

# A CALL TO SERVE

VINCENTIAN STORIES

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

MATTHEW 25:40



St Vincent de Paul Society  
VICTORIA  
*good works*

2022 CHAPTER



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

**BLESSED ROSALIE RENDU**

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## OUR MISSION

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

## OUR VISION

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

## OUR VALUES

### **Commitment**

Loyalty in service to our mission, vision and values.

### **Compassion**

Welcoming and serving all with understanding and without judgement.

### **Respect**

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

### **Integrity**

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

### **Empathy**

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

### **Advocacy**

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

### **Courage**

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



## STATE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Members, Volunteers and Staff,  
I am delighted to introduce the stories for the second round of A Call to Serve in the past 10 months. A great deal of what we do and celebrate was put on hold due to Covid restrictions and this partly makes up for the one year we couldn't undertake this valuable program.

Since 2013, 50 Vincentians and Special Works volunteers have had a story written about their service and commitment. Since 2015, videos have also been made. This gives us a depth of examples; a cameo history we can all be proud of. It is also a poignant reminder of the reality of many of our members' ages, with 19 honourees no longer with us. How wonderful though, that we have captured so many magnificent insights and records of our Vincentians.

This year, we received a very high number of nominees and subsequently the selection committee increased the number of honourees from five to eight. The stories span decades of loving commitment, unstinting service and courage from Vincentians from both rural and metropolitan Victoria.

We are very pleased this year to include in the awards, a volunteer from a program of Ozanam House Accommodation and Homelessness Resource Centre. We are also very proud of the achievements of our volunteers.

I hope you enjoy the stories and the videos. Thank you for your ongoing, steadfast commitment in living out the Vincentian spirit in all you do.

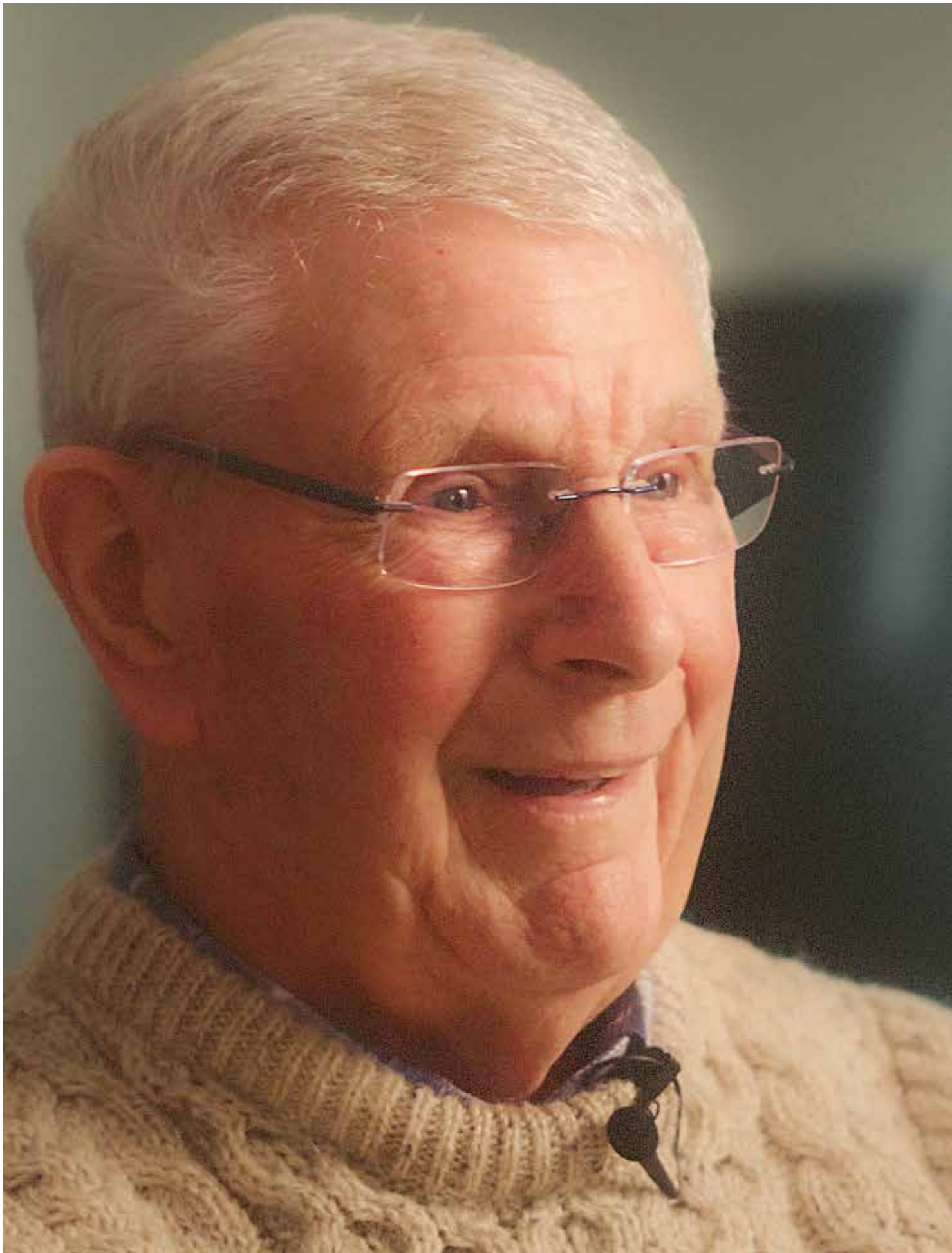
God bless.

**Michael Quinn**

State President

St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria







# ALAN BAILEY **BEING A VINCENTIAN**

Being a conference member for over fifty years represents close to two thirds of many people's lives. Honouree Alan Bailey is one of St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria's long term contributors who are pre-destined to helping others.



*Front, Alan and Jean Bailey, rear Jenny Keating, celebrating Alan's 50 years as a Vincentian*

Alan's upbringing was not an easy one and he knew as a child what it feels like to go without meals. He believes this has motivated his desire to ease others' burdens.

### **Starting a Conference from scratch**

In 1970, Alan joined SVDP, as a thirty year old. Inspired by Mathew 25 to be of service, he and other parishioners formed the Holy Redeemer Conference, East Oakleigh

Alan recalls that the Parish Priest was not a supporter of St Vincent de Paul so, while he was on a trip to Ireland, they set up the conference with the support of the relieving priest. On his return home, while not pleased by this act of insurrection, the PP came to be a strong supporter of the conference.

The members were young, full of energy and it was a very active conference involved in

special works as well as home visitation.

Alan remembers visits to Ozanam House on Saturday nights to serve dinner to the men.

Ozanam House then was a far cry from today's state of the art, specialist homelessness hub. The men queued in Flemington Road from lunchtime for a night's bed and meal. The men were, on the whole, street-worn and prematurely aged from long-term homelessness. Alan particularly remembers tending to their feet, the state of which he had never seen before.

Many missed out on a bed, even after queueing so long, which sometimes meant a night at the City Watch House run by the police. This was a dreadful place. The better option was a return to what was then referred to as the Starlight Hotel (under a bridge or in a shop doorway).



The East Oakleigh members were resourceful, driving around collecting discarded items that people had put on the nature strip for council collections. This was in the days before there was a local Vinnies store, so many items were stored in the Parish Priest's garage.

Alan was a reluctant leader; he saw himself as a doer. Nevertheless he became Conference President, but tried to knock back an offer when the Waverley Regional President retired. He stayed away from the meeting, hoping his absence would exonerate him. At about 9.30pm, there was a knock on the door. Upon opening the door, he was congratulated on being elected.

### **To the Dandenongs**

In 1985, the family moved to Boronia. Alan and his wife Jean joined the St John the Baptist Conference in Ferntree Gully. They have remained a strong team and still often do home visits together. Alan credits Jean for her love and support that has allowed him to give time to the conference. He also credits the conference for being a wonderful team that works together well.

Every month, two members travelled to Foodbank in Yarraville to pick up food to distribute among clients. It was then taken back to Alan's home where it was stored in his garage on shelves as well as in a large freezer. Meat was donated from the local abattoir, along with fresh fruit and vegetables donated from the local Coolstore. The use of the Bailey's garage as a food storage place was to continue until the conference was given space for a meeting room and a food storage area in the old convent which later became the Parish Centre.

### **Expanding**

Soon after joining Ferntree Gully Conference, Alan was invited to set up the new region and became Founding President, Knox Sherbrooke Region, part of the Eastern Central Council.

Alan had been advised on becoming a regional president that it was important to regularly visit every conference. He took this on diligently. Fitting

shifts as a tram driver and instructor and later job promotions around conference work, it was not always easy to be available for night meetings. Alan relied on help from his Vice President on many occasions. Alan recalls it was a juggling act, particularly after a challenging day. He mentions the many challenges associated with trainee drivers understanding traffic and tram signalling, controls and timing.

Alan would probably say that his contribution is unremarkable; he believes everyone does their bit. He mentions the efforts of other members to establish the School Scholarship which has been going strong for many years. It was modelled on a video of a successful scheme elsewhere, which inspired fellow members Elsie Johnson, Gordon Veerasawmy and Chris Markwick to get started, and which was supported by the Parish Priest. In 20 years it has helped local school children to the tune of \$1 million.

Many credit Alan with establishing the Christmas lunch for aged care residents, but he is quick to state that this event pre-dates him and that his contribution is only ever cleaning up afterwards.

He speaks enthusiastically about those members who have contributed to starting a Mini Vinnies and the school 'Tinnies for Vinnies' drive, with each class at St. Joseph's College Ferntree Gully competing to bring the most non perishable food. So much was donated, Ferntree Gully Conference has been able to distribute this among the neighbouring conferences.

Ferntree Gully has contributed funds to bushfire relief and Alan remembers a significant donation made to a man who had lost his work tools when his shed burned down in a local bushfire.

### **Being a Vincentian**

Alan's fellow members speak of his humility and ever-readiness to do any task as what sets him apart.

What strikes everyone about Alan is his honesty and straightforwardness; what you see is what you get. He is a fair dinkum, ambassador for the

Society and conference life, always ready to tell a potential new recruit, what being a member is really like. While many conferences struggle to find new members, Alan's conference is well resourced with 21 members.

On why he has remained actively involved for 53 years, Alan speaks of the joy in helping people and the lasting friendships made through the conference and parish. He emphasises that he is blessed to have wife Jean always ready to lend a hand and a constant source of loving support.

Both he and President Peter Finn speak highly of their conference team, describing them as sharing their talents and compassion for the benefits of others. Peter also makes special mention of Alan's meticulous record keeping of all conference visits.

Alan was also a founding member of Knox Infolink, which was formerly the Citizen Advice Bureau. In 2009, he was the recipient of the Ferntree Gully Electorate Victoria Day Award for community service. Alan also volunteered with Puffing Billy over 20 years, training people in signalling and Guard's duties, and other safeworking procedures.

### **Final words**

Alan has always been curious to know how things operate and this has given him nuts and bolts experience and logistical understanding, which are very transferable skills.

His work life and volunteering have taught him a great deal about people. He believes a member needs to be able to deal with the immediate, think through what they are doing but appreciate that they might not understand the whole picture for a while, if ever. It is important to simply help in whatever way you can and always follow up.

When discussing challenging home visits, Alan often reminds members that they don't have to like everyone they assist, but they do have to love them.

*I'm not interested in whether a person has contributed to their predicament. If they need help, I accept they need help. End of story.*

Alan still believes after all these years, that people's needs don't change that much. Covid and the current economic downturn have certainly meant that the conference sees more new requests for assistance rather than the predominantly, repeat callers. More new people have arrived in the area and many have complex and specific needs. There are many more people – even families – living in accommodation that should be short term but is now being used long term, such as motels.

As for Alan, he intends keeping on going as long as he can. He reckons God's not ready for him yet.

Conference president Peter Finn sums up Alan:

*I think what we all see in Alan is humility, dedication, honesty – he is upfront and takes no nonsense. If people start clinging to rules too much, he suggests they 'get real' and 'just love' the people we are here to serve. We are very proud of Alan.*

### **Record of service**

#### **Alan Bailey**

1970- East Oakleigh Conference

1974 President,  
East Oakleigh Conference

1978 Secretary,  
Waverley Regional Council

1980 President,  
Waverley Regional Council

1985 Ferntree Gully Conference

1987 President,  
Ferntree Gully Conference,  
several terms

1993 Founding President,  
Knox Sherbrooke Region

1995 President,  
Eastern Central Council



*Alan and Jean preparing for a home visit*

# **Volunteers are a force for good, contributing much to the social and economic fabric of local communities. Lyn Fry, who volunteers at the Vinnies Castlemaine store, is one of St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria's exceptional contributors.**

Lyn first joined Vinnies Castlemaine in the 1970s, following in her mother's footsteps. Her mum would spend one or two afternoons at the store, ironing clothes before they were displayed. Her mum was also part of a group of members who visited the jail on Friday nights, attending Mass with the men. Lyn recalls:

*After Mass, the men would have a cuppa with the visitors. It was a good chance to have a yarn and get to know the men. There were some sad stories and the members tried to bring hope.*

Lyn has lived in Castlemaine almost all her life, moving from New South Wales as a young child with her siblings and mother to live with her grandparents. Lyn left Castlemaine High at 15 and started work at the Maldon Shoe Factory and later went to the John Brown factory which made formal shirts. She loved both jobs and was highly regarded as a trustworthy and hard-working employee.

## **Vinnies Castlemaine**

The Vinnies Castlemaine store is a little gem. It is open 7 days a week which is unusual for this town. The store is very community-based; there is a strong sense the daily rhythm includes volunteers and visitors to the shop connecting and chatting.

There is a cheery atmosphere as the volunteers interact with Manager, Kim Perry, while getting on with their various tasks of receiving and sorting items out the back, making displays look attractive,

tidying the shop and greeting customers. What the store loses in floor space, it makes up for in quality, visual flair, warmth and welcome.

Lyn is a big part of its charm and her care and pride for what she does 6 days a week, shines through. She proudly shows her collection of Vinnies badges including her mum's that represent the many years of volunteering in the store.

Lyn is across every aspect of managing the shop. She explains the drill.

*I'm the first to come in around 8am. I turn the alarm off, put the money in the till. I unlock the back door and the workers come in. I start tidying all the clothes in the shop, folding and sorting, filling up the gaps in clothing and manchester. I make sure everything is looking nice when the shop opens.*

*I love going out the back and helping people unload their donations from their car. It is mainly locals who donate the goods and they bring in some beautiful clothes. You meet nice people doing this. I always thank them for their donations and tell them it will be helping our community. They feel good hearing this.*

*Our shop is known for keeping good quality stuff. We sometimes receive items from estates which I love sorting through. You get some beautiful stuff – clothes, homewares, handbags and other personal items. These usually come from Melbourne and occasionally from overseas.*

*As Day Co-ordinator, I teach the girls what to do. I tell them, if you wouldn't put it on your own back, you don't put it on anyone else's. We have good quality clothes in the shop and we make sure they are clean, ironed and well presented.*

*The locals love to see their things on display and it is very important to us that the people see their donations in the shop. The shop has a rule that we don't buy anything ourselves; that's the policy and we stick to it and respect the Vinnies.*



A close-up portrait of an elderly woman with long, wavy, light-colored hair. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. She is wearing a dark blue, textured sweater. A name tag is pinned to her sweater in the lower right corner. The background is blurred, showing hints of green and blue.

**LYN FRY**  
**CARE THAT SHINES**  
**THROUGH**

Lyn  
Day Coordinator



## **Work ethic**

The common message everyone communicates about Lyn is her incredible capacity for work.

Lyn believes she works no harder than anyone else and is a little unsure what all the accolades are about.

*Scott Marsden, our Senior Area Manager visits us at least once a week. Over the years, we've had nice chats. I keep on working usually when we speak. Scott says to me:*

*"You're allowed to sit down and relax and talk."*

*I reply: "I'm here to make the money for the poor."*

When the store was short of staff, Lyn worked every day. Neil Harvey, Vinnies Retail Manager Operations, visited and gave Lyn a gift card and thanked her for all her hard work.

Lyn was shocked. She doesn't see what she does as hard work.

*I never used to take a break but I do now have a quick break and a cuppa. If I don't have a break, my manager Kim won't let me work.*

*Manager Kim Perry says:*

*"Lyn is the hardest working person I have ever met. She comes to work every day saying,*

*How are we going to make a dollar today Kim?"*

*"She has more energy than me and keeps me on my toes. I love having her in the store. She is probably the only person who knows absolutely everything about the operations and finer points of Vinnies Castlemaine. She is an amazing person to work with. She makes the store a very special one."*

Even when Lyn was employed in the paid workforce, she always made a point of coming to the shop for a few hours either early in the day or on weekends.

## **Respect for others**

There are only ever positive comments from Lyn about enjoying her work. Her loyalty and trustworthiness shine through.

*I love the Vinnies. The people are warm and are doing their bit for charity and love what they're doing. Everyone is friendly.*

Lyn is highly respectful of the store and area managers.

*We didn't have managers when I first came and I admit, I wasn't sure about the need for paid managers but I can see the difference it makes to the store now.*

*Before managers, we had stacks of items to the ceiling. I was put on manchester and I started sorting, tagging them. The shop is very different to how it was and much more orderly and inviting.*

## **Attention to detail**

As Manager Kim tells it, there are Lyn standards and Vinnies standards.

Lyn often says to me,

*"It's got to be fine and dainty Kim".*

*"Lyn will break up large piles of items such as cutlery, polish them and put them in well presented sets. It is much more appealing visually and they look cleaner and newer. There is such a high level of care in all Lyn does. She will do things like sew new buttons onto a cardigan to make it look nicer. Detail is important to her and I think this is what people see when they come into the store. It's the care that shines through in our store."*

## **Helping out at other Vinnies stores**

Vinnies Castlemaine was renovated about 7 years ago. The volunteers moved everything out the back and had two weeks off. Lyn went to Vinnies Bendigo to help out, catching the train up and back each day.

*I did the manchester there. It was a challenge as it's a big shop. Everyone stopped what they were doing and focused on tidying up at 3pm.*

*Three of us went over to help Daylesford as well. Daylesford is another bigger shop so also harder to keep tidy. I sorted the clothes and cleaned up the back of the store. My heart belongs with Vinnies Castlemaine but wherever I help out, I feel good at the end of the day, knowing I've done a good deed.*



Record of service

**Lyn Fry**

1973 Vinnies Castlemaine Store

### **SVDP Assistance Centre**

Lyn reflects that people never know what's around the corner. Volunteers come to appreciate what the Society does by working in the shop and recognise that one day, they could themselves need help.

*We get people wanting help. We send them across the road to our assistance centre. They have lovely volunteers who help them with food, vouchers and bills. People will often come back with vouchers to get goods they need from the store. It's good that we are so closely located to each other.*

Lyn herself understands that life does not always run smoothly. Her son passed away earlier this year. She acknowledges the important role of Vinnies as the constant in her life that has helped her through both this and serious illness.

Many in the town were there to support Lyn and she placed a thank you notice in the local paper, including a special mention of Vinnies Castlemaine's help and support.

### **Supporting our volunteers**

Kim finds it particularly hard to find volunteers and reflects on their importance.

*"I've been to the local high school careers people, the library, service centre, participated in a range of*

*community events. We even tried an Open Day. It's harder than you would think. I think people think it's a huge commitment which it isn't.*

*People often don't realise what they will gain from it. They connect with people and leave happy. I have volunteers who drop in during the week outside of their shifts for a cuppa. They enjoy seeing the others.*

*Volunteers should be cared for. They are passionate people and can get quite upset if things don't go well. People can be themselves here. We all have our own interests and quiriness, especially as we get older. I admire this. It makes for a fun environment.*

*Working with my volunteers is the part of my job I love the most. They are very honest people, motivated by doing good. Being in a paid role, it is very important that I pull my weight, be open about my behaviour and ensure they feel valued and are enjoying the experience of volunteering in the store. People like Lyn make the store a very special one."*

Lyn agrees that it is very hard getting volunteers. In the past, there were more willing locals. The store has also seen some gain employment as a result of their volunteering and work experience which is pleasing. She offers this concluding remark.

*Come and work for the Vinnies. We are a beautiful team and we have the best manager in the world.*

# Conference members come into contact with people who are often used to being voiceless and invisible. The St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria works to bring our companions in from the margins by making sure they matter and they are heard.

Listening attentively and giving of his time in a quiet but effective way is a special gift that Donald member, Tony Goode is well known for; not only for the people he assists, but also with his fellow members. Witnessing Tony moving unobtrusively between members attending the Wimmera Avoca Tyrell Regional Council meeting is a clear demonstration of this. He helps each person with I.T and administrative tasks in his trademark, patient, capable and reassuring way. He clearly enjoys giving and the contact he has with others. There is witty repartee and a twinkle in his eye. His presence makes people feel at ease.

Born and raised in St Arnaud, Tony has lived in Donald for the last 35 years. Donald has weathered its way through the familiar plight of many small towns: it has shrinking school enrolments and an ageing profile, little in the way of permanent employment and has lost many services such as public transport. Once cheap housing that drew newcomers there is now unaffordable particularly if only occasional casual work is on offer.

Having taught until retirement and then volunteering to assist struggling students, he is well known and respected. Life membership has been bestowed upon him by the Australian Rules Umpire Association and several local sporting associations. He is a committed environmentalist

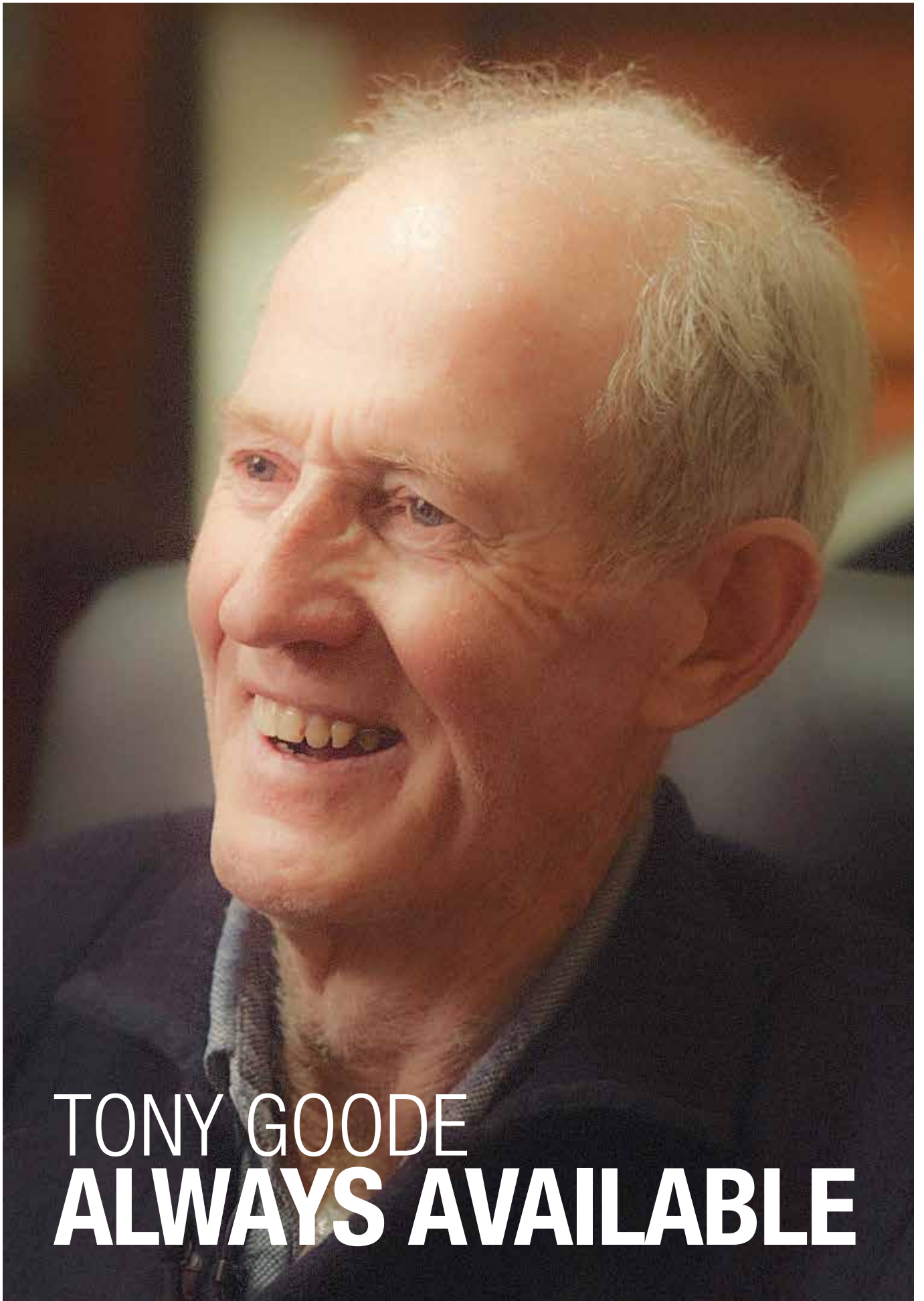
and continues his recycling programs that sees profits distributed among sporting clubs. He is widely connected and uses this to benefit local communities. Everyone knows Tony, locally as 'Goody'. To say he is a contributor is an understatement. The truth is he enjoys assisting people. Fellow members question if he ever has time to sleep.

## Examples of assistance

Tony shares all his talents willingly. Members speak of his persistence in pursuing justice for companions; the young woman who had obtained beds for her children through a Buy Now, Pay Later scheme: the enticement of no deposit, 6 months interest free terms, until the sinking reality sets in after the honeymoon period is over. The mother is hit with excessively high interest terms and pressure tactics including threats to repossess the furniture even though she had made many interest payments.

Tony intervened on several levels to protect the young mother. He arranged for another church agency to prepare a manageable budget, while he dealt directly with the debt collectors, the credit company, and the company's head office. Over a five month period, he negotiated a reduction in the outstanding amount, the conference made a contribution and the interest was waived subject to the woman honouring six more payments.

Another time he helped a man who had relocated after a relationship breakdown. The man found accommodation and Tony arranged the loan of a fridge and microwave from the church hall. He organised for the conference to assist the man to get his car back on the road so he was able to work. Six months later the man's rental is sold. He then moves to another country town, leaving belongings he had stored in the Vinnies shed. Tony attempts contact with the man several times to arrange pick up but



TONY GOODE  
**ALWAYS AVAILABLE**



does not want to hassle him. Six months later, the man collects his goods. Tony respects where this man is and allows him to manage his life as best he can.

Members reflect that Tony thinks deeply about the best way to make a difference to people's lives, both for immediate needs and in the longer term and to make sure they don't move further towards the margins. This goes beyond handing out a food voucher or paying utility bills. He comes up with practical and life changing ideas to help people. Examples include purchasing cars with manageable repayment plans, securing part time employment for people and finding accommodation when none is obviously available.

He started buying groceries for a young couple at the local supermarket and delivering to their home because they have been banned from entering the supermarket. He sees the need and the flow on consequences of not acting. Other conference members questioned whether the family had dug their own hole by their actions and should continue to be helped, but recognise that Tony helps them reflect on what they do and the fundamentals of why they joined the conference. Everyone learns a great deal from Tony's quiet example.

Utilising small bequests from parishioners, Tony developed a no interest loans scheme for essential goods such as white goods, car and hot water service repairs. His record keeping was meticulous. The scheme had a reasonably good repayment rate while recognising some will always fall behind due to life challenges.

### **Helping members**

Over the years since joining in the early 1980s, first as a member of Casterton Conference and in 1986, joining the Donald Conference, he has also taken on more senior roles. In 2006 Wimmera/Avoca Tyrell Regional President Chris Hogan asked him to become the regional treasurer which he had no hesitation in accepting. He continued on in this role, also



*Wimmera Avoca Tyrell Regional meeting, Ararat, July 2022*

assisting two other regional presidents through this period. As Chris puts it:

*Tony's willingness to help conference treasurers in their roles is second to none. He will help over the phone anytime. He is also happy to travel vast distances to do one on one work with the members or do it remotely if the members are computer literate.*

Tony has also taken on the role of North West Central Council Treasurer. President Chris Pye equally sings his praises. Nothing is ever too difficult for Tony.

*Tony has provided exceptional determination to master the intricacies on the Society's Treasurers Portal that captures all income and expenditure in the NWCC. In his former life as a teacher, he used Apple computers running Mac operating systems, so this involved a significant learning curve. We've also had the recent advent of credit cards.*





*Regional and Conference expenditure is monitored against formal budgets by Tony and he always reports Profit and Loss Statements in a timely manner at Regional and Central Council meetings.*

### **Final words**

Tony is confronting his own challenge with a diagnosis of Motor Neurone disease. He is determined to continue to utilise every moment to assist others. His loving and supportive family understand this is what Tony wishes to do.

It is almost impossible to encapsulate the breadth and impact of all Tony has done as a Vincentian. He lives out his strong faith with humility, gentle determination and compassion. He is an invaluable asset to the entire region. His willingness to learn new tasks and systems and then teach others; really, his unstinting willingness to take on any task and specifically, his way with people in need is beyond compare. As Chris Hogan explains:

*I count myself lucky as many others do, to have Tony in their midst. He has not only been a good friend to me for over 18 years but he is also someone that I have learnt so much from. Probably above all, is his ability to see the good and positive side of people and situations when I couldn't.*

### Record of service

## **Tony Goode**

- 1981 Casterton Conference
- 1986 Donald Conference
- 2006 Wimmera Avoca Tyrell,  
Regional Treasurer
- North West Central Council,  
Treasurer



# MICHAEL IVERSON **A MENTOR TO MANY**

Michael Iverson is the longest serving Vincentian of this year's honourees with his membership spanning 58 years. This has given him a wealth of knowledge which, along with his personal gifts, have greatly benefitted the Wangaratta and Wodonga conferences, the Upper Murray Region and the North East Central Council. This longevity and Michael's thoughtful reflections provide yet another glimpse into former days of conference life; the way we were and what the future may hold.





### **Early start as a Vincentian**

Michael grew up in a family steeped in Vincentian tradition. His father was a member of St Pat's Conference, Albury. His Uncle Jack was a regional president in New South Wales.

Michael joined the Young Christian Workers (YCW) and a junior Vinnies his father helped establish at Christian Brothers College Albury. These early experiences embedded in Michael a strong sense that helping others was part of the normal pattern of life. One of Michael's early memories of Society activities relates to the monthly paper collection.

*Members from the Albury and Wodonga conferences drove along streets with young boys*

*acting as runners, collecting old newspapers. We had great fun. The papers were sent to the Broadford Paper Mill and funds raised were shared between the three conferences. Dad was the treasurer at St Pat's and it was quite a decent source of revenue.*

Michael also remembers as a young member, visiting children at the old Albury Base hospital. It was a big ward and the young boys knew most of the children so it was a pleasant past time.

### **Wangaratta and Wodonga Conferences**

In 1964 and newlywed, he and wife Barbara moved to Wangaratta and joined Our Lady's

parish. The Parish Priest encouraged Michael to attend the conference meetings held every Monday evening.

Michael reflects that the order of conference proceedings have stayed true to form over the years. The meeting always had opening and closing prayers, although they were different to the ones used today. The spiritual reflection was always a chapter read from 'The Blue Book' (The Rule). The main differences were that the PP was always present and informing the members who they were to visit.

The centrality of the parish in Catholics' lives was much stronger then. It was quite common for the Priest to call Barbara during the day asking for someone to be assisted. A neighbour may have alerted the priest to a family in distress or a school may have made contact on behalf of a family. Word would travel to the priests about who was in need and often, those in need asked for help directly from the presbytery.

*The priest would give us a list of people to visit and we'd go out in pairs after work – all male then and knock on doors. We'd take food or what was needed. Looking back, it always seems a pity that women weren't involved as they could have added a valuable dimension.*

### **Establishing a shop**

Before the broad advent of Vinnies stores, conferences stored items often in a church building or in someone's garage. These arrangements were always informed by good intentions but not organised well.

In 1969, the Regional Council asked Michael to oversee the establishment of a stores committee. Many people contributed towards ensuring a proper, professional process ensued.

Fred Burgess had experience of setting up a store in Bendigo and shared his knowledge. State Stores President Jim Carroll came up from Melbourne and was very encouraging. In 1970, the Society bought a property in Ryley Street. It was a decent sized property with a wide street

frontage and an old house at the back. It was the first properly planned store outside of Melbourne. All the region's conferences brought carloads of items; one member brought three carloads from Corryong. Monsignor Hussey opened it and spoke about a dream to provide shelter out the back for itinerant people. This never came to fruition with the store eventually taken over by Kmart which, as part of the deal, financed the purchase of a replacement Vinnies store in Rowan Street.

In 2004, Michael and Barbara moved to Wodonga. Michael joined the St Leo's Conference.

### **Career benefits to the Society**

Michael's career as a technician repairing and servicing cash registers and adding machines brought him into contact with emerging computer technology. In the process, he learned a great deal about spreadsheets and databases, which has been to the great benefit of the Upper Murray conferences and indeed the North East Central Council.

Michael set up databases for St Pat's and Our Lady's Conferences in Wangaratta and St Leo's in Wodonga and helped where else it was needed. Eventually, Phil Mackey in head office devised in Michael's words "a brilliant database" which is now used throughout the region. Rosanne Hill, formerly President Upper Murray Region and recently appointed President NECC speaks of the bonus Michael's expertise brings.

*Michael's shares his technical knowledge broadly. He trains people to use a database and makes sure people can use computers. He is always willing to fix any problems that arise.*

### **A mentor to many**

Rosanne elaborates on both the knowledge and personal attributes that Michael has brought to the benefit of the North East Central Council's conferences and regions broadly and as Regional Secretary in her term as President.

*Michael has a quiet, encouraging way of assisting members when they are new. I've known Michael since I started as a raw recruit. I'd never had*



*anything to do with the Society up until then. He was my mentor and educator. He quietly goes about things and has a knack of having everything organised: agenda, reports all ready to go for a meeting.*

*He has affinity with people. He looks into people's broader needs which might relate to their children, transport, bills. He makes sure he looks after them along the way.*

*His humility, knowledge and understanding of the ethos are second to none. He showed me how I could use that expanded knowledge to do the same in my conference.*

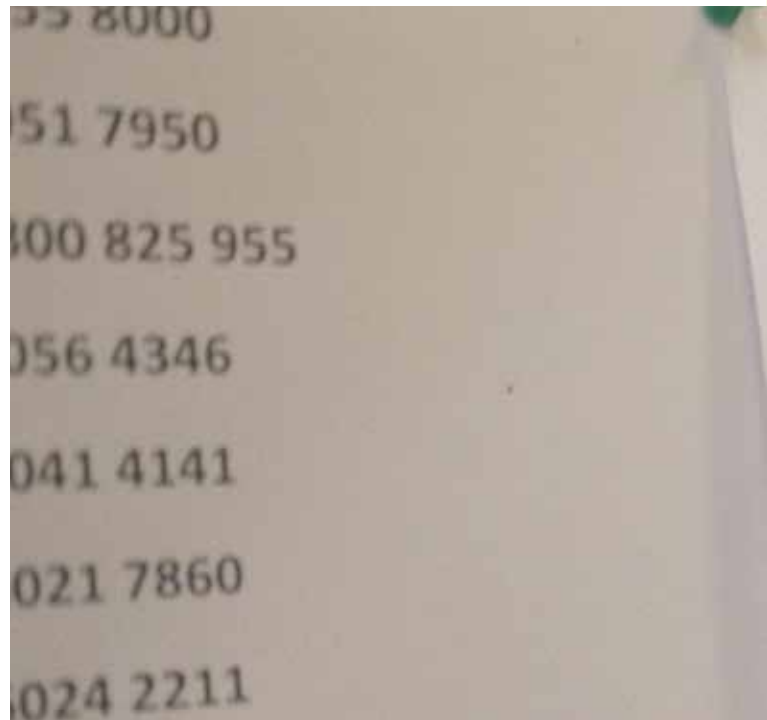
### **Changes over the years**

Michael believes that while times change, much stays the same. Throughout these past five decades, he continues to see people struggling to make ends meet. It's always been the case that the Society helps many people in an ongoing way. The current cost of living increases due to inflation, utility price hikes - petrol and rent are particular concerns for rural areas, wage stagnation particularly at the lower end - is contributing to increased demand as pressure mounts and, potentially, a recession looms.

The advent of SVDP credit cards has made assisting people much simpler. As well, there was not the array of government assistance available then as exist today such as Commonwealth Rent Assistance and energy concessions.

Michael makes special mention of the foodbank in Wodonga established by an inter-church group of which the conference actively participated. Members hand out cards to companions which achieve dramatic savings. For example, a \$25 card provides \$150 worth of groceries. This is a great help to struggling families. Michael speaks of the 'rosy' feeling members receive from seeing the support companions receive.

The Upper Murray Regional Council has lost three conferences: Corryong, Yackandandah and Rutherglen. More of the workload now falls back on Chiltern, Wodonga and Tallangatta.



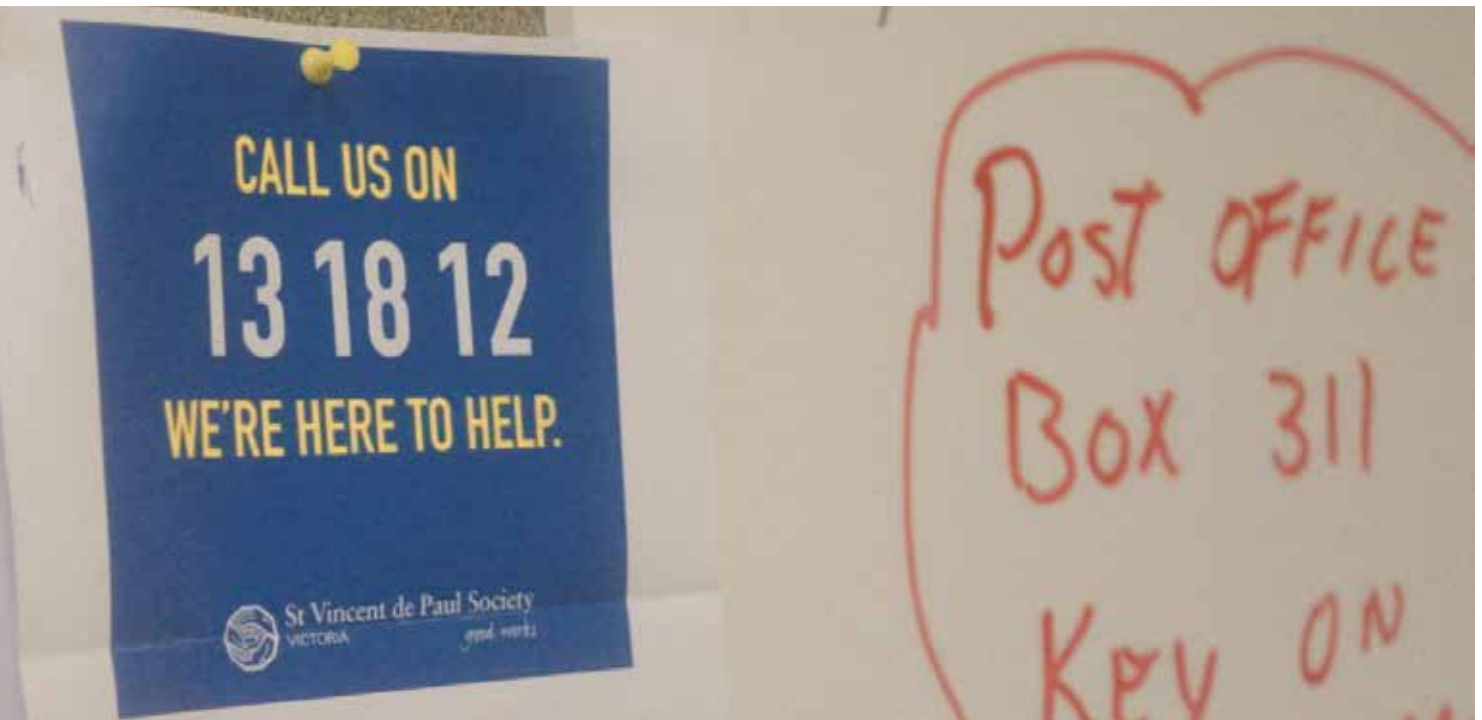
*We need new presidents. I'm not sure how this will be solved. Prayer perhaps and focusing on developing members to feel comfortable to take on office bearer positions.*

*The reliance on ageing members is a reality. Covid affected recruitment and people's desire to join things. Wodonga Conference will continue to answer calls for assistance 3 times per week.*

### **Networking and outside interests**

Michael has always been involved in a range of organisations and interests and these networks reap benefits for the Society and broader community. He was for 25 years involved with Glenrowan Lions, collaborates with other churches towards addressing need and remains active in his parish. Past school and employment involvement as well as his contributions as an accomplished violinist have added much to people's lives in the region. Over the years, this cross fertilisation has also brought new members to Michael's conferences and the joy of enduring friendships.

Michael and Barbara moved into a retirement village 4 years ago. This has opened up new connections and committees. Michael hopes to find more time to be involved in these.



Michael has been involved in musical theatre in Albury and Wangaratta. This has been a time to relax and have a break from life's worries. Michael values the opportunity that music provides to have a different focus and both gain pleasure and give pleasure to others. Michael is known to be an exceptionally good listener in his conference work and this may be a talent he extends to his musical accomplishments.

Re-reading the inspiring stories of Frederic Ozanam, Mathew Talbot and Victoria's founding fathers revitalises Michael's conviction and sense of purpose. It reminds him we are here to help and do this to the best of our abilities.

### Final words

*Being a Vincentian has been the strongest focus in my life. When Vincentians see something that needs to be done, we do something. And with your help Lord, I will get through whatever you throw my way. I hope to continue being a member for some years.*

*If your object in life is wanting to assist other people, this is the place to start. It's a good avenue. You don't join the Society to get warm feelings, but they come whether you want them or not.*

### Record of service

#### Michael Iverson

- 1964 Joined Our Lady's Conference, Wangaratta
- 1965 Appointed President, Our Lady's Conference and joined Wangaratta Regional Council
- 1969 Appointed Stores President, Wangaratta Regional Council
- 1995 Joined St Patrick's Conference, Wangaratta
- 2004 Joined St Leo's Conference, Wodonga
- 2005 Secretary, St Leo's Conference
- 2005 Secretary, North East Central Council
- 2010 President, Upper Murray Regional Council (3 years)
- 2014 Secretary, Upper Murray Regional Council

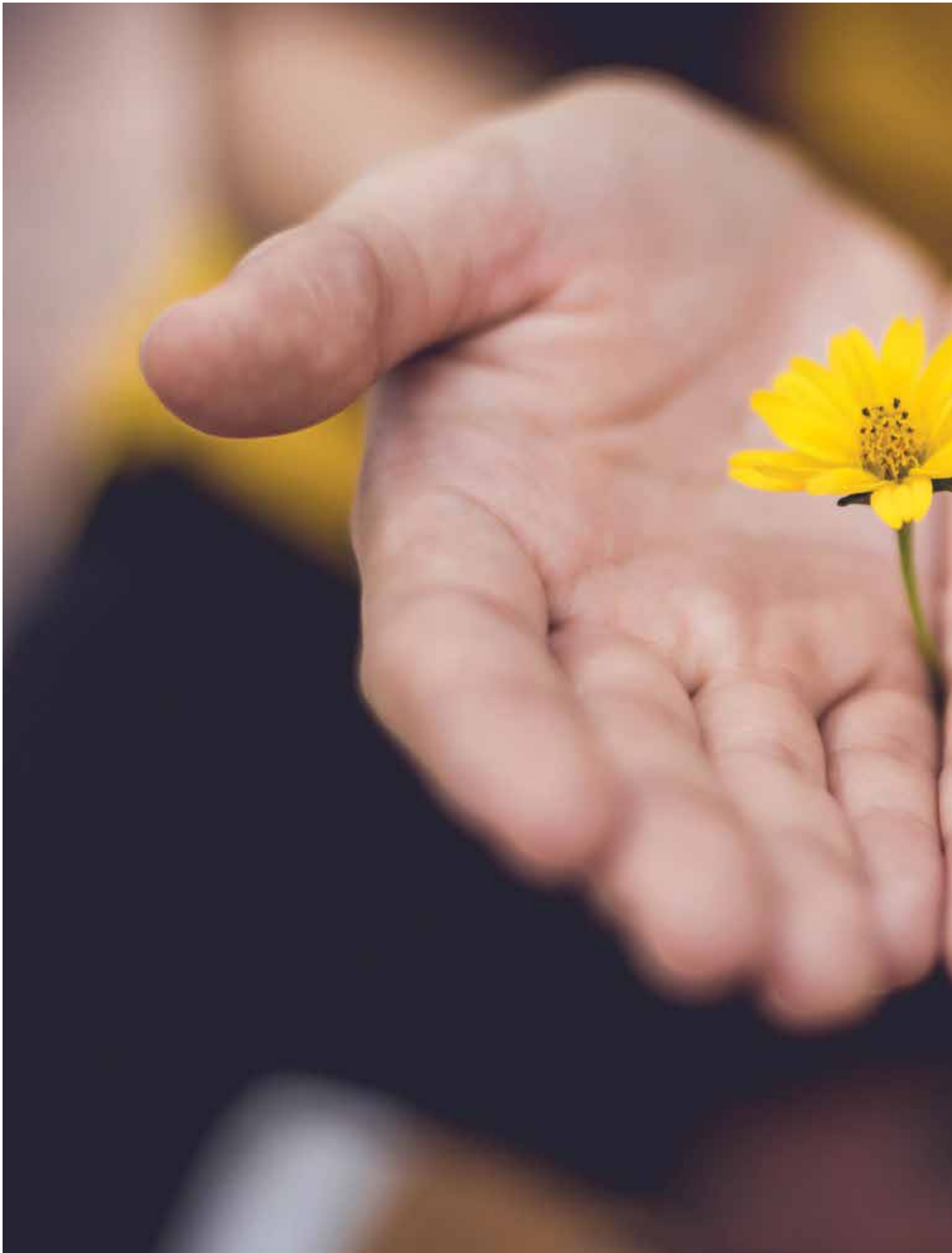




Photo by Lina Trochez on Unsplash



Solving problems often by bringing opposing parties together to respectfully find middle ground, enabling good initiatives to be implemented and helping a person see their worth, are some of the benefits many companions and communities have gained from Tony's involvement.

Tony is part of a generation of men of faith, who demonstrate innate qualities of decency, respect for and readiness to help others, while as well encouraging people to help themselves. Tony is a walking history lesson in the breadth of ways the Society has assisted people over several decades. The following is an attempt to provide a number of examples of the thoughtful responses Tony has arranged or facilitated in his various roles in the Society.

In 1992, while still working full-time, Tony was approached through his parish of St Francis Xavier, Box Hill, to consider joining the conference. Tony accompanied the then President, Jack Stagg on many visits to become acquainted with the role. It was a very good orientation. New members had a six month probation, which was a good period of time for Tony to decide if he had what it took to be a good member.

*Jack provided terrific on-the-job training. He had a gentle way and was very good with people. When people say we need formal training, I always suggest that this is the job of the conference president.*

Tony remembers meeting many Indo Chinese refugees and people fleeing the civil conflict in Sri Lanka who were establishing themselves in their new homeland. One family he recalls helping had nothing and the conference fitted out their accommodation with household goods. Years later, the family contacted Tony to thank the conference for setting them up for their new life here. They were now working and had bought a house. They wanted to donate back all the belongings they had been given.

In 1993, Tony became Conference President. A highlight of his term was establishing a tutoring programme with Year 11 students from Sion College to help struggling students at St Francis Xavier Primary School.

Later, Tony became Regional Council President. In those days, RCPs were responsible for Centres of Charity, now known as our stores or shops. The Vinnies were operating from a very small shop in Surrey Hills which was inadequate and unsafe. They relocated to a new venue which is still in operation in Mont Albert. There were no funds available to refurbish the shopfront, so the members went above and beyond in carrying out the necessary renovation work before the shop opened.

It was the start of understanding the bigger picture and some of the challenges when conference presidents did not see eye to eye.

In 2001, the State President, Syd Tutton appointed Tony as Vice President. Syd had inherited some unfinished challenges. Tony was kept busy, mostly in the country, often brokering 'peace talks' when a dispute emerged. There was a long standing dispute between State Council and one Central Council and Tony was appointed as administrator for almost a year until the matter was resolved.

*Throughout this time, I reminded all the Central Council regional and conference presidents to focus on ensuring that people in need were not affected by the dispute.*

In this time, Syd and Tony formed a committee to devise a six year, strategic plan. This gave a sense of direction and purpose that had been lacking.

### **Becoming North West Central Council President**

Tony enjoyed his time in county towns even when it involved challenging conversations. In 2005, Tony was elected, President of the North West Central Council.



# TONY KEANEY GOING THAT EXTRA MILE

A career in management at Telstra and involvement in footy clubs as a player, team manager and recruiter, provided an array of skills and experience that Tony Keaney has brought to his thirty years as a member.



*Margaret Gearon, Steve Kilroe-Smith, Tony Lobo, Tony Keaney, Blackburn South Conference meeting*

### **Victoria's 1990s-2010 major drought**

The Society is no stranger to supporting communities affected by natural disasters such as bushfires and floods. The unrelenting, severe nature of the major drought over the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, took its toll on the bush, in particular the Wimmera and Sunraysia districts.

Under Tony's leadership, much was achieved to alleviate hardship in drought-ravaged communities and to go that further mile for several causes. Members were creative and responsive and truly lived out the Ozanam quote:

*No work of charity is foreign to the Society.*

Farmers are loath to ask for help and baulk at the thought of receiving charity, even though they desperately needed help through this long, harsh drought. With the assistance of dedicated Vincentians in the NWCC, a No Interest Loans Scheme was established. This was a positive way to remove the sense of charity as farmers could repay with generous terms, the funds to for example, replace essential tools.

Tony asked the NWCC regions not affected by the drought if they could assist their struggling neighbouring communities. Jim Grealish was now State President and State Council agreed to provide \$50,000 to distribute as further assistance to families who were severely drought affected. A very innovative use of \$20,000 was for water and maintenance at the Hopetoun Swimming Pool. This enabled a most essential community facility to re-open over a particularly long, hot and taxing spell.

*We also worked in with local school principals, who identified families in desperate need of financial assistance to enable their children to participate in normal school activities such as excursions.*

*We held 'pamper days' for the women of the region and arranged a Sportsman's Night for the men with David Parkin as the guest speaker.*

### **Other Special Works in NWCC**

A significant initiative with the permission of the Bishop of Sandhurst, was establishing Independent Living Units at Red Cliffs on





Church-owned land. This was initiated by the Regional President, Bob Pollock.

Tony was also involved in establishing a Budget Grocery Outlet in Wendouree West and later, in Mildura; which was also organised by Bob Pollock.

Aside from responding to the drought, in Tony's term, there were several quite exceptional acts of kindness shown to families separated by long distances. There were also individually tailored responses to victims of family violence that were enabled by both the local conference and generous locals. Good begets good.

### **Home turf**

Because of Tony's involvement in country Victoria, it is easy to forget that he was a member of Blackburn South Conference, where he also served as president and vice-president over a number of years.

Blackburn South members give many poignant accounts of Tony going that extra mile in how to best assist a companion. The common thread is Tony's capacity to remain involved and work through issues that are often holding a person

back from getting on with their life. Examples include advocating to a number of magistrates to have tollway fines written off with a part payment by the Conference. This companion was then able to take steps to gain TAFE training and acquire work as a bus driver. Another case involved negotiating a reduction in utilities arrears totalling more than \$12,000 and then assisting the man to apply for work at a supermarket.

The Conference often visited a pretty typical rooming house in the area. The residents paid exorbitant rent for very little. Tony came to know one resident well, allowing time for the man to open up about his life. He was estranged from his family. Tony was able to gently encourage him to initiate contact.

This man also bought a car that turned out to be a lemon from a dodgy car dealer. Tony and member, John Robinson, (honoured as 2016 A Call to Serve recipient,) accompanied the man to VCAT and helped negotiate a reasonable settlement. Tony maintained contact with the man, encouraging him to remain positive. He eventually obtained a Department of Housing unit.

### **2009 Black Saturday Bushfires**

In 2009, Tony became Ringwood Regional Council President. This brought him in close contact with yet another natural disaster; this time the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires. The efforts of the Eastern Central Council conferences were extraordinary. Between April 2009 and April 2010, the total amount expended was approximately \$1,158,000.00. This was the highest amount expended of the seven Central Councils in Victoria. Again, there were many acts of kindness and generosity extended to people in need.

The Bushfire Relief Committee Minutes detail examples of assistance provided, collaboration with other agencies and the logistics of making everything happen. The number of entries and the level of detail makes clear the effort and dedication that was involved.



The Bushfire Relief Committee organised a Christmas party at Buxton in December 2009 which was a great way for the volunteers to meet the Bushfire victims in a less formal manner. Young Vinnies were there holding children's activities and contributing to making the day an enjoyable one for everyone. Father Christmas visited, distributing toys and gifts that were donated to the Society from all over Australia.

Consultants were engaged to evaluate the Society's response to the 2009 bushfire, in order to continue to learn and reflect on the experience. The efforts of members on the ground were hailed as quite extraordinary. As well, it was noted that St Vincent de Paul Society has a flexibility and a breadth in its ways of working that enables reaching out to people to offer many forms of support beyond material aid. Tony sees these kinds of evaluations as critical for SVDP Victoria to continue to be well prepared for the inevitable, continuing onslaught of natural disasters.

In the midst of tragedy, members like Tony will always do what they can to provide a sense of hope through ongoing support and a sense that nothing is ever too hard if it provides assistance in hard times.

In 2021, Tony and his wife Maureen moved to Croydon to be closer to family. Tony joined the Croydon Conference but remains in contact with his Blackburn South members.

#### Record of service

### **Tony Keaney**

1990	Box Hill Conference
1992	Blackburn South Conference
2001	Vice President, State Council
2005	North West Central Council, President
2009 - 2016	Ringwood Regional Council, President, various terms Vice President and President, Blackburn South Conference
2020	Croydon Conference







Photo by Jack Bass on Unsplash



# GARRY LIAKOUREAS PLANTING A SEED

In our organisation's work to address disadvantage, we see the face of homelessness present in many ways. Every person affected by homelessness has their own unique story. The journey towards homelessness can be a quick, spiralling down or be realised through a lengthier process.







Several years ago, Garry Liakoureas was struggling with mental health issues but never imagined homelessness could happen to him. His was a slow realisation as the reality he only had his car to sleep in sunk in. As he tells it, it took about 10 weeks for him to find the courage to reach out for help.

Garry made contact with VincentCare Victoria and became a client of Ozanam House. Since then, Ozanam House has been transformed into a state of the art, and possibly the largest homelessness resource centre and accommodation service in the Southern Hemisphere. This story is about Garry's contribution as a volunteer. It is also a celebration of the transformed Ozanam House and in particular, its Client Volunteer program.

### **The new Ozanam House**

Today, Oz House as it is affectionately known, is nothing like its former self. Previously, it only provided accommodation and programs for men. Today, it assists people of all genders and under VincentCare's Rainbow Tick accreditation and Reconciliation Action Plan prioritises LGBTQIA+ and First Nations people. It offers accommodation and through its Homelessness Resource Centre, an array of assistance including hot meals, showers, laundry facilities and specialist workers who assist people experiencing homelessness.

It is a carefully designed, beautifully crafted facility with 136 rooms, offering crisis, short term accommodation; extended stay accommodation and permanent homes for people over 55 years of age who receive support through home care packages and who are able to live independently. The whole place evokes a feeling of calm, safety, high quality and amenity. Good design can enhance wellbeing and to enter here is to feel valued.

### **Garry's journey from homelessness**

Garry recalls the early days of coming to Ozanam House. It was intimidating, particularly

when your life was at a low ebb. The former building was not a particularly welcoming or safe space.

*It can be confronting at first coming into any place like this where you will be with lots of people who are strangers. You need support and guidance and you get this from the staff. Without this, you could easily fall into a worse hole.*

Even though Garry describes himself as more reserved than extroverted, he took up the opportunities to participate in several programs. He joined the art therapy group which helped him connect with his creativity. He participated in the acupuncture sessions to increase his motivation. This was his gateway to meditation and mindfulness, which in turn, gave him a sense of calm and clarity. He began walking every day, which was the genesis of the centre's walking group. The centre began a boxing group, where Garry started to benefit from the health and social benefits of participating and exercising.

*Louise asked me if I'd like to volunteer and do a shift at the old Oz House Community Centre. I did the afternoon shift and it felt good. That's where my volunteering started.*

Louise Augustinus is the Senior Worker, Volunteers and Participation and has many years' experience in this role. The Client Volunteer Program is a 2 year recovery program for people who have experienced homelessness. Louise noticed Garry's willingness to participate and his positive way of engaging with others. He has contributed a great deal as a client volunteer and since leaving Ozanam House, has returned as a community volunteer. Garry is a strong advocate for participating in what is offered. Through his example, he is an influential role model to others.

### **Client Volunteer Program**

Being a Client Volunteer is a chance to enhance one's own journey to recovery while sharing



*Garry with Garden Program participants*

valuable lessons and one's own experience for the benefit of other clients. Oz House ensures there are many options available that pick up clients' range of interests. Program participants receive vocational training and are provided with case management support throughout.

Besides assisting with breakfast and lunchtime meals service, Garry has also participated in running the recognition events such as the annual memorial for residents, staff and volunteers who have passed away.

### **Barista training**

Garry was one of Oz House's inaugural baristas who learned coffee making and food safety

through the Client Volunteer program. He then helped set up the O Café at Ozanam Community Centre and later, in the new Ozanam House.

The O-café is currently open three times a week. The volunteers are friendly, welcoming and well trained. It has a gorgeous bright blue espresso machine that would hold its own in any inner city cafe. There is a genuine café vibe as customers and volunteers alike enjoy fantastic coffee along with cheery banter about the AFL season and other matters.

### **Gardening Program**

Garry is a passionate and experienced gardener and horticulturalist. From a young age, he learned



a great deal from his grandfather. It is a passion that developed in a nurturing environment and Garry loves passing on all he knows to others.

The Gardening Program, which Garry started at the former Oz House, is held once a week and alternates between Oz House and the community garden. Today, participants take the short drive to the community garden and the enthusiasm and enjoyment are very much evident. There is a joyous spirit. Garry hands out some trellis' for clients to use in their rooms. A woman walks by and expresses her pleasure in seeing the container beds full of colour and edibles. The community are welcome to help themselves to the produce.

*Plants, landscaping and Nature have always been a part of who I am and who I've been. Since I was a young boy, I used to help my grandfather out in the backyards of Brunswick, with vegetables, fruit trees and chickens. It grounds me and connects me to my roots. (no pun intended).*

The Gardening Program has something for everyone and Garry takes knowledge acquisition

as far as participants want to go. He teaches people about food sufficiency, medicinal properties and therapeutic elements of plants. He explains how oxygenating plants help promote sleep; herbs enhance the flavour of a meal. He hands around rocket flowers, encouraging everyone to try one. He knows from first-hand experience that nurturing and watching a plant grow gives people a purpose to nurture themselves. Clients have a great deal of spare time on their hands. Programs like this helps encourage interacting with others.

*This was certainly the case for me. I had a reason to be there tomorrow and the next day, a future plan and it helps others do that. And if nothing else, people learn something about plants.*

### **Homelessness Ambassador**

Garry also speaks about the experience of homelessness at events and schools; wherever he can have some influence. He speaks compellingly about basic human rights and his role as truth-teller; debunking the stereotypical views about homelessness. He understands first hand that



a person has to be in dire straits to be able to access the right paths. The solutions are more than simply building more homes: homelessness has to be prevented in the first place with more avenues available to divert people away from the downward cycle. It's another example of Garry sowing a seed.

*If there are 1,000 people who have come through these doors, they have 1,000 different stories, 1,000 reasons for being homeless and accessing these services and 1,000 dreams for their futures. Many clients want to work.*

Garry talks of the diverse nature of homelessness. He has met people who were well off and have lost everything and people who have never had anything and are in strife. Everyone needs help. Garry believes the more people are aware of this reality, the better off we will all be.

### **Continuous learning**

Garry is undertaking a Masters Degree in urban horticulture at Melbourne University's Burnley Campus. He is currently finalising his research thesis topic. He wants to eventually be able to write texts for school children about horticulture. This passing on of information is important for him. He feels the skills and knowledge he learned as a young boy were somehow lost over a few decades but there is a renewed awareness and interest. He wants to make this part of everyone's everyday experience. He believes growing food can be part of the preventing homelessness equation.

### **Garry's hope for the future**

Garry is a wonderful example of the benefits of volunteering, both for the giver and the receiver. He reflects that he gets more out of it than he gives and that it is beneficial for him to be reminded of his own journey to recovery. He has learned a great deal more about himself and others through his journey over the last five years. He has also observed first-hand the inequities and prevailing structural causes that keep people without shelter. This has given Garry authority and influence in what he is able to achieve, both for himself and

for others. He gives credit where it is due for his development.

*The staff here are genuine and invested in each client. There is no judgement. They want you to improve. You are not just a case. They will help in any way they can.*

He feels good at Ozanam House and this is why he comes back as a community volunteer. He knows he is adding value be it in the gardening program or on his speaking engagements. He thinks about his actions and about what he says and is aware of the audience and their capacity to understand the message. He is well able to put himself in a person's shoes and mentor accordingly.

His dream is for no one to be homeless. He sees people sleeping rough in his neighbourhood and wishes there were more Oz Houses. Everyone needs a stepping stone to a better life.

He speaks about the lack of action that could be easily taken. Since the pandemic, there is only 30% occupancy in city buildings. The infrastructure is there and some of this vacant stock could be utilised to house people. A few floors in a building would be sufficient and would avoid it becoming a ghetto. There are plenty of opportunities but Government has to be the catalyst: Government determines policy and action on who gets a house and who loses their home. We need less bureaucracy, less hold ups and more action. This way we could end homelessness.

### **Final words**

*I feel good being here. It's a safe place and helps so many. I like to help people on their journey and to understand the part nurturing plants can have in this. I see the joy when I give people a plant: something for nothing. It's a living thing. I don't want anything in return.*

*Give something a go. You never know where it will take you. I wasn't much of a public speaker but I'm ok at it now.*

Keep planting those seeds Garry.





CATH McMAHON  
**EVERY DREAM  
PRECEDES A GOAL**

To dream is to envisage a better situation. Dedication to the cause can make the dream a reality.





*Kerrie Volk, Cath McMahon, Trish Veevers and Jo de Boer*

Bairnsdale Assistance Centre which relocated to new and larger premises in 2021, is the focus of Cath McMahon’s dream. It has come a long way to reaching fruition due to perseverance and a wonderful team supporting each other’s shared vision.

Cath has a passion for Vinnies that is palpable whether you meet her in person or talk over the phone. This passion permeates the whole team at the B.A.C which has a welcoming, inclusive and relaxing vibe. Cath and her members are dressed in their Vinnies blue polo shirts with “We are here” emblazoned on them.

There is a strong sense the Society has evolved greatly since the days of secret men’s business in conferences. It is proudly ‘out there’ promoting its works and connecting across the community. The Centre now has a more prominent address and it is well known to locals and the larger region it covers; what is colloquially described as “Bairnsdale and beyond”. The coverage is

across most of East Gippsland, extending as far as Omeo. This is too vast for home visitation. Bairnsdale is a key town and people come here for other appointments so a visit to the Centre is convenient. The members are concerned about the high need in Lakes Entrance and plans are afoot to establish a stronger Society presence there, working in with other church agencies and the back up support of the Vinnies store.

### **Understanding need**

Cath is one of six children born into a comfortably off family but experienced a dramatic change of circumstances when, at four years of age, an accident rendered her father quadriplegic. Losing the main breadwinner suddenly meant the family needed help to make ends meet. The St Vincent de Paul Society was a backstop and Cath now realises Christmas presents and much needed items were provided by the Vinnies. Cath worked for many years as a nurse, primarily in nurse education and community health, with a stint in an



Aboriginal Community Health Centre in Bairnsdale. She believes her life trajectory developed an instinct for and a desire to do something about unmet need. She always planned to volunteer with the Society when her children were grown up and did this firstly in Melbourne and then for the last seven years in Bairnsdale.

This instinct has been heightened by transformative training courses like *Bridges out of poverty*. Its philosophy challenges misconceived ideas many have about poverty and helps develop a more respectful and helpful outlook and response. The concept of 'Mutual exchange' comes from this training and Cath and her team encourage companions to recognise that while the Centre helps, they are also asking each person to think about what they can do for themselves.

This instinct for addressing need is one key reason Cath was determined to establish a way homeless people could access a free shower and laundry facilities. It became apparent that this

was a particular need in the town. Cath lobbied Council for a way to use the public pool's amenities but this was knocked back.

In 2020, with agreement of the CEO and State Council to find bigger premises, Cath recognised the MacLeod St shop front was ideal on many fronts and in particular, as a former gym, it had a bathroom.

### **Rosalie's Place**

Cath's pride is very evident as she shows us around the spacious bathroom and laundry, fully equipped for a person to enjoy the recuperative effect of a warm shower. Everything is supplied: towels, personal items. If the person needs clean clothes, they are given a voucher to pick some up at Vinnies store nearby. A commercial washing machine and dryer have been donated by Miele.

*People can look dishevelled and weary but after they have had a shower, they honestly look ten years younger. The smile on their faces says it all.*

Naming this space after Rosalie is very appropriate. There is a strong female presence in the Centre and as the story of Sr Rosalie Rendu goes, where there was poverty, there she could always be found, establishing schools, night shelters, soup kitchens and all the time visiting the poor and the sick. Rosalie trusted in God's providence and excelled in gathering support from benefactors. Cath has similarly used her influence and networking to gain support for B.A.C.

### **The triple whammy of drought, Bushfires and Covid**

It was in Cath's term as Conference president, that the area was firstly, heavily in drought – and is still assisting people – and then hit by fires – also still supporting victims – and then, the third wave of disaster as Covid landed.

The Bairnsdale team worked a minimum 14 hour days throughout the aftermath of the 2019/2020 bushfires. Although the Society is not normally



a first responder to a natural disaster – its role is recovery – the team could not stand back with so much trauma and need in evidence. They set up a makeshift post at the Evacuation Centre and helped in whatever ways they could.

Other agencies referred people to them; it was recognised that the Society is not restricted in ways that other agencies are. They were able to respond quickly to a diverse range of requests. People had lost hearing aids in the fire, credit cards, all sorts of small but essential items that the Vinnies team could replace. A pregnant woman needed somewhere to stay.

Cath remembers a young man covered in soot, weary from fighting a losing battle to save his house, wanting a pair of work boots. He pointed to his own where the rubber soles had melted. He wanted to go back and help save his neighbour's house. Cath explained there was little likelihood she could find what he wanted.

Almost immediately, another young man turned up. His organisation had items they wanted to donate that might be useful and yes, he had some work boots. Cath found the first man queueing at another table. The boots fitted perfectly. For Cath, it was like an angel had visited them or maybe Rosalie was watching over them.

*The past four years has been an incredibly busy and challenging time. I could not have done this without this awesome team. Everyone helped through these very long days. We became like family relying on each other so much. We look after each other so that we can in turn look after others.*

No one could have imagined the layering of trauma these disasters imposed on the area and it still lives on for many. The Centre still see people traumatised, who need support. This week for example, an 80 year old widowed man in a remote location, who was severely affected by the fire, contacted the Centre. He had no food. With the recent rain falls, his cattle were stranded and he couldn't get them back. President Trish Veevers explains:



*The opening of the new Bairnsdale Assistance Centre, 2021*

*We managed somehow to help him. We will always find a way.*

The Centre has seen an increase in women escaping domestic violence and the associated problem of a severe lack of housing. The Centre always does what it can even if only an interim, practical response. It can pay for a few nights motel accommodation or hands out homelessness kits which include tents, ground sheets, sleeping bags, weather-proof clothing, a Primus cooker and utensils.

The members follow Cath's example and participate in many inter-agency networks. Cath's membership of different networks enabled the opportunity for a Good Shepherd employee to operate from the Centre, offering the No Interest Loans Scheme (NILs) and valuable financial coaching as well. This add on is an important way



to try and help people avoid greater debt. Over-committing is very easy with some Buy Now Pay Later schemes having scant regard for people's ability to service repayments after the honeymoon period is over.

The Centre volunteers greet people and ask them what they are wanting from the Society. It is an attempt to elicit what the person's needs are rather than assuming the members have the answers. With repeat visits from companions, the members encourage the companion to think about what they can do for themselves. This concept of mutual exchange is very important to the Centre.

### **Final words**

Cath has handed over the reins as president to Trish Veevers, but Trish is adamant Cath remains her right hand woman. They are both passionate

members and are part of a dedicated, equally passionate team. They will keep dreaming as a prelude to making things happen for the benefit of the region. As Cath sees it, the Centre is here for the benefit of the entire East Gippsland community.

Next goal is to better support Lakes Entrance's high needs as effectively as possible. Anything is possible and continuing to build on Cath's legacy is very much on the agenda.

### Record of service **Cath McMahon**

2011 Burwood Conference

2015 Bairnsdale Conference



# ANITA WILLIAMS **KEEP CHALLENGING**

Anita Williams has been involved in the Society since first participating in a College Conference as a secondary student. She describes her ongoing involvement over more than 25 years as an evolution: one type of involvement lead to another.









As a Maternal & Child Health Nurse, Anita focuses on supporting and educating people: this complements her Vincentian roles.

She has a particular passion for the Special Work “Roadshow” but also for the challenge we should all heed, first made to Frederic Ozanam by fellow university students.

*Show us your works! What are you doing about your faith? It's a good reminder to us all that we can achieve change and grow.*

### **Challenge and be challenged**

As Anita sees it, our work that assists individuals through home visitation, youth and education programs and other forms of assistance is all

worthwhile. But she believes, in keeping with the spirit of the Society’s founding story, we must also challenge the systemic causes of inequity; the many people put in dire situations because of structural causes. This means analysing why people find themselves in despairing circumstances that our members witness frequently. There is an urgency and an imperative to speak out and be strong advocates for those without a voice.

### **Anita’s SVDP evolution**

Anita joined the Siena College Conference and was involved in activities such as a soup can drive, casual clothes fundraising day and raising awareness of social justice issues in the school.



Through this connection, she attended a camp run by Young Adult Vinnies and participated in her first KDO (Kids Day Out) in Year 12. This motivated her to become more involved.

*I discussed starting a conference in my own area. This then led to attending World Youth Day in Sydney where I met more young Vincentians. Involvement in the State Youth Team led to Roadshow. This special work is probably what has captured my heart and sense of purpose the most.*

### **An influential presence**

Anita has an engaging, joyous and thoughtful manner. It is easy to see why other young people enjoy being around her. Her enthusiasm

is infectious, she has a willingness to step up and she questions the status quo often. She has a touch of Frederic and Rosalie about her: she put her faith into action as a young adult which helped her grow and deepen her Catholic faith. Like Rosalie, she has “gumption”, a word which encapsulates energy, determination and resourcefulness.

She questions the often-quoted phrase she hears about Young Vinnies being the future of the Society.

*We're the 'now', not the future.*

Anita also believes we have created a false delineation between what we categorise as Young Vinnies conferences and adult conferences. Taking a more intergenerational perspective could reap many benefits now and in the long term, for both members and volunteers and the people we assist.

It is refreshing to be around this questioning. The soup vans operate in a more inter-generational mode; could this approach be extended more broadly? Anita is a provocateur and a disruptor of entrenched and dominant views. This thinking is welcome as St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria tackles difficulties recruiting and retaining our valued members and volunteers.

*We're one Vinnies while all offering our individual talents for the benefit of the people that need our help. Within this one group we're able to express our desire to help in ways that enable us to be our best and enjoy what we're doing.*

### **Recruitment, retention and succession planning**

Anita's conviction is compelling, but she is the first to concede that recruiting is often not easy for Young Vinnies.

While the organisation's focus has been on the loss of ageing members, particularly after the impact of Covid on older people, Anita believes recruiting issues cut across many age groups and have always presented challenges within the Society. Our conventional ways often



unintentionally prevent progress. With more rigour, we can promote flexible approaches such as meeting less often and via zoom without losing the spirit of the structures laid out in The Rule.

The volunteers Anita comes to know are often at Uni, embarking on professional careers or learning a trade. This gives the Society a great diversity of skills and experience which is very welcome. Often young members can't meet on week days or be rostered for weekly home visits but can commit to do events and special works planned in advance. Then, as this group get older, while their passion for assisting people doesn't wane, their capacity to make time for other things does. Anita elaborates.

*These young people get to an age, usually around 35, where many have their own families and they can't be as involved. It can continue until people are approaching retirement. How do we keep their talents, their mentoring and their participation? Certainly, Special Works and being mentors is a start – we need more Baileys.*

Having a dynamic, enthusiastic ambassador at the recruitment helm is a good start. Anita talks about her own recruiting approach. She has had experience starting Bennetswood Young Adult Conference. She put feelers out and posted notices in her parish and surrounding ones. She held an information night and by the end of it, had 12 members and a president.

*I tailor my pitch to the person: what are their talents and what are they looking to do? That helps me direct the conversation. It's definitely a plus that at Vinnies, you can use lots of different talents. There's always something you can do and when you have an idea in the Vinnies, people listen.*

### **Relationship at the heart of what Young Vinnies offer**

Anita emphasises the importance of relationships to any work of the Society. Roadshow is a strong example of this. There is the relationship of the youth leaders running the program, the relationship with the schools and the students who are being mentored to step up and assist on the day. There

is the relationship with the conference members who liaise with the families in need beforehand and who are supportive with their time on the day with organising supplies and providing the lunches.

Most importantly, there are the relationships with the children who attend. The children have a wonderful day out not just because of the quality of the activities organised, but because they get so much positive attention and for that day, they feel valued and have something positive to talk about when they go back to school.

The Roadshow program lives out the Society mission perfectly. This is why it is so loved by anyone who has ever been part of it and it has such a loyal following.

When Anita took over coordinating Roadshow, she ensured that the training resources and policies were in place to a high standard. This is critical due to the age of participants and duty of care issues.

Roadshow has evolved to include areas of metropolitan Melbourne as well as maintaining its strong regional focus, rotating between Central Councils. Every activity is a chance to be inventive and dream up some great activities. It's basically taking a Kids Day Out to a regional location.

### **Young Adult Conferences**

Every Young Adult Conference is different. Responses usually develop from the interests and talents of members and identified need in the area. Young Adult Conferences tend to cover a larger geographical area so are not as constrained as the conventional conferences.

There are Kids Days Out, great activities and a chance for the children to have a day away from home doing fun, engaging and educational activities. These may be experiences they have never had before. Kids Days Out are a good stepping stone to holiday camps and a valuable way to build relationships with Vinnies, which is the essence of much of what the Society does.

There is also The Amazing Race which has been re-named The Amazing Scrabble. This is basically



a scavenger hunt in the city. The Young Adult Conferences compete with their group of children. The young adults are known to be very competitive, albeit at a healthy level, and the winning team enjoy bragging rights.

Whatever the activity – it could be bowling, visiting the zoo - the opportunity to be around positive role models is beneficial. Children may live with one parent so they gain confidence from contact with the opposite gender.

There are family days: this is a precious chance for the family to do something together that they may otherwise be unable to do because of the cost. It is a chance to be away from the worries and sense of exclusion often relating to disadvantage. It is also a chance for the relationship and trust between the volunteers and the family to grow.

It can be quite a close time with the children. When you next see them, they share what they have been doing and what is happening in their lives.

### **Leadership**

Anita enjoys the leadership opportunities she has had through the Vinnies. She has also been well mentored and welcomes the opportunity to give back in this way.

*Being Vice President of Siena College Conference was my first Vinnies leadership role, then setting up a conference, I learned a lot. The Society offers training and events that can generate your interest and understanding of leadership. My attitude is, always say yes to these opportunities. You realise it's not so hard, just different. I was also Youth Rep on Eastern Central Council. Being on State Youth Team was additional work but a great opportunity to help and further the work of your own conference.*

Anita recognises that often people just need a point of contact to motivate them and reassure them they can try a new role. Providing mentoring is very important.

### **Many opportunities**

Anita gets a lot out of Vinnies programs and works. She loves meeting other members, the excitement of sharing and the joy from belonging to the Vincentian group.

She's had some unique experiences such as attending World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008. She also went to a World Youth Day in Madrid and afterwards, travelled with a group of Young Vincentians to Paris and did a Vincentian Pilgrimage.

*Through Vinnies, I've even had the unique experience of meeting the Queen and Prince Philip at Government House.*

### **Final words**

Anita counts the friendships she has formed through Vinnies as a significant bonus.

*At this point in my life, having done a few Roadshows, I contribute my learned experience and mentor others. People mentored me. I also enjoy bringing my music ability to various ceremonies and masses. I can even provide first aid at events.*

*I want to continue to contribute to what's best for the people we support.*

#### Record of service

### **Anita Williams**

1999-2000	Soup Van and College Conference Member of Inner East Young Vincentians
2001-2018	President, Burwood Bennettswood Young Vincentians State Youth Team member over many years, including as Bailey
2014	Roadshow President and member Youth retreat committees



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