family moved again, this time to Casterton. Hugh completed primary school at the Mercy school, grade 6 at the convent and then boarded for years 7 and 8 at the Marist Brothers Agricultural College in Mount Gambier.

Working life

As a child of the 1930s, Hugh is aware his family were lucky as his father, a commercial traveller, remained in employment. They did not have to endure the struggles of others beaten down by the impact of the Depression.

In 1944, his parents bought a grocery business in Casterton and Hugh worked there from 14 years of age. Hugh joined the Casterton Vice Regal Band in this time, playing the baritone. He was also a founding member of the Casterton branch of the Apex Club.

Hugh did National Service, spending three months basic training at Puckapunyal and completed the mandatory three years of part time National Service which mainly involved camps and parades. He enjoyed this involvement.

In 1961, at 28 years of age, Hugh moved to Bendigo. He started working at his uncle's stock and station business in the newly established Farm Merchandise department. Bendigo felt like home to Hugh as it was his mother's birthplace and the family always holidayed there. As Hugh describes it:

While my mother had moved to other country towns, in her mind's eye, Bendigo remained her home.

In Bendigo, in addition to Bendigo Conference, he joined the Marist Brothers Brass Band, the Young Christian Workers' (YCW) Athletics Club, and re-enlisted with the Citizens' Military Forces based in the drill hall in Mollison St.

Hugh was employed as a Farm Merchandise manager, a role he would hold for the remainder of his working life. His uncles' business, Frank A. Hill & Company, would be the subject of several mergers and takeovers; eventually becoming



Hugh at work, Frank A Hill & Co, 1964.

Elders. The family company went back to the 1850s and Hugh recounts some of the earlier times in its history. On the approach into Bendigo, there was originally a long, narrow building not far from Bendigo's iconic fountain, owned by his uncles known as Hill's Bazaar. Here, in times past, they auctioned horses and before the sale, set up hurdles inside, sending the horses over them before the sale. Later, pigs were also brought in and auctioned. The calf market was held a little further down the road. No one today would guess what had occurred in what is now a busy office centre. The now Bendigo Bank stands on this site. In a delightful type of full circle, Hugh's son Stephen, now works above where Hugh had his office.

From the stories, it is easy to gain a sense of Hugh's loyal work service and commitment. He mentions other employees he worked alongside, citing in particular one who, deeply religious, wanted to follow in the steps of Jesus and become a carpenter but was unable to continue with this because of a physical disability. In seeking an alternate job, he fell into the Farm Merchandise industry. In later years he left to become a pastor.

Meeting Frances and family

In 1961, Hugh moved to Bendigo, initially boarding in a private home. His parents moved to Bendigo later the same year and Hugh realised they did not have the means then to purchase a home. He purchased a house in Mollison Street and the three of them lived there. A little later, his parents moved to a house in Hargreaves Street.

Hugh attended St Kilian's parish and became involved in the YCW Athletic Club and a table tennis club operating out of Cardijn House, next to St Kilian's Church. Through collecting the key from the parish office, Hugh met a young lady by the name of Frances Mennen who was the receptionist. As Frances tells it:

Hugh seemed to be collecting the key more often than he needed to!

In 1964, Sandhurst Bishop Stewart married Frances and Hugh at Sacred Heart Cathedral on August 15. Hugh and Frances had their first two children, Peter (1965) and Marie (1966), while living at Mollison Street. They then moved to Fifth Avenue White Hills, known colloquially then as 'street of nappies and high overdrafts'. Then with a growing family – third child, Stephen (1968) had arrived, Frances and Hugh bought a 1.2 hectares block also in White Hills and built their home. Two more children came along, Jennifer (1973) and David (1977).

Hugh and Frances still live here amidst a beautiful garden they created from a bare block. Hugh planted all the trees but credits Frances labour and creative talents for the overall effect. It is an exquisite setting and was a wonderful place to raise children. They are truly blessed to have all their children living locally and to have regular contact with them and their 10 grandchildren ranging in age from 29-11 and 3 great grandchildren, aged seven to two years.

Society involvement

In 1951, as a young man of 18 in Casterton, the Conference President, Mick Healy, asked Hugh to join the conference. Hugh says:

Being footloose and fancy free I thought I could give some time to this. I wasn't much of a pray-er but thought at least with St Vincent de Paul, I could be a do-er.

Hugh describes Mick Healy as a wonderful man, a true Vincentian and a great role model. He also appeared to be a contradiction: an extrovert who wore a bow tie, while at the same time he was deeply religious. Two things have always remained in Hugh's memory of Mick:

Before we went on a visitation, Mick would have us meet at the church to first visit the Blessed Sacrament. There was a sense of 'taking Christ with us' on our visits. The second clear recollection I have is that if Mick arrived late for our weekly meeting, he would kneel down and say a prayer before joining the meeting.

These were the old secretive days of conferences but in a small town, as Hugh tells it, everybody tended to know what was going on in people's lives. Unlike today, rarely did anyone ask for help then; it was a matter of finding people in need of help:

We didn't help that many people. There was a much stronger focus on the spirituality of the Society then. The exercise of that faith and Spirit was in doing practical things that alleviated a person's circumstances. The primary consideration wasn't helping; it was why you were helping.

The primary consideration wasn't helping; it was why you were helping.

As Hugh remembers, visits often involved chopping wood. On one of his first visits, Hugh accompanied Mick to visit a woman and her family. Hugh was busy chopping the wood while Mick chatted to the woman. He smiles, remembering Mick was quite an operator and knew how to set the young ones to work.

In 1961, Hugh transferred to St Kilian's Conference when he arrived in Bendigo. It was a larger conference than Casterton and it was different in many ways.

Early involvement of women

In a time when conferences of the Society of St Vincent de Paul were men-only affairs, Bendigo had two ladies' branches, Sacred Heart Cathedral and St Kilian's, affiliated with the international Society of St Vincent de Paul founded by a woman, Celestina Scarabelli in Bologna, Italy. These were entirely un-associated with the rules and requirements of the Society of Frederick Ozanam and the men's conferences. In an interesting twist, the Ladies Sacred Heart Cathedral branch was formed in 1933 prior to the first mens' conference and it had a long and quite glorious history. In the early days, Hugh's grandmother belonged to this group. Even more staggering to learn is that the St Kilian's Ladies Conference was formed fifty years earlier in 1883.

Hugh's mother was one of the first women in Bendigo to obtain her driver's licence. Hugh paints a picture passed down through his family of his mother in a little red *Swift* sports car, with no canopy, in which she would take her mother - Hugh's grandmother - on home visits with Gran. Picture Gran, hair in a bun, decked out in hat, hat pin and gloves, sitting up in the front seat holding an umbrella for protection against the elements.

The women's contribution was always appreciated and they were warmly received and respected by the men's conferences.

A departure from Hugh's experience in Casterton was that St Kilian's President, Reg Buck, believed that where there were women to be visited, it was best for women do the home visits. All such calls for help were almost automatically referred to either one of the ladies' conferences.

Even when he and Frances moved to White Hills, Hugh remained a formal member at St Kilians until 1975. It felt like his proper Society home base.

Becoming Conference President

Until the 1960s, being a conference president, was a job for life. Then, in the first few years of Hugh joining the St Kilian's conference, this rule changed. From then, there was to be a term of five years with a maximum possible extension of three.

This new ruling gave the Regional President, Bert Thomas, the unenviable task of advising Reg Buck that, after 33 years, he'd more than adequately served as president and it was now time to retire. He then visited Hugh, asking him to take on the job of conference president which he undertook, later completing the full five years plus three-year extension.

Hugh acknowledges the great contribution of Reg Buck. In his working life, Reg was Advertising Manager for the Bendigo Advertiser:

He was an extraordinary man, involved in many things and did much good. All the itinerant travellers would go to Reg and he would find a way to assist them. One of our Conference members, Mick Lalor, was the Bendigo stationmaster and Reg would often send them up to Mick who would frequently find them a job somewhere.

When Hugh took on the role of Conference President, the conference was doing much useful and practical work, largely relating to types of material relief. Hugh encouraged conference members to conduct home visits in line with the foundational example of Frederic Ozanam and the tradition of personal service.

Mostly in those early days, people had wood fires so members often started a home visit by chopping some wood. Hugh remembers one elderly lady complained he wasn't chopping the kindling finely enough:

I had to pick up my game there!

President, Diocesan Central Council of Sandhurst and member, State Council

Hugh has a history of never seeking jobs but mostly accepting those offered to him. As with the way he became conference president, this was also what happened as Diocesan President.

In 1966, Bert Thomas, who was, in addition to being President of the Bendigo Regional Council was also President of the Diocesan Council of Sandhurst, passed away leaving both positions vacant.

At this time, the Diocese had three Regional Councils and 14 conferences.

Hugh had a visit from Stan D'Altera, the Society's Executive Officer at that time. He asked Hugh, could he recommend anyone for Diocesan President? In almost the same breath, he suggested Hugh take on the job which he accepted. This offer was later ratified by State Council.

Hugh's approach to any new position was always to find his feet and build his own role:

Hugh's approach to any new position was always to find his feet and build his own role.

I set up a Diocesan Council and, to get to know the area and the Society members, undertook a visitation program initially by attending the four annual festival meetings of the three regions and keeping in touch with people. As one of the first appointees, and at a time of major development of Centres, Fred Burgess undertook the role of Diocesan Centres officer, later becoming President of the Diocesan Centres Board for many years. He was followed in this position by Bill Gearon who also occupied the position for many years.

In his time in this role, from 1966 to 1974, the number of conferences in the diocese increased with Hugh overseeing the development of an additional fourteen parish conferences and the establishment of several new centres. It was a hectic time. On one occasion, Hugh finished work around 5.30pm and then drove to Beechworth for a meeting, arriving back home at around 3am.

Even with all the executive roles Hugh has held, he sees himself first and foremost as “just a conference member”, here to do God's work as his humble servant.

Society's limited finances

The 1960s were the days before the Society had many well established centres and the sources of income were pretty thin. In Bendigo, conferences mainly relied on what was contributed in the secret collection, the poor box and receipts from the Society Waste Products Committee. Vin Fitzgerald, another man Hugh hails as ‘magnificent’, ran the Society Waste Products Committee in Bendigo. Through collecting and selling bottles and papers, they made some additional money. The emphasis was still very much on the spiritual element of Society work. They were only starting to turn their minds to revenue raising possibilities.

Bill Burton-Clay, another Conference member Hugh also describes as ‘magnificent’, was very involved in many aspects of Society life, was a probation officer and a Justice of the Peace. He wrote a report on future financing, taking a big picture, long term view.

The late 1960s/1970s was when the development of the ‘Centres of Charity’ across Victoria began in earnest under the extraordinary input and guidance of State Council member, Jim Carroll. In the Sandhurst Diocese, Echuca and Shepparton had already commenced operating op shops which later came under the banner of the Society Centres of Charity:

Prior to the 60's Bendigo conferences each had what was referred to as the conference cupboard.

Prior to the 60's Bendigo conferences each had what was referred to as the conference cupboard. It was a less than satisfactory arrangement. In the case of St Kilian's, we had a room which was chocablock full of clothes just dumped there. Trying to find something specific for someone in need was difficult.

Bendigo Regional Council combined the efforts of conferences to develop a Centre of Charity in Bendigo. Their first attempt, under the guidance of Vin Fitzgerald, was in space they rented in the basement of the Princess Theatre in View Street.

The members of the ladies' branches offered their help with all aspects of the daily running of the Centre, with sorting, pricing and serving at the counter. This then meant that clothing was better displayed and it was much easier to assist people with their individual needs.



Cushing family (l-r), Stephen, David, Jenny, Peter, Maree, Hugh and Frances

The desire to improve on this built, with a final decision taken to purchase a property in McCrae Street:

In effect, we took a punt. One of my uncles was an unofficial financial adviser to the Bishop and used his influence. The Bishop undertook to go guarantor and the NAB came through with a loan. It was a long, narrow shop and we expanded, buying the one next door and then Dalgety's in the lane way behind. The punt paid off and we were able to service the loan.

In the 1980s, the Bendigo TAFE was expanding and the Society sold the premises to the TAFE. Bendigo Regional

Council then bought a former cordial factory on the corner of Chapel and Hopetoun Streets and developed this into a very attractive and viable Centre of Charity which included the trading operation and a focal point for receiving requests for assistance.

In later years, a separate dedicated Assistance Centre, under the guidance of Regional Council President, Vin Ketterer, was added to the site, staffed by conference members five days per week.

Over time, Centres of Charity were also established at Eaglehawk, Castlemaine and Kangaroo Flat.

During 1976 and 1987, Society records that Hugh took a sabbatical from St Kilian's Conference. However, he was still providing some support to the then Diocese of Sandhurst Centres president, Fred Burgess, attending some Diocesan Centres' meetings and acting as Minutes Secretary to this committee.

Joining White Hills Conference

In 1988, Hugh returned to conference life, this time as a member of Our Lady of the Rosary Conference, White Hills.

The conference has approximately 12 active members. Jim and Helen, two members, drop around to collect a cheque while the interview is going on. The easy rapport and respect each conference member has for each other is apparent.

When asked to discuss individual casework, Hugh takes a few moments. He has such a developed capacity of not judging that he sees the people the conference helps as unique in their own ways, with different issues and different capacity to cope; they vary greatly but he doesn't tend to dwell on particulars:

As a conference member, I know what I need to do. I need to help people some way. Everybody's different and you just do what you can do and then you leave the rest to God.

Pressed, Hugh recounts certain stories and reflects on the nature of conference work:

The essential always is to ensure the preservation of the dignity of those in need who seek our help.

Affordable housing is an ongoing critical concern; many people cannot afford the rent and the lower cost options are in short supply.

Hugh sees that some needs remain; others change or are now more out in the open. Affordable housing is an ongoing critical concern; many people cannot afford the rent and the lower cost options are in short supply. Even caravan parks, not an ideal option, are not as available anymore. There are still some substandard rooming houses operating though. Bendigo is fortunate to have a wonderful community housing provider called Haven; Home, Safe, previously known as Loddon Mallee Housing. Their workers are creative in responding

to needs. Hugh recalls the occasion when, with all available accommodation full, Loddon Mallee Housing bought a tent for a family to camp in as the only solution to their immediate needs.

The Conference is ever vigilant in managing its funds reasonably well. They are sometimes challenged by individual requests. They can't become overly anxious about every single case. Hugh stands by his belief that if conference members are doing the work to their best ability, then they must leave the rest to the Lord:

If people try to occasionally misuse the system, that's their problem not ours. The important thing is to always seek to be non-judgemental. However, there may be the odd occasion where it is more helpful to not provide the help requested as was the situation with a young woman on Centrelink payments. She was paying rent of \$230 and wanted help with the rent and the bond to take out a 6-month lease on another property in a better area where the rent would be \$330 per week.

Usually the visiting conference members are able to make decisions on the spot unless difficult cases like these go to the conference meeting for discussion.

Hugh is relieved that domestic violence is less of a hidden problem; being more out in the open will hopefully lead to people speaking out about it and better solutions.

Utility bills and generally, the cost of living has risen. This puts people under increased pressure. The Conference has started advocating on behalf of people regarding payment arrangements. It is a new skill they have been learning over the last few years.

Sometimes, they come across people who need considerable assistance, more than what is usually provided. The Conference has been supporting a woman who has multiple sclerosis. Her health has been gradually deteriorating and she is now bedridden.

This was an exceptional case. The Conference helped with household bills as her husband had to give up work and become a fulltime carer. There was no spare money so the case was put to Bendigo Regional Council who provided \$15,000 from funds received from bequests. This enabled the family to refurbish the house and provide a degree of freedom and comfort while this woman could still move around.

Hugh is also concerned for the women with children, too often being left to manage somehow on their own but with great difficulty.

People have different needs and different issues; you get all sorts. There are some people the conference has seen for twenty or more years and they come back when they need help.

Hugh is a stickler that the Society's way is to visit people in need in their homes. This he believes is the best personal contact and mirrors the example of Ozanam.

You can be more helpful in their homes. It's their castle. You're there as a friend, a servant if you will.

Valued Office Bearer

Over the years, Hugh has taken on a number of key Society office positions. In 1991, at the request of Bill Gearon, retiring President, Diocese of Sandhurst Centres Committee, Hugh was appointed to that position and remained until the position was removed from the Society's organisational structure.

In 1993, Hugh was then appointed to the position of Secretary of the State Centres Committee by State Centres President, Brian Lenten.

In 1999, Hugh was asked by Regional Council President, Gary Frilay, to Chair the Bendigo Centre Committee, a position which lasted for the duration of the Regional Council President's term.

In 2002, then Regional Council President, Brian Lenten, asked Hugh to undertake the task of treasurer of that Council. This position was held for two terms of office.

During this period he was part of the management team of the Bendigo Assistance Centre with Pat McCarthy and Gary Frilay and was on the roster for one day per week to conduct interviews with those seeking help.

Hugh feels privileged to be a member of White Hills Conference and grateful for the enduring friendship and comradeship which prevails among all members.

These days, with other members doing more work with home visitation and sharing the work load at the Bendigo Assistance Centre, continuing as Secretary/Treasurer is an opportunity for Hugh to contribute to the overall work.

Hugh is particularly grateful to Conference President, Len Gaskell, who proposed him for this recognition and to the Conference members who supported the proposal.

Knights of the Southern Cross

In tandem with Hugh's Society involvement, another great passion involves his work with the Knights of the Southern Cross.

In keeping with the normal order of how Hugh came to become involved in most things, in 1962, Bill Burtonclay visited him at work and mentioned that the Knights would like him to join them. Hugh of course, said yes.

Back then, it was an organisation veiled in secrecy; most members' wives did not know of their husbands'



Hugh (l) and other Knights of the Southern Cross, Piscatorial Retreat, Barmah, 2013.

involvement. There was a view then that to be effective in fighting discrimination against Catholics, particularly in the workforce, it had to be secretive.

Hugh has remained involved for more than fifty years and was recently awarded life membership.

This organisation has changed dramatically over the years. It is now very open and it publicises its activities and endeavours as much as possible.

Hugh is particularly proud of its initiative in Bendigo to provide ongoing support of the Gianna Family Education & Pregnancy Advice Centre. The Knights also assist many individuals through a Community Welfare program as well as assisting church and community groups and the clergy.

Conclusion

Hugh's story demonstrates the power when many good people act in a unified manner to improve a person's circumstances. Actions speak louder than words and he has chosen to be an active do-er all his life.

As Hugh says:

It's never one person ... it's we as a team so all you can talk about really is "we" as a conference, our conference members do this, our conference members seek that, not 'me' and it is actually a bit scary when it becomes about me because then you can lose it. It's only when you think outside yourself that you can actually achieve anything.

Hugh has made thinking outside of himself a pattern for his life. After 65 years as a conference member, he looks to the future and what more can be done but he holds dear the fundamental elements of Frederic Ozanam's way such as home visits and remaining committed to the spiritual basis of the Society.

He recalls the story about Ozanam in his debating group when one of the opposing team challenged him with the proposition that 'you Christians used to do great things, but where are your works today?' This was the challenge which motivated Frederick, while still studying as a student at the Sorbonne, to undertake the process of founding the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

To be a good Christian, to be a good conference member, you must do good works. Hugh has lived by this message his entire life.



Frances and Hugh Cushing.

1951-1960	Member, Sacred Heart Conference, Casterton
1961-1975	Member, St Kilian's Conference, Bendigo
1964-1972	Conference President
1968-1975	President, Diocesan Central Council of Sandhurst and member, State Council.
1976-1987	Sabbatical.
1988-	Member, Our Lady of the Rosary Conference, White Hills.
1991-1992	President, Diocese of Sandhurst Centres Committee.
1993-1996	Secretary, State Centre's Committee
1999-2002	President, Bendigo Centre Committee.
2002-2009	Treasurer, Bendigo Regional Council.
2005-	Secretary/Treasurer, Our Lady of the Rosary Conference



Jack Daffy

Around the kitchen table

There is something about country upbringings, hard times and resilience that make special Vincentians. Warrnambool's Jack Daffy is one of this breed. He knows just about everybody in his town, having been a probation officer, a funeral director, justice of the peace, bail justice, councillor and mayor as well as an active conference member for over fifty years. He learned a great deal about life through the dying business and credits sitting around the kitchen table with people many times for giving him a keen understanding of people and their needs. This is Jack's story.

Jack Daffy was born in Colac in 1932, not an easy time to come into the world. He had two brothers and parents who were share farmers. Jack and his brothers helped out with milking and with no neighbours nearby, were good at making their own fun.

There was never any money but the family always managed somehow to get by. Jack's early years were punctuated by many moves as his parents chased opportunities where there were more cows to milk and a better milk cheque. Jack attended six schools in eight years. The names of these school towns evoke a rich rural romanticism — Colac, Purnim, Naringal, Woodford, Wangoom — but life was no bed of roses. Jack learned a great deal about tough times that he would carry with him throughout his life.

Not one for school, he left the day he was eligible, his fourteenth birthday, and worked on farms. When he was 16, his father and four other men were killed in a car accident on the outskirts of Warrnambool:

My brothers had gone their own way, Mum was not up to much anymore, so I milked the cows myself. I was very much on my own. In 1949, I then went to another farm and ended up staying there for five years.

The man running this particular farm happened to be a

registered bookmaker and Jack became his bookie's clerk. The farm work mainly involved clearing bush. When it was too wet to work outside, Jack accompanied the part-time farmer to race meetings and in this way learned the ropes.

It was to become a lifelong interest with Jack working as a bookie's clerk for over 40 years. He has also bred greyhounds. He concedes that he never did any good on the bets and subscribes to the widely held view that it is a mug's game.

Meeting Margaret and family

In 1954, Jack first met his wife-to-be when she came to Warrnambool from Bendigo with some friends for a holiday. She stayed in private accommodation run by the mother of Jack's bookmaking mate. That mother had lost a son and grandson in the same car crash that killed Jack's father.

Margaret came back a few months' later for a break and this was when she and Jack hit it off.

On May 28th 1955, a year later, they were married at St Liborius, Eaglehawk. Jack was unable to attend the only race meeting he would miss in 17 years. Jack describes his wedding day as a day that changed his life. He would experience much encouragement and support from Margaret from that day forward.



Jack, Margaret and family.

Margaret and Jack went on to raise a large family of 4 girls and 5 boys: Gerard, Peter, Theresa, Bernard, Paul, Michael, Catherine, Loretta, Elizabeth. Seven children still live in Warrnambool. There are also now 13 grandchildren.

Jack and Margaret remained in their first home in Merri St for forty years, moving to their current home 12 years ago. After they sold their old place, Jack explains matter-of-factly, it was burnt down by a nine year old.

Jack describes Margaret as easy going. She took things in her stride — a useful outlook with so many children — and nothing ever bothered her.

She stayed home while the kids were young, which freed Jack to pursue his community interests. Later on, she volunteered as a tour guide on Flagstaff Hill, which she continued to do for 16 years. Marg died in March 2015.

A career in funerals

During this time, Jack also worked at the woollen mills and then in 1959 moved into the funeral director's business, working with Warrnambool firm, Guyetts. He would remain there for 43 years. Guyetts was an old firm, originally from Port Fairy. It was not a Catholic firm, which also meant that Jack's networks expanded broadly across the community.

Jack took to this work comfortably:

I always remember the wisdom of a Lutheran minister who was often doing funerals, particularly for the German community of Warrnambool. One day he referred to the three death notices in the daily paper: a baby, a 21 year old and a 93 year old. 'The old must die and the young might die.' I've always subscribed to that.

He compares the dying industry then to now. Then, there was never any debriefing for funeral staff after a traumatic death. Everyone just got on with the job.

A significant difference in funerals in the old days from today

was that, more often than not, the funeral directors went to people's homes. Today it is more common for the family to come to the funeral parlour. This was a useful, early lesson for his future work with the Society:

There's nothing better than sitting around a kitchen table. It was there that I learned a certain amount about informality in a personal setting. It's very immediate and open.

Jack learned early the value of not only empathy but also a sense of humour:

Humour is a great comfort in times of distress and breaks the tension. It is a great way to connect with people even in hard times. Everyone relaxes a bit. It has helped me too.

The night Margaret died, a Vinnies conference member came around to be with Jack. They sat around the table as the funeral directors talked to Jack about funeral details. They asked Jack what flowers he would like and his confrere piped up saying: 'This miserable old bastard will probably only want cauliflowers'. It was the kind of off-the-cuff comment that provided comfort in Jack's grief.

Jack also recognises he was fortunate that over the years he met so many people through the funeral business. Even today he bumps into people up the street and can remember them from those days.

A new role: Probation Officer

In the sixties, there were very few community or government services in Warrnambool. Most were in Geelong or Hamilton. In 1964, Jack was at a funeral conducted by a Presbyterian minister who advised Jack he was leaving Warrnambool the following week:

He told me he was supervising four kids on probation and I'd be looking after them from then on.

Jack literally fell into a role he knew very little about. Two of the four on the probation team were Society members:

I don't know how I came to be appointed to this role. I had no experience. Between the four of us, we looked after the kids. I was the least qualified, no good at writing and we had to write reports. Margaret would help with this. I'd dictate and Margaret wrote the reports for the magistrate.

Now deceased Vincentian Elizabeth Bond, writes about the involvement of the Society in probationary work, particularly in the 1960s. This work filled a vital gap for many years but has been phased out over time, possibly due to the growing professionalization of welfare work from the late 1980s. In 1960, the Melbourne Catholic Archdiocese had over 100 probationary officers and, in 1962, the Society had 95 honorary probationary officers in the Archdiocese and a number in the country. Many of these officers also did prison visitation, so it was a valuable overlap on the youth justice continuum.

The Probation role was significant work – ground-breaking really.

Jack was aware how many times the young people, mainly boys, referred to him by the courts did not have a home to go to. In another valuable addition, Jack was also to become a Justice of the Peace and, later, a Bail Justice for a number of years in the 1990s. He recalls there were times he arranged for young people to be locked up for a few nights. At least then he knew they were safe and there was a good chance they would use this time to rethink their actions.

The Probation role was significant work – ground-breaking really – and another example of the Victorian Society not being fazed by a lack of specialist expertise. The members accepted they would learn as they went along and their faith spurred them on to embrace new challenges.

The issue of a lack of secure homes led the Society in 1969 to open Mater Dei hostel for boys in Blackburn. Boys were referred there, finding some kind of work and paying board. In this way, they built a sense of independence, purpose and self-respect. A second hostel in Springvale, Forsythe House, was also opened. Both hostels provided unit-type accommodation with, on average, five young boys staying at any one time. This is an example of the Society's far-reaching vision. It is a gap that is not fully addressed today, with many people ending up in remand for lengthy periods simply because they do not have a fixed address and have been let down by a social-service system with many gaps.

Joining the Conference

After a couple of years, one of the Society's probation officers, Tony O'Hurley, told me I'd better join the St Vinnies mob, as part of their mission then was probation and prison visitation. So it was really through probation work that I joined St Joseph's Conference and it went on from there.

Conference meetings were Friday nights at St Joseph's Church so Jack wasn't a very regular attender. There was always a dog or trots meeting on then.

Jack believes the time spent around the kitchen table with grieving loved ones was good preparation to become a Vincentian. He was very comfortable doing home visits and found there was considerable crossover between the families he met through probation, funeral work and Vinnies.

Jack is wary of quick fixes, particularly agencies that spend little time with people and send them on their way. He knows the value of sitting down with people in their own

He knows the value of sitting down with people in their own environment and working out what they really need.

environment and working out what they really need. He fears that if we don't spend time with people, we will lose touch which is what the Society is on about:

Even if it is only reminiscing about something of their past you know about, it's a valuable connection and helps to break down the divide. I learnt this through the probation work and bail applications. You meet them in other circumstances. For example, one chap told me about burying his mother, then his father and then his grandparent; what a good fella he was. And I said: 'But you still belted your missus'. Knowing a bit of their background always helps when you visit.

After so many years of Society involvement, Jack has home visits down pat. He believes visiting in pairs is perfect: one does the talking, the other the observing. Jack always checks if the people they are visiting are recent arrivals to the area, if they have a health care card and are getting entitlements such as power discounts.

He is a firm believer in the importance of meeting people in their own homes. Interviewing them anywhere else is always a second-class option:

You pick up a great deal more about people's circumstances from being in their kitchen than interviewing them at the centre.

Jack has for many years gone out on visits with Brian Earnshaw, retired Ministry of Housing employee who did property purchasing. Jack has learned a great deal about public housing through Brian.

Jack recognises they do see some people over a very long period of time. It can be hard to find solutions to entrenched problems. He believes that ultimately some are beyond help due to drugs and compounding issues.

His conference still has a very busy visiting schedule. As an example, in May 2016, the conference conducted 220 visits, of which 210 were in homes.

The changing nature of conference work

Jack has spent considerable time delving into old minutes of the Conference and, coupled with a remarkable memory, he is in effect its unofficial historian. He is able to provide an interesting account of its development, both its commitment to conventional works and its embrace of new areas of need.

St Joseph's is a relatively old conference, established 5 July 1942. Due to the war, it was a small conference in terms of manpower. In the late 1940s, it went into abeyance, reforming in 1952. It had the same president from 1952 to 1966 but never again in its history has the same person been president twice.

Jack notes that there are two families from those early days who were still receiving assistance in 1998. While names are never mentioned, he believes many of the fundamentals of why people need the Vinnies' support remain the same. There are common stories: people never have money or through

ill fortune lose money, struggle with work, are never able to put money aside so are always subsisting on next to nothing, and this becomes a pattern. He sees variations of this refrain repeated regularly.

In the old days, people accepted what they were given and, admittedly, it wasn't always leading to a more dignified existence. Subsistence living is a term that comes to mind often as Jack describes the way things were:

The food parcels comprised whatever could be bought cheaply. Now it's a better system, giving people a food voucher and allowing them to make their own choice.

The Conference still hands out food parcels, usually sourced from Food Share. Jack sees it as a necessary tool in the Vinnies tool box but, again, what is provided is not always suitable:

I remember giving one to a 20-year-old Indigenous lad living on his own. There were 5 loaves of bread, 12 bread rolls, 7 onions, some sweet potatoes and leeks. There's no way known he'd use it. Ten cans of baked beans would have been more useful and nutritious for him.

The minutes record some interesting interventions by the Conference and act as a social barometer of the times. The minutes for August 8, 1944 note that a man with TB needed to travel to Melbourne to attend a clinic but was not permitted on the train except in the guard's van. The Society paid ten shillings for the fare. This man happened to be the only one of six who survived the car accident involving Jack's father. Again in Warrnambool, there are always crossovers for Jack.

In 1956, conference members started visiting Corio Men's Home, shaving the men and giving them haircuts. Jack recalls that if long term member, Cyril Rowe, now deceased, gave the haircut, the recipient would not need another for several months. He took buzz cuts to an extreme level.

Warrnambool's Mental Hospital opened in the late 1950s and would grow to have over 200 patients. Jack's funeral parlour had the government contract for burials. The stigma surrounding these places then meant that families tended to stay away and rarely if ever visited patients. For Jack, he was struck that, at these funerals, there was hardly ever anyone there to mark the occasion of a person's death:

We started sending a car to pick up 4 or 5 of the most able patients to attend and afterwards we'd take them for a drive before taking them back.

Jack started to think more broadly about the absence of people in these patients' lives. There was no reason the Conference couldn't arrange for visitors to the hospital on a longer term basis.

So the Society became involved. It was common then with visits to institutions occurring on a Sunday that members would take patients a few cigarettes, some lollies and a book to read. Jack urged them to do more and follow through. The Conference minutes record that members started attending



Jack worked in the funeral business for many years.

the funerals, paying for them on occasion when families were struggling, and sometimes being coffin bearers. This desire to do more and fill a gap developed into a community visitors program, which continued until the hospital was decommissioned in 1996.

In the 1960s, Jack recalls that members sold Catholic literature at the church. The minutes record that they averaged sales of 300 newspapers every Sunday:

Nowadays we'd be flat out giving three away! We leave The Record and other publications at the Vinnies Centre but we need to do more to spread the word and help people understand what the Society does.

There are many stories Jack remembers and, often, there is an intersect between different parts of his community involvement. He recalls in the 1960s two Conference members he describes as 'dyed in the wool Vinnies' visited a man on a Saturday. The place was a pigsty so they went back the following weekend with brooms and cloths to clean it up. The man was very put out. They told him to go to the doctor, visit the priest and pray for a happy death and gave him rosary beads:

You wouldn't get away with delivering the same sort of message to someone today, would you!

Upset as the man was, he left the Society 400 pounds. He was buried at Warrnambool cemetery and Jack discovered there was no marker on the grave. He had no family. Jack talked the stone mason into putting a concrete block there for a stone marker:

I'm not sure this man would have appreciated that we spent \$140 to buy a plaque but I felt he should have been acknowledged in some way.

In 1966, the much loved and respected prison chaplain, Fr John Brosnan, asked the conference to visit the prison farm, now no longer operating, at Cooriemungle near Timboon. This was a special work St Joseph's took on for a number of years.

These are just a few of the insights Jack shared as an indication of the 'can do' attitude over the years of a small yet vibrant conference membership.



Jack with former State President, Syd Tutton.

Initiatives were not all locally focused. The Conference often supported causes such as bushfires and Darwin's Cyclone Tracy Appeal. Jack was particularly able to garner support as mayor with public appeals and, in turn, the Society was heavily involved. There were many times Jack wore both hats to good effect.

The Conference currently has 16 members, five of whom are women. This is a relatively new phenomenon for St Joseph's, as women members were only admitted in the last ten years. Jack counts the Conference as lucky indeed that 3-4 members are under 60.

Jack recognises that it is difficult to encourage people to become members. He believes one problem lies in regional meetings now being held at inappropriate times:

We used to meet on Sundays, which people could manage. Now it's mid-week, which is no good. We only get the old, retired people attending.

The Conference has had some feisty moments too. At one stage, there was a rumour the Society's Melbourne office was intent on redrawing boundaries, which would see a western council extending all the way to Altona. A Conference member suggested they could dash this plan by joining up with Casterton:

The old minute books don't tell you much as there is a veil of secrecy around naming people but, when you've been around as long as I have, I can usually work out who's done what.

The Society's Glenelg Council today includes three Warrnambool conferences. As well, it has Hamilton; Casterton; Koroit and Port Fairy.

A thriving Centre

In his time as Regional Council President, Jack oversaw the major upgrade and renovation of the Fairy Street Centre. The decision to convert two shops into one centre has made it a very pleasant browsing and retail experience. It is a thriving business for the Vinnies.

Bail Justice

In the 1960s, Warrnambool did not have any magistrates and there was a heavy reliance on Justices of the Peace and, later, Bail Justices. In his fourteen years as one between 1990-2004, Jack made over 2,000 bail applications and most of them were at night:

We had a women's refuge but that was about it in terms of services. Nowadays it's easier, with places like Brophy Youth Services operating in the area.

If it was the third breach of an intervention order, people were locked up. Jack reckons a couple of nights in the police cells makes them realise it's not the best place to be. Sometimes it was also the safest option available, like the time he put an aboriginal girl in police custody as no one would take her on bail:

Even my kids would come across people who would ask if I was their father. One young woman asked that they thank me as her life turned a corner after she was placed in custody.

The house that Jack built

In the mid-1970s, a house was left to the Warrnambool Conference. It was an ordinary place, weatherboards on stumps and out of square. Later, the Conference bought the house next door. In 1989, Jack suggested the old weatherboard place needed to be demolished. In its place was built a four-bedroom brick house. The Society in Melbourne wanted Melbourne architects to be engaged but Jack insisted a local be employed. This architect did not charge a design fee. The house was completed for a very economical price of \$112,000.

The Conference sold the neighbouring home for \$80,000 and the proceeds went towards the new build. Including other donations – all local – the Conference only needed to borrow \$12,000 from the Bishop's Fund, which they paid back promptly.

The house has been designed with disability access and can accommodate up to eight people at a time.

The house is available for use by people referred by conferences or by community organisations. In the beginning, any applications to stay were made in writing and it was a tedious procedure. Jack took over, simplifying the system, and continues today, managing the bookings over the phone. The Conference provides everything other than food. Sometimes people fail to appear, which is disappointing, but overall they maintain high occupancy:

We need to keep the house full. We aim for 48 weeks occupancy. If it's a welfare organisation, we accept them. We've had Mackillop, Mirabella, Wimmera Services, Salvos, Anglicare, SIDs make referrals.

Joining Warrnambool Council

Becoming a councillor was not something Jack ever contemplated. He recalls that there were a couple of local issues where he attended meetings that potentially piqued his interest in council affairs. One was about the state of the significant landmark, Flagstaff Hill. The fences were in disrepair and cows were entering the site. The other involved a proposal to build new offices in the middle of the highway, which Jack did not support.

In 1968, in an unusual show of support for a Catholic, but also another indication of Jack’s broadly based network, it was the Masonic Lodge that approached Jack, telling him they had decided to back him at the next Council election instead of a longstanding councillor. Guyetts Funeral Parlour also encouraged him to stand.

So that’s how I stood for Council. I felt very supported by many organisations as a councillor and in my various charity roles. The Lodge was a supporter of the conference, consistently giving generous donations over the years.

It was another role in which Jack’s broad network benefitted him. As he puts it, he always felt he had a run-up start when it came to meeting with people over a particular council issue. At the same time, being a councillor would also be a role that continued to expand his network.

Jack would go on to serve for a number of periods as a councillor until 2008, a total of 24 years. He was mayor from 1973-1976. His involvement on many committees is a testament to both the broad range of issues he embraced but also the kinds of people and agencies he was instrumental in developing and supporting.

A significant contribution was to the Yalundah Day Centre (1970-1990). Jack first became involved after attending a Yalundah training service. He kept being asked to attend other events and eventually attended an annual meeting. He joined the committee and discovered there were a few problems. The committee of ten comprised five members of one family with no family members as clients of the service. They voted as a bloc. In 1976, Jack was appointed chair of the committee and, slowly, the previous resistance to change shifted. The service divided into a training centre and a special development school. Today, there are 130 people enrolled in the school and 170 people receiving training and employment services and being cared for. This is quite a feat for what was initially a very small organisation.

Jack gains enormous satisfaction from seeing a number of Yalundah’s clients mowing lawns as part of a business that has provided employment.

Jack received an OAM in 1998 for services to this group of people in the Warrnambool community.

Conclusion

Vincentians like Jack Daffy offer a breadth of knowledge and insight and live out in very practical ways the adage of: ‘You have to know where you came from, to know where you’re going’. Knowing a great deal about where others have come from has also always given him a head start in the range of charity work that has been a major part of his life.



Jack in his mayoral robes.

The scope of Jack’s contributions and their breadth are staggering. Another adage comes to mind: ‘If you want a job done well, give it to a busy person’. His Conference friends attest to his practical way of always getting on with whatever tasks need to be done, with a great deal of compassion. They consider that Jack epitomises the spirit of Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

Even at 83 years of age, he still devotes several days every week to the Society and is always ever present for his large family.

Perhaps the key has always been the invisible line between work, charity and personal interests: Jack does not really discriminate. Each area overlaps and he has always thrown himself into any new task with gusto, commitment and staying power. His story is yet another in the long list of Vincentians who find their Society and community roles are ultimately a driving force that keeps them going.

1964-1977	Probation Officer
1967	Joined Warrnambool St Joseph’s Conference
1998	Conference President
2003-	Acting President, Glenelg Regional Council
2007-	Coordinator, Society’s Warrnambool holiday house



Dick Pepper

17/8/1931 - 24/9/2015

Always find the right person for the job

Some people fit a great deal into a life, others look back on what might have been. Dick Pepper belongs emphatically in the first category. An ability to identify opportunities, do the necessary groundwork and always involve the right people were key features of Dick. These ways enabled a life of great achievement and adventure.

Arriving at retirement age in Bairnsdale, Dick put his skills to work for the Society. A new idea was always followed through with fervour unless Dick realised it was a dud. Then he'd move on quickly to the next one. Not one for sentimentality or small talk, he was a man of great faith. Actions spoke louder than words and everyone recalled of his loving, non-judgemental way with people and generosity of heart. The business acumen and far reaching vision he brought to Bairnsdale and the wider Society will continue to reap benefits and stand the test of time.

Here, Norma, Dick's wife of 60 years, a number of Conference members and others, outline Dick's life, sharing family details and stories. There is admiration, respect- mirth at times, sometimes sadness. This is Dick's story.

Richard John Pepper was born in 1931 in Cowra New South Wales to Dorothy and Ian Hamilton, a shopkeeper. He was the eldest of five children.

His home had been in the family for several generations and is still standing, its heritage preserved and now operating as a fine restaurant.

During the war, the family looked after Uncle Norm's farm at Gooloogong, a short distance from Cowra, while Norm was away at war.

Dick rode his bike into town to St Malachy's school, Gooloogong. He was an altar boy at St Malachy's Catholic Church. The Pepper family were of strong Catholic faith

and today, visitors can see the beautiful baptismal font with the angel's wings which the Pepper family presented to the church.

Cowra has a flat and undulating terrain and produces mainly cattle, sheep, cereal and vegetables. It responds to the climate, seasons and time-honoured farming ways in a consistent pattern so it is surprising to discover the town's history contains a fair share of drama and excitement. In the 1920s, two young dare devil pilots flew a plane under the Cowra bridge, narrowly missing electrical wires and certain death. The pilot was famous aviator, Sir Charles Kingsford Smith.

When Dick was 13 years of age, Cowra was the setting for the largest military prisoner of war (POWs) breakout in

modern military history. In 1944, more than 500 mainly captured Japanese and Italian military personnel attempted a mass breakout from Cowra's detention camp. More than 200 POWs were killed as well as several Australian guards. It was an event that Dick often talked about.

As a child, Dick suffered from dyslexia and received a hard time from an ignorant and unsympathetic teacher. Like most in those days, this teacher neither understood the syndrome or had any idea how to respond to Dick's learning needs. As a consequence, school was an experience where Dick was subjected to labelling that suggested a lack of intellectual capacity. Dick's wife Norma reflects that while Dick rarely spoke about it, there were painful childhood memories seared into his memory:

People who had dyslexia then were looked down upon. Dick was treated like an idiot. Good teachers now who know what they are doing.

Meeting Norma

Dick's sister's best friend was Norma Leahey. Norma's uncle had a large general store in Orange and after the war, opened a furniture store. Dick started working there where Norma also worked as a furniture buyer. Norma recalls that it wasn't an instant attraction; more a slow warming to each other that would develop into a deep, life-long love.

Norma went overseas to study interior decoration at the London Polytechnic College and increase her knowledge of the products available abroad. She remembers the gorgeous fabrics she came across and the Irish carpets. She remained overseas for several years and worked for a time at Harrods. Throughout this separation period, Norma and Dick corresponded.

Joining the air force, jobs on the side and settling in Darwin

In 1951, Dick joined the R.A.A.F, serving at Wagga Wagga, Cocos Islands and Darwin. During this time, never shy of earning a few extra quid, he would turn his hand to other jobs.

In Darwin, Dick was able to develop his entrepreneurial spirit, taking on a number of ventures. He purchased Colman's Service Station, operated a wrecking yard and did some spray painting.

His commanding officer asked Dick to spray his car. To save money, Dick bought cheap tape. When he came to remove it, it wouldn't come off. He had to use solvent and do the car again.

In 1954, he formed a partnership and took over Darwin's Auto Wreckers. The business also had the franchise for land rovers. This was where Dick's interest in stock car racing began. He would become the founding member of the Darwin Stock Car Club.

Dick always kept the Church as a central motivation in his life.

In Darwin as in later years, Dick always kept the Church as a central motivation in his life. He was involved in St Vincent de Paul Society, supported the Catholic school and probably more significantly, through his friendship and respect for Bishop Ted Collins, was very engaged in the Aboriginal Missions.

He was civically minded too, supporting the Darwin Show, St John's Ambulance, Darwin University, the local velodrome and pony club. His energy was boundless and he always thrived the more challenges before him.

Marrying Norma

Norma came from a Catholic and High Church of England background but was not raised a Catholic. She remembers the societal prejudice and divide that existed back then between Catholics and Protestants and wonders why it had to be that way.

Norma and Dick remained constantly in contact through letter writing and Norma had a strong feeling he was the one for her. There was always a deep respect and a shared humour which would see them travel well through their lives. They married shortly after she returned to Australia on 27 October 1957, at Darwin's old Catholic Church:

I'm three years older than Dick. He always said he took me off the shelf!

The Pepper family were not bothered by this intermarriage and Norma remembers the family as warmly welcoming. Both Dick and Norma grew up with mothers who were great cooks. This legacy of wonderful hospitality would be a feature of Dick and Norma's life.

Starting a life in Darwin must have been confronting for many from the southern states but Norma and Dick saw it all as an adventure.

The RAAF did not provide a home on the base for Dick and Norma so they had to find their own accommodation. They moved into a big shed with a dirt floor and chicken wire.

One night, a big storm rolled the roof right back. Dick and his mates put the tin back on and covered it in tar and sand to keep it fixed. Norma laughs recalling this occasion:



Norma and Dick on their wedding day.

The first hot day, drip, drip, drip. Good thing it had a dirt floor. Really, it was loads of fun for a young couple and young kids.

Dick was discharged from the RAAF in 1957.

In 1958, first child Lesley arrived followed by Jennifer two years later, Michael in 1962 and Richard in 1964.

Borrooloola outback community



(l-r): Jennifer, Michael, Lesley and Richard Pepper, Borrooloola, 1967.

In the top end of the gulf country, Northern Territory, on the McArthur River is a little settlement. In the 1960s, it was home to a large aboriginal community and welfare centre, known as Borrooloola. There's not much there and it's pretty much the middle of nowhere. It's a town in a very loose sense of the word.

Dick and family arrived in March 1964, to operate the Gulf Trading Company, a cattle and stores cartage business, in partnership with another family. It was run from a big red shed. Dick and Norma also operated the general store, pub and a small motel. These buildings were just about the sum of the place.

The highlight of the Borrooloola calendar was the annual horse race. Attendees flew in from all over Australia. Norma and Dick were very involved in organising this and doing the catering. They decided one year preparing for the race festivities that they would spruce up the big red shed with a lick of paint that was ordered from Darwin. When the wrong colour was sent up, they christened the shed 'The Pink Pussycat.'

There were many characters up there, many wore wide-brimmed hats and hung around drinking beer. It had a bush pub in the finest tradition of real outback Australia. Stockmen

There were many characters up there, many wore wide-brimmed hats and hung around drinking beer.

dropped by for short stays and then mounted their horses and rode off, silhouettes against the red of the evening sky. People waiting for a lift out of there to anywhere were common. There was a community of approximately 500 Aborigines. There were also hermits in the early days.

When the aborigines came in to buy grog, Dick always kept a bit of their money back so they would have some for other provisions. Norma reflects on some of the adjustments Borrooloola brought:

The aborigines worked for us and we had to adjust our expectations. We'd have people flying in, government ministers to do with the McArthur Rives mines and the Beef Road Project and, sure enough they've gone walkabout and you were left to do everything. We learned a great deal from our time there.

A real estate career

After Borrooloola, Dick and family returned to Darwin. There were more ventures for Dick; usually they went exceedingly well but he would also experience disaster. Dick partnered with a number of mates to breed Brahman cattle at Coomalie Park near the Northern Territory South Australian border. The cause was never clear but the entire stock developed rickets and had to be destroyed.

Dick took up Society work, conducting home visits and supporting Darwin's Bishop Collins with his aboriginal mission work. In the 1960s, Conference work was fairly standard fare; handing out cigarettes and providing food; much more of a focus on a 'hand out' rather than a 'hand up'.

It was in this time, that Dick began work in the real estate industry. Starting as a salesman for Fred Canara, within a short time, his boss predicted Dick would open his own business. Fred pleaded that he set it up a distance from Fred's business. He had witnessed Dick's talent for selling.

In 1970, Dick started Mooney Pepper Real Estate at Casuarina. His partnership with Mike Mooney would endure throughout his real estate career. They then acquired TC Waters and started trading as TC Waters Pepper & Co. In 1975, he took over the real estate franchise of LJ Hookers. This was when his career took off big time. Dick with Mike Mooney always by his side, would go on to have a much acclaimed career.

It is hard to fathom the extent of his success. Over his thirty-year career, he saw Darwin go from a city with four LJ Hooker offices and 12 sales people to one with 30 offices and close to 300 sales people. Norma remembers an important milestone was his company being the first to take out a double page spread in the Northern Territory News.

Dick was always good at organising people and standing back. In real estate, he often put this skill to good use. An example is when he was engaged by the Churcher Trust that held considerable land holdings in Australia. The Trust authorised Dick to open up a massive land subdivision outside of Darwin and he project managed all the development work,



Dick receiving Sir Lesley Hooker Award, 1995.

employing all personnel. He received an award from the Darwin Council for this project.

Norma leafs through press clippings and photos from award events, reeling off a long list of awards.

Over the years, his office topped sales in New South Wales, Northern Territory and Queensland and one year, won top sales and top office nationally.

The pinnacle of his career was winning the highest accolade the company bestowed on a franchise owner, the Sir Lesley Hooker Award. This was awarded to one person each year, from across all of Australia.

Dick remained in this industry until his retirement, selling the company in 1997 to Les Loy. He stayed on for a while as a consultant, clearly reluctant to give up an industry he enjoyed dearly.

Dick's key strength was to build great teams, and to value and acknowledge their work.

As with other challenges Dick took on, another key strength was to build great teams, and to value and acknowledge their work. He was awarded many trips overseas as prizes. Dick gave these to staff other than one he and Norma took. He always assisted other franchise owners and modelled a style of leadership that recognised and rewarded others' valuable contributions. That said, he gave short shrift- and a verbal outburst according to Norma, - to anyone who didn't carry through on tasks.

On receiving any awards, he was often quoted as saying:

Running a real estate office is a bit like a football team. It is no use having two or three stars. You need to be a team of winners.

Norma remembers a former staff member writing about her

experience of working for Dick. She wrote that Dick had taken her in when her marriage ended and trained her to end up having a business of her own so she could raise her family. Norma has numerous cards like this. His staff were like family, in many ways:

I came home one day to a prominent 'For Sale' sign out the front of the house. I was furious he hadn't talked to me about this. I then discovered the staff had been playing a joke on me.

Dick was a wheeler and dealer and a born salesman; focused, keen and always had an eye out for an opportunity:

He bought me a little Morris Minor car-we had 4 kids and were 14 miles out of town. It arrived with a big pink bow. Later, a man came up to me and asked me for the keys to my car. I asked him why and he said he'd bought it. Dick would sell anything!

Moving to Bairnsdale

Dick and Norma had spent a large part of their married lives in the tropical climate of Australia's top end. A move to Bairnsdale might have seemed an out of the ordinary direction for them to take. However, the expanse of Dick's real estate world extended to Bairnsdale where he and Norma would visit.

Dick suggested they get a Bairnsdale 'dongle' - N.T slang for a weekender - and use it to escape the 'troppo' season. In 1999, Norma came down ahead of Dick and found a lovely house. Instead of using it as a dongle, it became their permanent home.

Norma and Dick were used to moving around and taking on some pretty challenging assignments. Coupled with their warmth for people and hospitable nature, they felt very much at home in Bairnsdale in a short period. As Norma remarks::

Bairnsdale people are very nice and very accepting of newcomers.

While this was supposedly a move in retirement, Dick was never one to be idle and was soon involved in many things. Norma at all times was a steady and helpful presence always finding a role she could fill.

Church remained a central and stabilising influence for Dick and he immediately started attending mass at St Mary's. He did not involve himself specifically with parish council and could usually be found sitting at the back of the church, preferring to take everything in without drawing attention to himself. Conference members report that those back pews were often a good spot for a catch up and to float new ideas. It was likely here that Dick's 'think big' ideas in relation to St Mary's started to take shape.

Those back pews were often a good spot for a catch up and to float new ideas.

Norma with her flair for decorating, quickly took on arranging the flowers only giving this up when she could no longer carry the large vases. She and Dick also loved gardening and she was often seen tending to garden beds around the church. One member recalls seeing Norma on her hands and knees scrubbing the front steps. There were no tickets on the Peppers. They were full of energy and goodwill to help in whatever way they could.

Bairnsdale Conference, St Mary's Catholic Church



Dick commissioning Pat Lithgow as new President, Yarram Conference, 2010.

In 1966, the Bairnsdale Conference started as an initiative of the Knights of the Southern Cross who approached parish priest Monsignor Crow. It went on from there with conference brothers mainly doing home visits initially, providing food, vouchers, firewood and some assistance with bill paying and advocacy.

In the early 1970s, a decision was made to start a centre recognising this as a well tested way of raising some income. Initially, Coles Supermarkets provided a shop rent-free. Conference members recall that the layout was hard on the women who did most of the work. The rooms were small downstairs so all goods were taken upstairs and sorted first so there were many trips up and down stairs.

The president at the time, Jack Jeffreys, and member Geoff Clark, an experienced local builder, decided to establish a new centre. They found a well located building on the main street. The Centre (shop) has operated there for more than twenty years, growing steadily and currently open six days per week.

Leo Saunders first met Norma in 1999 when she came to Bairnsdale to set up house. Leo had a mowing round and started cutting the Pepper's lawn. Norma asked him if there was a local conference. What followed, was copybook Dick Pepper mode of operating according to Leo:

I told her yes, and to go to the parish. I wasn't a member. About six months later Dick has joined and asks me to join. He told me he'd been roped into to be president and 6 months

later, he became regional president, and roped me in for the job. It was almost impossible to say no to Dick. It had never entered my mind to become involved in the Society and help people until Dick told me I should. He was incredibly influential. You couldn't refuse somehow.

Leo remembers feeling a little intimidated; it was a very hard act to follow being conference president after Dick:

Dick had done such a great job, he was so well known, everyone knew him. Not only was he well known, so was his old orange Mercedes he used to drive around. We often went out home visiting in it. In fact, when people saw it parked outside the Vinnies centre, people would come in. They were drawn to him. He was always very humble when I was president. He took a back seat and let me have a pretty good go.

By 2008, Dick had become Gippsland Central Council President. He was very comfortable with the mantle of leadership and was always looking for opportunities to do new things and do things better. Although possessed of a strong sense of purpose and direction together with a strong work ethic, he also liked to hear from the troops. Face to face contact with people was very important to him.

Face to face contact with people was very important to Dick.

Dick's former volunteer secretary Denise Roberts, remembers that within a short time of becoming Central Council president, he arranged a meeting of all Conference Presidents, Regional Presidents and members of Central Council. A group of about 30 members attended. Dick invited everyone to talk openly about their work-what was going well and what could be improved.

Leo remembers Dick's well known way of operating:

Whenever there was a problem, Dick would call me around to his home office and have a pow wow there. Often I'd get a call at 6am that didn't worry me as I'm an early riser or any other time in the day and he'd simply say, 'Come around.' And you did.

Most of all Leo remembers how Dick was with people:

He didn't judge anyone, always so humble and compassionate. He went out of his way to help people. He taught me a lot and I respect him like everyone else. His knowledge, assistance and backup to me were wonderful. He was a mentor to me and many others. It was a pleasure to know him.

Denise Roberts and husband Arthur, a good friend of Dick's also recall his kindness, his generosity and adamant request that he not be acknowledged. Arthur recalls one incident:

Denise and I had been walking along the river and came across a seat with a plaque acknowledging that Dick and Norma had donated this. I mentioned this in passing to Dick and he went into a rage. He had expressly stated that this gesture be anonymous.

The focus on seeing a project through to completion was another often mentioned strength of Dick's. Indeed, his purposeful focus on every task he set himself and others. Yet friends describe another side of Dick. He loved gardening and enjoyed nothing better than sitting in the sun. He and Arthur had a lovely weekly ritual of placing a few bets on the horses. He also loved dancing and was very good at it. A surprise discovery was his ability to bake cakes. He would also mark a friend's special occasions with wine from his collection.

He was not one for idle chit chat and could seem gruff until you glimpsed the golden lining.

Dick's way with people is fondly mentioned. He was not one for idle chit chat and could seem gruff until you glimpsed the golden lining and compassionate way with people. It was witnessing this special knack that probably cemented Paul Heaton-Harris, a parishioner and local businessman's deep respect and willingness to support Dick's ideas.

One particular evening, a destitute man decided he was going to live in the church. He wouldn't move. The priest asked Paul to see if he could sort this out. Paul approached him, there were a few choice words exchanged and he clearly wasn't leaving. Realising they were powerless to resolve this, the priest suggested ringing Dick. Paul recalls what happened:

The way Dick handled this guy was particularly caring but careful. It was a big lesson for me. Dick approached the man and gave him a gentle shuffle with his foot and said "Hey mate, what's going on?" The man gave Dick some of the same choice words he'd shared with me. Dick persevered, unfazed.

'How long since you've had a feed?' This sparked the guy's interest. Dick had him eating out of his hand quickly - so to speak - and sent him over the road with a few bucks to buy a hamburger. Dick then went about finding a little about his story and was able to organise accommodation through Vinnies.

Paul was moved by this incident particularly the approach Dick took to handling the situation:

I asked Dick, was that a bit rough giving his feet a bit of a shove? Dick explained you can never be too careful. You never know if they're on something and might take you on. From that day on, our relationship was pretty amazing.

Tertiary Education Scheme

While Sandra Walker was Central Council President Gippsland, her Regional President East Gippsland, Pat Bourke, would often raise the struggles many families faced in sending their kids on to tertiary study. Sandra asked Pat

to put forward a proposal to address this area of need, which he did in consultation with local school coordinators. (A Call to Serve 2014, Sandra Walker).

Pat, with specific assistance of Membership and Development Officer Brendan Podbury devised a fund, the Tertiary Education Scheme, that commenced in 2003 with initially \$3,000, to be used by families to help meet costs. Six schools were initially awarded the funds – five Catholic and one government school. The program included very isolated areas such as Cann River, Swift Creek and Orbost. The number of schools steadily increased. Funding came from Central Council with top-up funds once from State Council. Sandra was the coordinator for 10 years. The role is now held by Trevor Fogarty of the Maffra Conference.

To date, approximately 70 students have been assisted. The principals nominate students with ability and motivation but no financial means. Each student selected receives \$3,000 in the first year of their tertiary course and \$1,500 in the following year.

All students selected have gone on to graduate.

The principals have made excellent choices as all students selected have gone on to graduate.

Dick loved this scheme but wanted it to have greater capacity. Pat Bourke describes Dick as an innovative fellow who could utilise his left brain thinking very easily. Pat believes Dick's greatest gift was: his ability to identify the ideal people for a job:

Not only would he know who was right, he'd convince them to take the job!

Within a short time, Dick phoned Paul Heaton-Harris. He had something he wanted to run by him—a situation many locals are familiar with. He often was onto something. Paul went around, sat down and received the customary hospitality from Norma and Dick. And then down to business.

Dick told Paul he had this idea about running something locally, for sponsoring kids for further education. The present arrangements were not raising enough money said Paul:

He suggested I knew a lot of people we could approach. We sat down and wrote a list. How are 'we' going to go about this? You get roped in before you know it. We went around asking people for money. Because Dick was involved, it became easy to raise the money.

The scheme became known as Vinnies Local Care, with the money going back to TES. It evolved from there. Dick and Paul asked the same people to contribute money every year but it became more difficult to make repeat requests. They started looking for other ways and ones that were more sustainable in the long term.



Norma and Dick on the banks of Mitchell River, 2007.

Steers for Students, a cattle breeding program evolved that still continues today. Profits are directed to the education scheme. The Program is not directly linked to the Society; farmers contribute who have no ties to the Vinnies. This was a point of difference that Paul and Dick had to reconcile. Dick was initially vehement that it be a SVDP program but the people that became involved were from a much wider cross section of the community.

Eventually, others took charge of it and now it's operated outside of the Society but along the same lines as TES. Regardless of its links, Paul concedes it would never have happened without Dick. Those initial stages, working up the idea, were fundamentally important.

St Mary's Church tours

Bairnsdale's main Catholic church, St Mary's has a remarkable story involving an Italian man who arrived in Bairnsdale in the 1920s where he was able to obtain casual fruit picking work. A talented artist, he devoted more than four years, very much in the style of Michelangelo, bending and balancing on very high scaffolding, decorating the church interior with magnificent murals.

Dick saw the fundraising opportunities this presented and was responsible for starting tours. To date, over \$50,000 has been raised for restoration work. Dick always intended that once the restoration target was reached, further fundraising through Church events and business support would be used

to employ a youth worker. This was a passion of Dick's. He knew this was a critical need in the township.

Home visitation was another passion of Dick's. He saw this face to face contact in a person's own home as essential. He continued doing home visits until quite close to his death. Dick had not taken on leadership positions with the Society in Darwin and Norma credits his regional president predecessor, Pat Bourke as wonderful and helping Dick a great deal.

Dick knew what he was good at and he knew when skills were required from others. He posted an advertisement in the parish news seeking a volunteer secretary, someone who could help with Society minutes and correspondence. This was how Denise Roberts came to work with him for more than ten years.

Norma's life with Dick was a whirlwind of activity, achievement and significant milestones. She smiles that under that at times brusque manner, he was a very soft touch. He'd do anything for anyone. One time his bank manager took him aside and advised he really shouldn't be giving so generously to other causes.

Dick was sick for a relatively short time in 2015. He never wanted to talk about how he was feeling, deflecting well wishers concerns promptly. Conference members remember Dick's enthusiasm for conference ideas never waned until very close to his death.

Denise Roberts recalls a wonderful partnership over ten or

more years. She remembers he would always arrive early when there was a meeting across the region, putting out cups and saucers and ensuring the urn was boiling by the time the travellers arrived. These touches were an indication of his concern for others. Denise herself always felt Dick's care for her.

Like others, a common feature was to receive emails from Dick sent at 4am. She affirms much of what has already been said about him.

Even when he was at death's door, he couldn't rest. He was telling the regional people who would be taking the next position. He had very good judgement about who were the right people. And he was very loyal to many. In particular, he was always in Norma's corner and would support her through thick and thin.

Conclusion

Dick's skills, expertise and personal approach were an absolute boon for the Society. People of good hearts and mind of which the Society abounds, do not always have the business savvy to make a good idea a reality. This is possibly the crux of Dick's most important contribution to Bairnsdale and the Gippsland Society.

It is hard to believe that such a larger-than-life man is gone yet he and his contribution will live on and will be spoken about in reverential terms for many years to come. Among so many achievements, employing a youth worker is possibly the one task that wasn't realised in his lifetime and there is every hope others will carry this baton on Dick's behalf. He was indeed entrepreneurial but he also respected tradition, particularly the tradition of the church. A stone from his childhood church, St Malachy's has been incorporated into his headstone. At the funeral of this man who never wanted any fuss, every charity and cause he supported were represented. It was a wonderful send off and acknowledgement of an incredible life, full of giving.

2003	Joined Bairnsdale Conference
2005-2008	President, East Gippsland Regional Council
2008-2011	President, Gippsland central Council (and a member of State Council)
2010-2011	Member, Emergency Recovery Liaison Committee



John Robinson

21/3/1931 - 4/1/2016

Fred made me do it

John Robinson, a Blackburn South conference member for fifty years, always looked for the face of Frederic Ozanam to guide him before a home visit. John loved being a Vincentian and was a natural at it. Those who knew John well, repeatedly described him both as someone who could talk to anyone and as 'a great man', two powerful words that reverberate with meaning. The stories told about him expand on this description, encompassing non-judgement, mercy, generosity, compassion, doggedness and solidarity. They are the sort of words we associate with Frederic Ozanam's desire to better understand the causes of poverty, to dignify the lives of those impoverished, and to act practically to address need. This is John's story.

John grew up in Malvern, the second of five children, attending St Joseph's parish school and then St Joseph's Secondary, South Melbourne, which was closed in 1988. John's family were devout Catholics; a brother and sister joined Religious orders. John grew up in an era when official Church teachings were not questioned and he signed on to it all, maintaining a strong faith and relationship with God throughout his life.

Although growing up in a close and supportive family, he experienced some hard times as a child. His sister Kathy, to whom he was very close, died at 8 years of age. Then John caught rheumatic fever; missing six months of school.

From a young age, John developed a fascination with the sea from having a father and two grandfathers who were all marine engineers. It was a path he would have liked to pursue but, instead, he became an electrician. He worked as an electrical fitter and had particular trade expertise in armature windings, which create electromagnets in generators and motors. Over his career, he worked mainly at Stanley Works, tool makers where he undertook the electrical maintenance

of machinery, and also at Burnley National Heating. He also worked for five years with the railways. He kept on top of his trade, acquiring first a 'B' grade electrician's license and later an 'A' grade license.

Meeting Joan

There's a tree in the meadow

With a stream drifting by

And carved upon that tree I see

'I love you 'til I die.'

(opening lines of A Tree in the Meadow,
first performed 1948)

At twenty, John came to know Joan Howard, a young lady from nearby Glen Iris. After 18 months, they were engaged, with Joan's father insisting they give themselves a further 18 months before settling down together. Almost to the day, they were married on 2 January 1954 at St Roch's Glen Iris. The reception was held in East Malvern's Central Park.



A young John and Joan.

Their early years were spent happily socialising with other young people they knew through their parishes, Young Christian Workers (YCW) and the Legion of Mary. They were both active, enjoying hiking trips, running and many group activities with their friends.

John played footy, cricket and tennis. As well, he was musical, playing several instruments. Joan recalls that John would often take his mandolin or banjo on excursions. Before they were a couple, on their first hiking trip, Joan spotted an early indication of John's romantic streak:

I can still picture him sitting on top of a hill, a short distance from the group, playing a popular song, 'A tree in the meadow'.

Joan had a feeling the song was meant for her and it wasn't long after that they became an item. John also wooed her with a beautiful corsage of fresh flowers every week.

John continued with his musical interest and played his banjo, entering with another player Christie's Radio Auditions, a popular music competition. They won ten shillings each.

The group of friends would regularly go dancing, alternating between parish hall dances and those at St Kilda, Hawthorn, and Caulfield town halls. Square dancing was particularly popular then. The group were so good at it they were approached to go on tour but had to decline as most of the group had started working and some of the men were doing their trade apprenticeships.

Those shared times were always great fun, with usually 10-15 young people going out together. Joan believes these were golden years for young people that the young today miss out on:

None of us had electronic devices or cars then but we had fun, catching trains and buses. It was all an adventure.

Joan acknowledges that she stood in the way of John following in the family tradition and becoming a marine engineer. She saw the strain on his mother, having John's father away more than he was home. She told John it wasn't a life she wanted. Joan would prove to be influential in many decisions of his life.

Moving to Blackburn South and family life

After marrying, Joan and John moved to Agnew St, Blackburn South, where they would stay for 60 years. Here, in their four bedroom house, they raised their family, with seven children coming along: Garry, 1954; Jeanette, 1956; Kathleen (Kathy), 1958; Sharon, 1959; Helen, 1962; David, 1966; and Peter, 1972.

Daughter Sharon recalls a happy home constantly alive with the activity and noise of a tribe of kids. There were often friends over as well and she recalls her Dad was forever bringing people home. Her mother was good at making the meal extend further. Joan believes big families find it no trouble having extra mouths to feed. The motto is 'You always get by.'

John was a loving and interested father; his children knew where they stood with him and they gave and received respect in turn. Daughter Sharon puts it succinctly:

He was a good Dad and a straight shooter.

He was also a handyman, fixing and maintaining things around the house. He and Joan were always a team, working side by side on many tasks.

Joan reflects how much Blackburn South has changed over sixty years. Anyone who heard where they lived usually told them they were 'out with the black fellas'! (Ed's note: Even use of this expression indicates indeed how times have changed.)

In the fifties, Middleborough Road was a stock route, the width of one car, not that there were many cars then. The Robinsons purchased their first car, a Chevrolet, when they had 4 children. On Sundays, the family would take a walk to Wattle Park, a distance of several miles. The journey was like a trip through the country. There were hardly any sealed roads, no sealed footpaths and definitely no traffic lights. The area was mainly orchards and had previously been market gardens.

St Luke's parish was central to their lives. At first, there was a visiting parish priest, Fr Ryan, with the first parish priest, Fr Larson, arriving shortly afterwards.

The first two children attended St Thomas' parish school in Blackburn until St Luke's was established and the children moved across.

Early in their married life, Joan was surprised to learn that John did not see the point in holidays. Like many key decisions, Joan was able to assert her influence in a positive way:

It was Christmas time and I said to John, where are we going for holidays? John advised he didn't go on holidays; too much to catch up on around the house. I told him, well I do. And I'm sorry but I will go.

Joan hired a tent and begged and borrowed camping equipment. They headed for Torquay and John had a ball. He told Joan: 'I'm never stopping home again over the holidays. So began an annual event that everyone in the family looked forward to. The family made lots of good friends through these holidays, usually visiting Torquay, San Remo and Rosebud.

It was never just the Robinson clan either. Each of the children took a friend. As Joan explains, larger families never mind extras.

The camping trips continued, upgrading to a caravan that would later take Joan and John around Australia. Memorable stories abound, with one involving Joan waking in the middle of the night when they were camping at Kings Canyon, Northern Territory in the days before there was a resort there. She grabbed a torch, realising John was not in the caravan and called out to him, managing to rescue him from a potentially fatal fall as he had lost his course on the way to the long drop and was headed straight for the canyon.

The children learned early the value that their parents placed on these holidays and the lesson that families need time out of hectic lives together.

Sharon recalls that towards the end of her father's life, he stressed that he didn't want his children coming back to see him when they were away on holiday. For the man that in the beginning didn't understand the relevance of holidays, he was now their biggest advocate.

First aid training and joining St John's.

When the family were still quite young, John, in his usual friendly manner, was talking to a girl at Box Hill station who was waiting for a bus. After a while, she told John she'd walk instead. Shortly afterwards, she was hit by a car and was left on the side of the road. John's sense of powerlessness in the face of this accident motivated him to undertake first aid training. It would become a significant feature of his life. The family remember times when they were present and saw their father put this experience to good use:

Once, we were driving home from an event and there was a car accident. Dad got out, retrieved blankets and stayed with the injured until the ambulance arrived.

John was also a volunteer footy trainer with Victorian Amateur Football Association (VAFA) for many years. He then went as a trainer to Aquinas College and then to the Box Hill Pioneers. In these roles, he used his first aid training to good advantage. These many years as a footy trainer are another example of the way John lived his life. Once he took on something, he stuck to it. He saw a commitment through.

His contribution to charities was acknowledged by his employer Stanley Works which one year directed its annual Community Awards on behalf of John's efforts: \$1,000 to the Society and \$400 to St John's Ambulance Service.

Joining the Society

Wondering what skills he could possibly bring to Society work, John Robinson was reluctant at first to join his local conference, which was being established at the urgings of enthusiastic parish priest, Fr Larsen. The new parish loved Fr Larsen, who had started the parish school and would give



John enjoying a cuppa on a caravan trip around Australia.

many years of wonderful service at Blackburn South and other parishes. An indication of their affection for him was a decision to buy him a car to mark his 25 years as a priest. The community today continues to speak highly of his legacy.

Joan's father had been a conference member and she knew John had what it takes. His ease in anyone's company, his caring nature and responsiveness to those in need — he was a natural. She encouraged him to join. John came to realise that being a Vincentian was a major driving force and one of the most satisfying pastimes in his life for 50 years. Still, he would often in light moments tell Joan she was responsible for getting him into this.

In September 1965, John was one of the ten founding members present at the inaugural meeting of Blackburn South conference.

In September 1965, John was one of the ten founding members present at the inaugural meeting of Blackburn South conference. He would remain until just before his death in January 2016. As one of the three remaining original members, his membership of the Conference is distinguished by the fact that he was the only one who had given continuous service over the fifty years.

John's faith was integral to how he approached his conference work. He always said a prayer before visiting a person, often offering a green scapular — a devotion to Our Lady — with the words 'Pray for us now and at the hour of our death' for guidance.

John served as Conference President and in other office positions for many years. He enjoyed these roles but was happiest 'doing', rather than 'attending' meetings.

Joan reflects how underutilised the phone seems since John's passing. John was often on the phone, following up on individual cases, always trying to find a solution. It was his nature to be drawn to people, liking the engagement and wanting to help them. If Joan went out, he would be on the phone hardly before the door had shut behind her:

He'd never leave anyone in strife. If they were hurt, he'd make sure they were alright and would take time to talk through any worries a person might have.

Like many longstanding Vincentians, who started in the days when it was strictly a men-only affair, there is often an invisible or only partly visible wife in the background, providing the kind of support that allows their husbands to focus often single-mindedly on their Vincentian work. John was in the fortunate position to have Joan who, while not deliberately active in the conference, provided the kinds of assistance that allowed John to fulfil his work.

Quite often, particularly in the early days, John would pop home from an evening visit and tell Joan he had visited a family and the children had no warm clothes. Joan would rustle up some children's jumpers and take some meals out of the freezer. Even though John encouraged her to join the conference when women were allowed to join, she was always happy to be in the background supporting John. From growing up with a Vincentian father, Joan believed one member in the family was enough but always stood by to help in any way she could.

The conference members were involved in the staple of conference work, namely conventional home visits. John always placed great importance on these visits and, with his friendly, respectful engagement, was able to develop rapport with many people. It is important to remember that in those early days very few people owned cars. Conference members would have ridden bikes or caught a bus to perform these visits, which were done in the evenings after they had finished work. When John retired from work in 1994, he began doing home visits during the day.

Salvation Army Men's Home

From the first months of the conference starting, the men also started visiting the Salvation Army's Men's Home, Inala Village in Middleborough Road. The minutes of the second meeting record that the men looked forward to these three weekly visits, where the members distributed sweets, cigarettes and tobacco.

John's children remember those early days, preparing the bags of sweets. Sharon recalls, they often accompanied John on these visits:

Dad always told us 'the old people like to see young people'. Whether we liked it or not, we never said no to Dad and went with him. It was a good experience to have as a young person.

Consequently, the Robinson family remember bonds were formed with several men. John in particular would take a special interest in some of the men and invite them home for meals. Joan recalls this moving story about one man in particular:

Bill was one of these men John formed an attachment to. He was a small, gentle man and was always very polite. The Salvos Major told us after he died that he'd murdered his wife.

If we'd known, it wouldn't have made any difference. John always told us: 'remember, don't be judgemental'. He really did live by this creed.

Another case was Darren, whom John had met through conventional conference work. Darren had wanted to tour Australia but his car was very old and he was unwell. He didn't get further than New South Wales. He came back to South Blackburn and stayed at a place that offered temporary accommodation and would always put him up. At this time, he contacted John, who managed to get him a place at Inala Village. Due to John's regular visits there, Darren was fast tracked up the queue.

In the mid 1990s, there were some unfortunate incidents that occurred at Inala Village. These incidents caused the conference to re-think its approach. On two occasions, men caused fires from smoking in bed, with one fire resulting in the tragic death of a man. The conference ceased providing cigarettes from this time. As well, staff reported a couple of occasions when the men were found to be choking on the lollies, resulting in a decision to distribute only marshmallows.

Supplementing other conferences' efforts

Blackburn South Conference has never had its own store but, in the 1970s, its members commenced helping at Vinnies stores in Heatherdale and Ringwood. Joan was a regular helper.

In the 1980s, Blackburn South Conference joined with other conferences in the Ringwood region to assist with visits to the South Melbourne and Port Melbourne Ministry of Housing estates. John was involved in these visits, which continued until 2014 when there were no longer sufficient members available.

The conference also made themselves available should they be required to visit Ozanam House.

Hands on advocacy

If there was an issue with bill payment or finding housing, John would contact authorities and plead the case.

From 2000-2015, John served as the Conference Social Justice Officer. John was strong on advocating on behalf of people he met. If there was an issue with bill payment or finding housing, John would contact authorities and plead the case. Over the years, he built up an extensive knowledge and range of contacts at relevant authorities and he did not hesitate to use these to the advantage of those in need.

Much of his advocacy work took place outside of conference meeting times. He and Joan also supported those needing

help by providing them with hot meals and inviting them to their meal tables to share what they had according to conference member Margaret Gearon:

Joan would go to the freezer and take out a frozen meal, or soup or a fruit cake as soon as we mentioned that the person had nothing to eat and was not able to get to the supermarket.

Margaret recalls a home visit in 2015. The resident had only one leg and was coping with a flooded kitchen. John contacted the Office of Housing and convinced them to bring their maintenance visit forward by 48 hours.

Keen to add to his practical understanding of poverty and disadvantage, John liked to regularly attend the monthly Social Justice in the City talks organised by St Francis Conference.



Members of Blackburn South Conference honouring 50 year members.

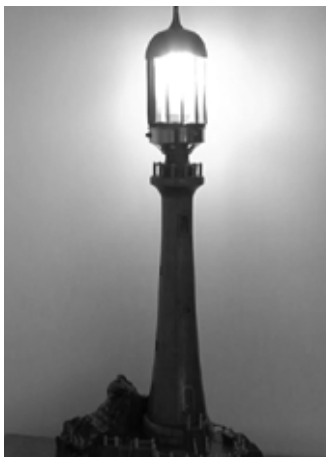
Lighting the way

Outside Joan and John's home is a small sign in the garden that says:

*'Welcome to the Magic World of GRANDPARENTS.
Rules Bent. Children Spoilt. Lots of Love and Cuddles.'*

This speaks volumes about John and Joan's love of family, particularly their 27 grandchildren and 24 great grandchildren. John loved his golf and gained great enjoyment playing around with his children and grandchildren.

Many of the family have followed in his footsteps, involved in St John's, footy training or in charity work. At Christmas, some of the grandchildren would raise money for the Blackburn South conference and this would be donated to a needy family to enable them to have a Christmas meal and buy gifts for the children.



One of John's many lighthouses.

John was always a handy person, happy to potter around the house. Equipped with the knowledge he gained as an electrician, John was also a proficient wood turner. He made tables; some are on display in the unit he and Joan moved to over two years ago. But John's real joy was derived from a hobby he would enjoy throughout his adult years, making

lighthouses. He enjoyed working on each as a labour of love for family members. He even made one for society member, Tony Kearney's five year old grandson, who was desperate to have one. Sometimes, he made replicas of ones he and Joan visited on their travels. Others he copied from a book.

These beautiful, lovingly crafted models tell us a great deal about John. His persistence at finding solutions and following through, and his joy in giving. There is also a quirky individualism about each one that reflects his desire to provide a personalised response to each recipient, much like his conference work.

His family put together a beautiful display of his work in an album with heartfelt messages of love, respect and sorrow at the loss of their Dad and Pop. Messages include:

Pop was an exceptional Father, Grandfather, Great Grandfather and all round Good Samaritan in the community. He has left his stamp in many hearts and will be missed by many."

RIP Dad/Pop. We are going to miss you. We hope you have found a piano, some friends and family and started your singalongs.

... dedicated 50 years of volunteering to St Vincent de Paul Society. This man is a Saint. The world is worse off without you Pop.

[H]ope this is another beacon for Pop to follow... I just hope he doesn't get side tracked by the golf course ... miss you Pop, you are a great man to all who knew you.



John, Joan and family.

Always having fun

There was another side to John besides the diligent Vincentian who was always following through on inquiries.

Not everyone saw the devilish side of John but he could be a devil according to Joan and loved a party. From the number of photos, it is clear that he loved a dress-up party.

He and Joan often dressed up along the same theme. They went as country bumpkins, Mexicans, the raging thirties with Joan looking resplendent in Charleston dress, dancing on the stage. John often received awards for his outfits: first prize for a St John's dress-up and also for a Probus trip event.

Joan recalls a St John's Ambulance event where John was the life of the party.

He was always willing to give something a go in the name of fun. He dressed up as Father Christmas for family and was always finding ways to make fun with the children and grandchildren.

A mate remembers John

Danny Carroll, 87, is a Blackburn South member who was a close friend of John's. Over the years, they often visited people together. Danny credits John with many things and echoes the sentiments of others:

John could talk to anyone, would help anyone and he'd always go that extra mile.

Danny remembers many occasions, when doing a home visit, John would notice things Danny wouldn't. That was one of John's skills: he saw beyond the obvious details and the incidental requests for assistance to other needs to be met:

One time on a visit, we talked to the person seeking assistance. John had also noticed the state of the garden and organised, although not sought, for someone to mow the lawn. Another time, the house was particularly drab and there was lots of mess. John organised a skip to be delivered there.

The accounts of John going beyond what might seem the call of duty are many and varied.

The accounts of John going beyond what might seem the call of duty are many and varied.

Danny recalls John was called out late one night after a house fire. He realised the affected people's first need was for blankets. He broke into a Vinnies centre where he knew there were plenty on hand. Sometimes the ends justify the means; and John lived by this, as required. Similarly,

Danny remembers a visit to someone he was sure had been put on the ‘black list’. This is for people who, often due to exploitation or threatening behaviour, the conference decides not to help any further. Dan asked John why they were visiting. John told him ‘Fred’ made him do it. Who’s Fred? Frederic Ozanam was the answer.

Danny was sometimes frustrated and suspicious whereas John’s generosity knew no bounds. He always wanted to give people the benefit of the doubt. This meant that at times, John and Danny had to play ‘good cop, bad cop’.

One night, John was asked to go to the church where a woman was seeking assistance. She said her father had died in Adelaide and she needed to get there urgently. John offered to get her a train ticket but she rejected this offer. She wanted to drive. Danny thought there was something awry:

I felt sure she was spinning a story but John filled her car with petrol. I drove past her house for the next few days and that car was always there. I told John but John stuck up for her.

I thought he could be a soft touch sometimes, all part of his generous nature. Another time, a woman, who to me was an utter liar, was pretending to ring a solicitor and I knew there was no one at the end of the phone, but John, again, gave her a fair hearing. I found it hard sometimes when the Society was being taken for granted, but John was never that bothered. He always went out of his way to help and see the good in them.

Danny remembers many times when John would be on the phone, organising to have electricity or gas re-connected where a person’s non-payment had resulted in supply being cut off. He was always prepared to put in the time to find a solution even if this meant enduring an inordinate amount of time waiting for customer service staff to respond.

Last years

When Joan and John moved to the retirement village, John lost his spacious garage where he did his wood turning and made his lighthouses. He finished off lighthouses he had started but didn’t start any new ones.

He had a pain under his rib but tests never revealed anything. The doctors called for a colonoscopy and cancer was revealed. It was a relatively short-term illness.

He remained active in his conference, continuing visits to Inala Village even while he was quite sick.

Conclusion

Blackburn South is an ageing conference, like many others. It is a constant issue occupying the minds of the Society.



John and Joan celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary.

Conferences ebb and flow, recede and occasionally are re-born. John’s story reveals that they should not be judged by a paucity of numbers though. There is a steadfastness in the way even conferences with a small membership continue to live out the Vincentian spirit to the best of their abilities. John’s Blackburn South is a fine example of this tradition.

A few days before John died, he asked one of his daughters to buy a corsage for Joan. The daughter did so, showing it to John, but it wasn’t what he wanted. Back to the florist the daughter went several times before she found what he was looking for: a corsage that was like the ones he had bought for Joan in their early years together.

Joan has received simple, poignant messages from people who miss John the person and also his extensive knowledge about where to go for help and who to ask. His legacy will live on.

References

History of Blackburn South Conference: 1965-2015 – Celebrating 50 years of service to those in need in the community.

1965	Foundational member Blackburn South Conference
1970-84	Conference Secretary
1985-92	Conference President
1992-99	Vice President
1999-05	Conference President
2000-15	Social Justice Officer, Ringwood Regional Council



St Vincent de Paul Society
VICTORIA

good works