



A CALL TO SERVE

Vincentian Stories - 2014 Chapter

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State President's Message



Michael Liddy - State President

Dear members, volunteers and staff,

As the newly elected State President of the Society in Victoria, I am both honoured and delighted to present the 2014 Chapter – “Our Story, Our Mission, Our People – A Call to Serve – St Vincent de Paul Society, Victoria.”

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

Our first Conference was established six months after the passing of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam in France. Guided and inspired by Frederic Ozanam's vision, Gerald and his companions established the first Conference in response to the sufferings and cries of the poor 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 by publicly advocating 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 shown compassionate service and a dedication to make the world a better place for all.

In 2013, the State Council, under the then State Presidency of Tony Tome, announced six Vincentian members to be honored in 2014 for their dedication to service, for their compassion, courage and selflessness. As well they are acknowledged as being a modern day example of servant leadership within their respective communities and our Society more broadly.

The richness of each of these stories cannot be overstated.

I congratulate each of the honored members for their service as well as their families for their part in supporting the works of the Society.

In sharing these stories with fellow members, volunteers and staff I believe that each story will add a further thread to the very colorful tapestry that is the story of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria.

Michael Liddy
State President
St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

Elizabeth (Betty) Bond

Faith, Hope and Charity



Elizabeth (Betty) Bond
1925 – 1990

There would be few in the
Society that lived more by the motto
'A hand up not a hand out' than Betty

Introduction

Betty Bond's significant influence on the Victorian Society lives on today, on both a personal level for the many people she assisted as well as on an organisational basis for the Society. She worked tirelessly supporting refugees seeking a new life in Australia, in ways that maximised their chances of successful resettlement. More broadly, Betty produced a comprehensive history of the Victorian Society which maps its history and remains a valuable resource today. While undertaking this task, Betty worked as the Society's first archivist, establishing a proper framework for the development of an archive which continues to play a vital role in maintaining the Society's rich history.

Those who knew Betty well speak of her inherent understanding of the nature of conference work and her affinity for the people she encountered. She was involved in many areas of service, most notably her support of the Vietnamese. She is remembered as demonstrating kindness and perseverance in her pursuits on behalf of those in need.

Pick up a copy of the blue-covered history and one appreciates Betty's rigour in compiling such an accurate and comprehensive record. She also utilised her persuasive writing style to influence debates around many areas of injustice. Her column with *The Advocate* enabled her to communicate her strong adherence to Church doctrine and conventional family values as well as promoting the work of the Society.

Many conference members work so well because they are double acts: committed teams of husbands and wives as Betty and husband Vic were. When Vic became Victorian General Secretary, Betty's support role became even more central to her Society work. Even while supporting Vic, Betty retained a strong individual presence, pursuing her own areas of interest and using her gifts for the benefit of others.

Betty adhered strongly to the founding aim that Society members develop a deeper understanding of Christ through their conference work. She lived for the Church and expressed this devotion practically with over twenty years of service to the Society. Her strong faith – her enduring beacon – an inherent optimism and spirit of perseverance, enabled her to face challenges with grace and humility in the many places she and Vic settled in Victoria.

Her family remained central to her life, with many others she helped becoming part of the informal Bond family. Throughout her life, cut short too early, the Society remained dear to her heart.

Growing up in Camberwell

Elizabeth Ginnane, known mostly as 'Betty' was born in 1925, one of eight children born to Tom and Helena in 1925. The family lived in Camberwell where Betty attended Our Lady of Victories parish school. Her academic ability secured her a secondary scholarship at Siena College.

Betty developed a keen interest in writing from an early age, possibly sparked by her father's employment in the printing works at the Herald. As a young girl she won many writing competitions including first prize in the Shell Essay Competition. This talent and passion would stay with Betty throughout her life.

She also demonstrated from childhood, an acute sense of care towards others. One example is her giving the competition prize money to her mother, enabling the family to enjoy a holiday at the beach.

Her family were devout Catholics and this fervent faith was passed onto Betty. In the words of her daughter Louise, "Mum lived for her religion. It was an important part of who she was."

After school, Betty worked in the Naval War office at Victoria Barracks. In 1948 she moved to Mount Beauty to work for the State Electricity Commission.

Marriage and family

It was at Mt Beauty that Betty met Victor Bond, who worked for the S.E.C. Romance blossomed and they married two years later in 1950. Over their forty years together, they would regularly set up home in different locations according to where Vic's work took them.

Betty and Vic adopted three children, Peter, Anne and Louise. Family life was full with Betty and Vic also raising a nephew and caring for four nieces.

Louise remembers a happy home and parents who never quarrelled. Louise particularly remembers the strong sense of her parents operating as a team. She also remembers her mother's warmth and optimism. A strong memory is of Betty always clack-clacking away on her typewriter keys.



Betty and Vic's Wedding Day,
Our Lady of Victories Church, 1950

Finishing a story was more important for Betty than getting tea ready on time

Finishing a story was more important for Betty than getting tea ready on time. In the evenings, Betty typed from a desk in her bedroom; during the day, from the kitchen table. Betty always delayed putting away the typewriter for as long as she could. Domestic duties were not a high priority for Betty although she created a loving and nurturing home and always took great interest and pride in her children and later, grandchildren.

Louise reiterates how important her mother's faith was to her. Betty was particularly devoted to Our Lady, regularly offering a prayer to Mary. Later in her life, Betty became involved with the Charismatic movement, as she pursued a deeper understanding of her faith.

This desire is also apparent in the many letters and articles she has written where she grapples with societal changes and pressures affecting Catholics. This was standard practice for Betty. She never shied away from confronting a challenge or others' cynicism; even her own self-doubt was explored publicly in her articles. She respected others' opinions but was unabashedly committed to the Church's mainstream and conservative thinking.

Although deeply religious and focused on her faith, Betty had a great sense of humour. There were many laughs in the home. As Louise tells it, for a very smart person, her mother could also be quite silly! Housework was not high on her list. While she saw the role of homemaker as essential and worth safeguarding, she was also part of a generation of women realising they had a great deal more to offer.

She became involved in many activities and causes, often stemming from parish life. Her life was extremely busy and fulfilling. She remained, however, a strong advocate on behalf of stay-at-home wives and mothers, recognising the invaluable and cohesive energy women engendered in the home.

Betty was very much her own person and did things her own way. Very few people realised she had a driver's licence as she was a keen user of public transport. For someone like Betty, always so interested in others' lives and the world

around her, it is no wonder that the chance for a broader view of life afforded from a tram or train appealed. Many remember Betty's prolific use of public transport and her ability to criss-cross Melbourne, often with others in tow. No distance was too great.

Joining the Society

Betty and Vic were both keen to be involved in the good work of the church which led them naturally to membership of the Society.

Louise remembers growing up in Colac where both her parents were involved with the Society. Her parents had previously lived in Benalla. Betty and Vic were founding members of the Colac conference. It was while there in the 1970s that Vic was approached to take on the role of General Secretary of the Victorian Society. The Bonds then moved to Hoppers Crossing to be closer to Melbourne.

Supporting the migrants



Betty and Vic, migrant friend's christening

It was at this time that Betty became involved as a member of the migrant special works conference, which was an initiative of St Andrew's Werribee Conference, to support Wiltona Migrant Hostel at Altona. Conference members came from Werribee, Altona, Altona North and Newport. Wiltona was originally established for the post-war European and British migrants who flocked to Australia. It was then re-opened in the late 1970s to accommodate Indo-Chinese refugees.

Betty's efforts helped approximately 400 families to settle in Victoria. The most significant contribution

Betty made to these newly arrived refugees was helping them find jobs. Les Jones from Hoppers Crossing worked alongside Betty and to this day, retains the utmost admiration for Betty's unstinting contribution.

Betty understood that having a job was the essential prerequisite to settling into a new country.

As Les describes it, Betty took the initiative in seeking out potential employers and positions. She would take the Vietnamese men with her on public transport to wherever she had arranged interviews. She managed to combine the role of quasi-interpreter with advocating for the men and finding work for many. Betty understood that having a job was the essential prerequisite for satisfactorily settling into a new country.

Contact continued with many of these families who regarded the Bonds as family. Every year, on Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day, the families would visit the Bond household – wherever they were living – and Betty and Vic were kept busy attending weddings, birthdays, christenings and other family and celebratory events. Betty was godmother to several children from these families.

Various conferences operated inside the different hostels such as Newbridge at Nunawading, Broadmeadows and Wiltona. It was a way to provide emergency material help but more importantly, personal contact and a bridge between the world of the hostel and the outside world that held promise of a long-term future.

Betty and Vic, along with other conference members, worked to support the migrant families to overcome the obstacles of settling in a new country. Much assistance involved small steps in familiarisation – using public transport, understanding signs, food and shopping places. Arranging outings and visits further assisted with orienting these families to a new life in Australia.

Betty wrote often about the migrant experience in the hostels as a means of broadening understanding and compassion for the plight of refugees. Her special gift became a valuable tool in advocacy which she would use with determination.

The Society has always been active in refugee matters and in the 1970s, as a member of the Catholic Co-ordinating Committee for Refugees, was promoting a community refugee settlement scheme. This allowed refugees to be directly sponsored by groups such as parishes and to bypass the hostel system. A parish

would take responsibility for meeting refugees on arrival and arranging post – arrival settlement needs such as housing, employment and English classes.

As with many special works, conference members do not necessarily have specific expertise or complete understanding of the responsibilities the work will entail. However, the conference members had big hearts and a willingness to work hard on behalf of these migrants. The St Andrew's refugee committee was established by the parish priest at Werribee and the committee and volunteers learned 'on the job' as they proceeded with supporting the migrant families. (Much of Betty's experience at Wiltona echoes John Cannon's experience at the Broadmeadows hostel: (See *A Call to Serve, Vincentian Stories – 2013 Chapter*; "John Cannon: Rising to every challenge.")

A Werribee parishioner leased a home he owned at a price the committee could afford. This enabled a Vietnamese family with nine children to move out of the hostel. Furniture was provided through an appeal at St Andrew's. Werribee Branch of the Catholic Women's League provided further gifts to make the home more comfortable. One gesture was to provide hot water bottles, a thoughtful and sensible gift for families unused to Melbourne's chilly winter.

The broader Werribee community also responded generously, with the Uniting Church offering resources and the Italian community making a donation.

There are many Vietnamese Australians making a significant contribution because of the support the first generation received from Betty and other members of the Society's special works migrant conferences. These lessons are still relevant today.

Betty as writer

Fortunately, for those who followed Betty, she was a prodigious, personal archivist. Betty kept a copy of everything she wrote in scrapbooks and boxes. These provide significant insights into her outlook on life and faith-based matters, and represent a slice of history for a Catholic woman living in Victoria from the 1960s through to the last weeks before her death in 1990.

***Her writing was practical,
sensible and, most importantly,
honest and warm***

Betty used her writing to help make sense of personal and societal challenges and to advocate for greater justice for those missing out. She wrote from a place of pure joy which compelled her to sit down

every day at her typewriter. Betty never embraced computers. Writing really was her 'thing' and it was prolific. She produced many manuscripts, a book of poems and hundreds of articles and letters.

Her writing was practical, sensible and, most importantly, honest and warm. It reveals her sharp mind, cogent thought processes and a woman with the courage of her convictions.

There are fictional stories telling of family dramas that seem to provide a way for Betty to discuss what ordinary people she might have known were tackling. Her main characters were often salt-of-the-earth people with universally relevant dilemmas.

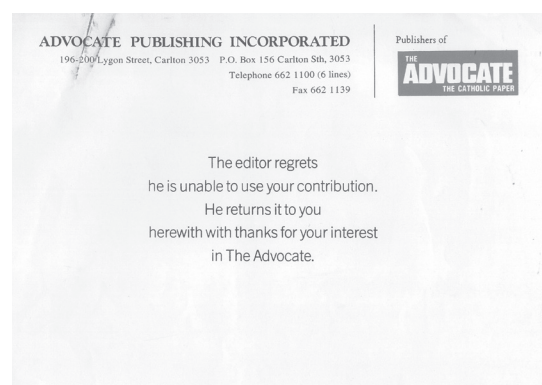
Her editorial letters are a compelling read. One entitled, "Voyages of despair for refugees" (Melbourne Herald, 21/10/81) could have been written by an advocate for asylum seekers today. It pleads with authorities not to turn their backs on "the tragic flotilla of helpless refugees off the coast of Thailand" who were rescued by a passing West German ship. She challenges the belief that many are not genuine refugees, concluding the letter with:

"Real refugees? Could anything but desperate need or fear drive people to it?"

Like many budding writers, Betty experienced the lows of rejection along the way. Within her archive of boxes, there are several rejection slips. Her act of keeping them suggests they served to spur her on. Her persistence paid off.

"Leola Young", guest columnist, *The Advocate*

Her perseverance led to her securing work as a guest columnist with *The Advocate*, a newspaper begun by prominent Irishmen in Melbourne in the 1860s. It was bought by the Melbourne Archdiocese in 1919, eventually folding in 1990. It was seen as representing the Catholic voice on local and overseas issues.



Writing under the pen name, Leola Young, Betty's column was particularly directed at Catholic women. Her very first article entitled: "Editor rang, so here I am" (March 1974) reveals her delight at being given this opportunity. Betty describes the basis on which she sought the position and her qualifications to write for women.

"I liked writing about ordinary people, and as a happily married wife and mother, foster-mother, school committee office-bearer and canteen worker, catechist and joint editor of a parish magazine, I was acquainted with quite a few women. Knew what they thought, talked, laughed and cried about."

Betty's Advocate articles record the issues facing church goers in the mid 1970s to early 1980s. Clear, prosaic writing reveals Betty's efforts to explore and make sense of many mysteries of the Church's teachings as well as her constant pursuit of fairness.

She wrote from a conservative stance, adhering to conventional Church positions; endorsing teachings on family, defending stay-at-home women, opposing the ordination of women. She wrote passionately about why children were turning away from the church, the sanctity of life and her deep concern about the high incidence of abortions. Yet she expressed the need for compassion for women who were faced with these dilemmas. Her articles acknowledge both sides of a debate while promoting her own particular stance. She was not afraid to respond to criticism head on. Many of her articles acknowledge the response from her readership, both those in support and those with contrary views.

Her articles often served as a message of hope

There was no doubt where Betty stood on an issue and her stance was always shaped by Church doctrine, her deepening faith and years of practical life experience. While clearly propagating a particular narrative, her motives were pure. Her writing in these articles was unsensational, clearly argued and conveyed an air of authority. In a way she was promoting people's need to believe in something.

Her articles often served as a message of hope rising above the uncertainty for Catholics struggling with societal trends that challenged the beliefs on which they had been raised.

There was also often a sense she was confiding her inner thoughts to women readers. Some articles contain heartfelt outpourings about not taking action when she should have. Others simply offer practical perspectives and advice.

Many articles have a human-interest angle such as stories about migrant families. "Leola" was clearly astute about The Advocate's considerable readership base. She knew she could use her column to good advantage to influence public debates dear to her heart and those of the people she and Vic supported.

Her carefully recorded and collated store of writing is a wonderful record of themes and practices of the times. For example, in "Vincentian Stores, a help to everybody", Betty reminds us of the original intention of the stores: to provide a cheap place people could buy needed products as well as providing goods for people without the means.

"Long before inflation became a talking point, Vincentian stores were leaders in helping working class families buy at prices they could afford. As in all our stores, we have a 'case' room kept stocked with best quality goods for relief giving, through confidential and compassionate well-tried methods".

Betty's agenda was widely supported by readers of The Advocate. Her column is remembered with great respect and affection by many in the Catholic community.

Writing the Society's history and establishing the Archives

As many have commented, notably the Society's current honorary long-standing archivist, Kevin Slattery, there was probably no other person as well placed as Betty to become the Society's archivist and to write its history. Her credentials were indeed impeccable: she was a long-serving Vincentian, librarian, historian and journalist. She was undertaking her Bachelor of Arts, Librarianship in 1982 as she worked on the history.

Organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the value of honouring their histories. Many other charities and not-for-profit organisations have committed resources to draw on their rich histories but perhaps the Victorian Society has always been ahead of the pack in this regard. At every level – conferences, central council, state council, head office, – the key figures and patrons are celebrated regularly. Prayers and discussions at conference meetings keep the founding spirit alive and relevant.

And significantly, the importance of collecting and preserving records has been supported prominently by a roll call of many State Councils. Writing a history is made much easier if there are intact records. Betty had worked on the history of the



Betty's Graduation Day with daughter Louise and Betty's Sister

Society in Victoria for a number of years. The detailed research she applied to the task – the history was published in 1980 – would have helped her understand the extent of what was required in setting up an archive.

With Betty's appointment as the first official archivist for the Society in 1983, she was able to use her Society knowledge and her library skills to catalogue the collection according to the then recognised Dewey Decimal System. Employed one day per week in this voluntary role, Betty also prepared an addendum to her earlier history, incorporating the later years 1980-1990. The revised history, still a valuable reference point is entitled "The Society of St Vincent de Paul in Victoria 1854-1990".

Sadly, it was as the shorter history neared completion that Betty's health deteriorated. A former State President, Michael Kennelly assisted to complete the text, which was published after Betty's death. Michael succeeded Betty as honorary archivist.

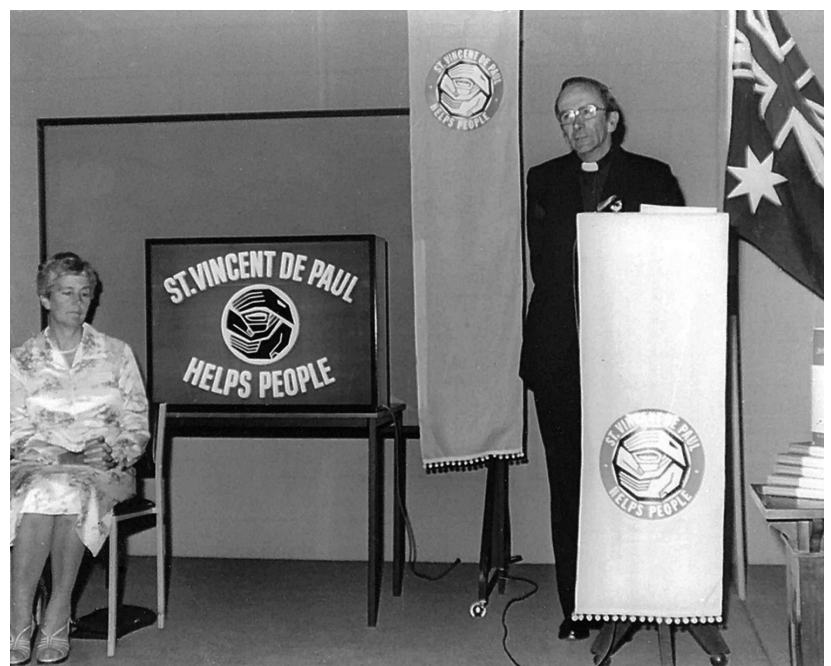
Initially, the former Society headquarters at 585 Little Bourke Street held all historical documents, either in the basement or in the State President's office. A first official home for the archives was established in 1999 in a room in the basement of the State Centres Administration Centre at Brooklyn. State Council honoured the wonderful foundational work of Betty by naming the collection the 'Elizabeth Bond Archives'.

Again, the Society would experience another sad blow with the death of Michael Kennelly in 1996. The following few years saw a deterioration in the state of the archives until retired librarian and Williamstown conference member Maureen O'Neill took on the role of archivist in 1998. Her capacity was boosted when she was joined in 1999 by another retired librarian and member of the Hawthorn conference, Kevin Slattery.

Maureen and Kevin have made a significant contribution by establishing files on all Conferences, Regional Councils, Centres and Special Works.

In 2006, the archives moved to a new home at 335 Flinders Lane where it remains today. These premises were identified and secured at a very modest rental negotiated by State President Syd Tutton. The additional space has enabled the archives to grow and expand to quite a considerable collection. As visitors approach, they are greeted with the words "Elizabeth Bond Archives" etched over the entrance.

Did Betty realise the valuable and enduring legacy her work would contribute to the Society? We will never know if her vision was far reaching or simply a desire to get things in order in a practical sense. However, a visit to the archives, is indeed akin to letting a child loose in a lolly shop. It is a veritable treasure trove of written and pictorial information,



Launch of the Society's history by Archbishop Frank Little, Betty at left

insights and examples of how the Society across Victoria has been going about the business of assisting the poor since its beginnings in 1854.

It is a living social history, catalogued along conference lines and detailing special works. There are examples of works that members initiated that were really ahead of their time and which could be successfully reintroduced today. Some of the reflections of past leaders - General Secretaries and Presidents - are poignant reminders of why the Society exists. These messages remain current. While Ozanam may have warned charity to never look back but always ahead, drawing on this history will continue to equip the Society for the future work while reminding all of its true purpose and focus.



Betty and Vic at Birthday celebration

Moving to Portarlington

Betty and Vic retired to Portarlington. Betty became involved in The University of the Third Age (U3A) creative writing group, tutoring classes and producing an anthology of stories.

Conclusion

People leave their mark in both little ways and with grand gestures. Betty seems to have done both in her Society work. Her efforts over four years to produce the Society's history is an example of Betty's enduring legacy which continues today to be a valuable resource.

There would be few in the Society that lived more by the motto *A hand up not a hand out* than Betty. Betty would no doubt, have viewed her ongoing support of refugees as nothing-out-of-the-ordinary but many people are indebted to her for helping them successfully settle in their adoptive country. A clear acknowledgement of the impact of her efforts was evident at Betty's funeral where more than half who attended were Vietnamese.

There are lessons we can learn from the example of Betty Bond. Most significantly, her advocacy on behalf of refugees whom she saw as misunderstood – even vilified – by the general community, remains as relevant today as it was when in the 1960s and 1970s a different wave of boat people were landing on our shores.

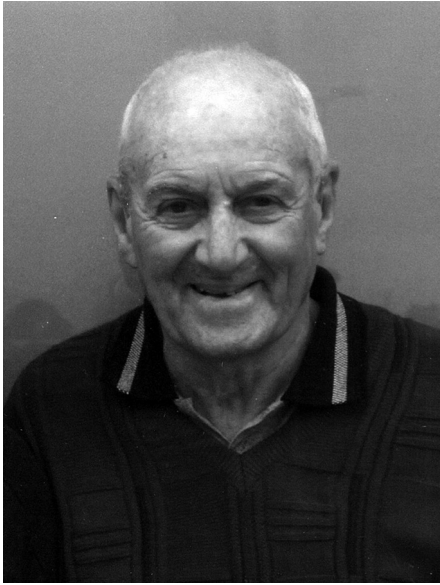
Betty's life was cut short by cancer and there are many in the Society who did not have the chance to know her. Her story can hopefully enable some understanding of her contribution and her sharing of unique gifts for the benefit of many.

Two striking images endure which exemplify her life's work: Betty tirelessly traversing Melbourne on public transport seeking employment opportunities for refugees and Betty typing away at her typewriter, focused on saying what she wanted to say in just the right way.

- 1959 Founding member with Vic Bond, of St Mary's Conference, Colac, remaining as members until late 1970s.
- 1976 - 1977 First President, St Mary's Ladies Conference, Colac.
- 1974 - 1979 Appointed guest columnist, The Advocate, under pen name 'Leola Young'.
- 1977 - 1982 Member, Migrant Special Works Conference, Wiltona Hostel.
- 1980 Completes "Society of St Vincent de Paul, Victoria".
- 1983 President, Midway Conference, (a Migrant Special Work).
- 1983 Appointed St Vincent de Paul Society archivist.
- 1986 Member St Patrick's Ladies Guild, Portarlington.
- 1989 Founding member Drysdale Conference.

Bill Eccles

A life well lived



Bill Eccles

A history of compassionate service in the country and Melbourne

Introduction

Bill Eccles is a longstanding Vincentian, who remains at heart, a country boy. While events in his life saw him and his family move to Melbourne, he retains the lack of pretence and no nonsense values commonly inherent in a country upbringing. These have served him well as his life changed course and particularly in his service as an active conference member for over fifty years.

His story is one of hard work and devotion to family, Church and the Society. It chronicles many important turning points as well as some endearing stories told through his still keenly recalled childhood eyes. Through these, the reader glimpses the cohesive ties of family, love of land and how these contributed to his sense of being part of a shared, bigger purpose.

Bill describes growing up on a dairy farm in startling yet simple detail. He paints a picture of a way of living long gone. Some of his stories would send children today into a spin of envy and disbelief.

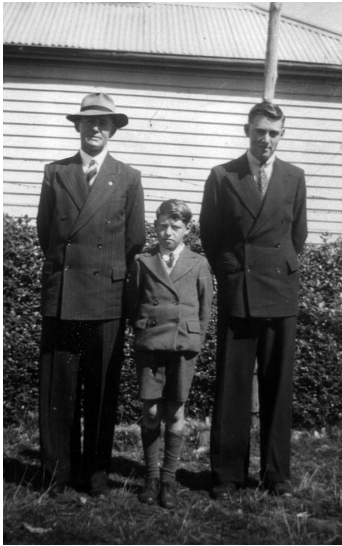
His keen recall of events reveals what conference work in Warrnambool in the late 1950s was like. Moving to Melbourne, he continued his Society involvement, now based for many years at Holy Spirit, Ringwood North. Throughout, he has adhered to fundamental practices for Vincentians while accepting that it is necessary to change with the times. Perhaps it is the farmer in him seeking to strike a balance between tradition and learning. His story provides a gentle warning that the Society remain alert to ensuring the tried and true ways prevail alongside new approaches.

Bill retains a strong sense of responsibility to others while being adept at taking things in his stride and demonstrating a capacity to adapt as changed circumstances require.

There is a saying that people may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel. Bill's gentleness and kindness towards others lives on as a demonstration of this sentiment and of a life well lived.

Growing up in the country

Bill was born on the 28th November 1932 in the Warrnambool base hospital. He was one of five children with an older sister and two younger sisters and one brother. The family grew up on a dairy share farm at Rapunga East. Bill started school at Rapunga East state school,



Bill with his father Les and younger brother Stan

8-10 kilometres out of Warrnambool. Bill remembers walking the two miles to school and back, “rain, hail or shine.” And it sure can rain in these parts. He wore gumboots and if gumboots were not long enough, bare feet sufficed.

At about grade 5, the family moved to nearby Wangoom where his father was able to negotiate a better share of

profits on another dairy farm. The area is perhaps best known for its proximity to the Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve. In the 1860s an Aboriginal reserve was established, administered by the Church of England. One hundred years later, the land would be given to the Kirrae Whurrong Aboriginal Corporation. It continues today in the hands of the original owners.

Bill moved to a Catholic school at Purnim, about ten kilometres out of Warrnambool. Bill and his three sisters rode horses to school. The school had a horse paddock where the horses grazed before taking their charges home at the end of the school day.

Bill’s father decided it was a bit wet for horse riding. He bought a phaeton, a small two wheel jig. A Shetland pony pulled it along with Bill and his sisters on board. Shetlands are renowned for their stubborn behaviour and Bill remembers some memorable rides.

“Quite often, the damn animal would find a puddle and lie down in it to cool off. I’d have to get out and give it a whack to get it going.”

After grade 6, Bill went to a Christian Brothers school in Warrnambool. It was a strict and at times brutal education although Bill respected many of the Brothers who he believes taught him well. He completed his leaving certificate. He would have liked to stay to complete the final year of school but his father suffered a heart attack and needed him on the farm.

Bill remembers milking their eighty cows with his mother and two sisters and then taking the milk to the depot before and after school. His father remained in hospital for three months and was then sent on doctor’s orders to Mildura’s better climate to expedite his recuperation.

Bill learned the hard way, old habits die hard; sometimes it’s time to move on

Bill was fulltime on the farm, doing all sorts of jobs as well as milking and harvesting the hay and oats they grew for feed. They were long days and hard work. Sometimes he was on the end of a pitchfork most of the day.

In those days, ploughing was done with horses until his father bought a tractor. Bill had been so used to horses that he still remembers the fateful day he forgot and told the tractor to “whoa.” The tractor went straight through the fence. Bill learned the hard way, old habits die hard; sometimes it’s time to move on.

Every Wednesday, Bill would drive his mother into Warrnambool for her weekly shopping. Bill didn’t have a driving licence. One day the local police man asked Bill to drive to the police station. Bill was given his licence on the basis of this short drive.

Another job of Bill’s was to once a month drive the dry cows to an outlying paddock. This was a long day’s work and involved crossing a river. The bridge was often washed away in this flood-prone area. The cows would swim across followed by the horse, with Bill holding onto its tail. The dog sat on its saddle. Bill still marvels at the ease with which he undertook this task and wonders how today’s young people would manage.

The charm of farm life was balanced with the realities of providing food and sustenance for the family. From his early teens, Bill was responsible for slaughtering, skinning and quartering a sheep every fortnight and hanging it in a tree. The meat was then stored in flywire netting under the water tanks.

This was the way of the land and Bill’s father taught him how to farm without being wasteful. Bill accepted these jobs as part and parcel of farm-life.

Hard work was the order of the day and there were not many perks but this didn’t stop the Eccles family making their own fun. The necessities of farm life were softened by the deep affection the family had for each other and for an interesting choice of pets.

Bill’s father hand-reared four kookaburras and two magpies from a young age. Bill remembers as clearly as if it was yesterday the birds hanging around the house, coming inside at mealtimes and sitting on the backs of the kitchen chairs.

“They sure let us know if we were late getting their breakfast.”

Magpies can if trained mimic sounds. Bill's father had split the magpies' tongue and taught them to speak.

The birds would imitate what they heard out in the paddocks.

"G'day Bill! Les, where are you?"

"Go back! Get the cows."

While the kookaburras couldn't sing for their supper, they were also allowed to live in the house alongside the magpies.

"Once a day it was my job to feed them. I'd place a shovel over my shoulder and they'd fly up and sit on the handle as I walked down to the dairy to dig for worms. After a feed, they'd perch back on the handle and come home. They were really lovely birds."

As well, the Eccles kept chooks that were excellent layers. Bill remembers the family giving away more eggs than they kept.

Bill's father was renowned for the border collie sheep dogs he bred. The puppies were sought by farmers across the district as they were always exceedingly clever.

Bill clearly remembers getting up early with his dad for milking. By the time they had reached the dairy, the dog would have brought the cows into the yard.

When the milk was ready, Les and Bill had only to reach for the horse's harness, and the dog would bring the horse to them for loading.

"When the dog saw us sharpening a knife, the dog would run straight to the paddock, and round up a sheep."

Bill recalls one particularly foggy morning when his father said "Rover, we're two sheep short."

Rover ran to the paddock and quickly returned with the two sheep he had overlooked earlier.

The stories reveal the strong family bond Bill grew up with

As Bill speaks, he reinforces one of those interesting ironies farmers have in their practical outlook and lack of sentimentality about their stock while holding a deep affection for their cattle dogs and in this case, an assortment of native birds.

By today's standards, these are enchanting stories of a farm life with animals, magical pets, excitement and adventure. This is the 1930s – 1940s era before



Bill, National Service days

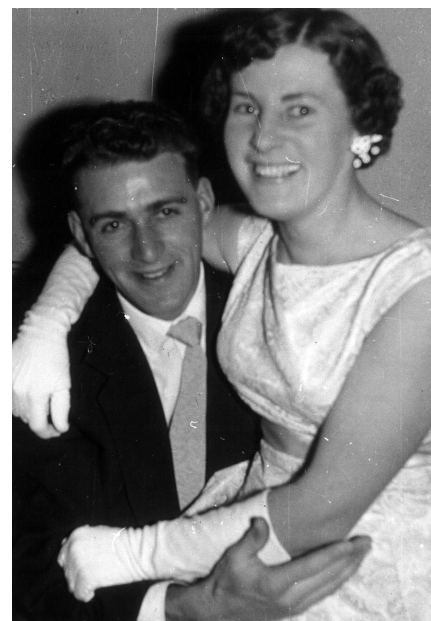
television. These events illustrate how families then made the most of lives touched by the grim reality of a world at war. Equally, the stories reveal the strong family bond Bill grew up with.

National Service

Bill was part of the first intake for national service, implemented by the Menzies Government during the 1950s. This initiative largely came out of concerns about the Cold War in Europe and Communist insurgency. The National Service Act 1951 provided for the compulsory call-up of males turning eighteen on or after 1 November 1950. Bill recalls undertaking training over several months at Puckapunyal Army Base.

Marriage and family

Bill was very involved in the social life of Warrnambool, playing tennis, football, and cricket. Bill started seeing Gwen, a local Warrnambool girl. They played tennis together and enjoyed a happy and socially full life. They married in 1957 when Bill was 25. They went on to have four children, Andrea, Ashley, Junia and Jason.



Bill and Gwen at ball, Warrnambool

Bill continued to be active in sport throughout his life in Warrnambool although he hung up his footy boots when the children arrived, aware of the risks of accidents and his obligations to his family. He then took up golf, which has been a source of great



Eccles family, L - R Ashley, Andrea, Gwen, Bill, Jason and Junia

enjoyment. Bill plays at a high level, still completing eighteen holes with a score less than his age and beating many players, a great deal younger. He has passed on his passion for the game to Gwen and to his son-in-law Peter and grandson Lachlan.

Joining the Society

Gwen recalls that the Society has been a feature of Bill's life for as long as she has known him. Animals have also always played a part. When they married, Bill attended the weekly Friday evening meetings at St Joseph's Conference. She remembers Gerry Gleason picking Bill up. Gwen would put their cat in a basket and walk the short distance to her mother's. Bill would collect her after the meeting. One night a semi trailer flew by and the cat escaped from the basket. Gwen thought they'd never see it again but cats do it seems, have a few lives up their sleeves.

Bill remembers his early days in the Conference with only five members - Pat Goggin was the treasurer, Ray Harrington the president. Fred Toohey and J Clifford are names he recalls. The conference met in the parish hall with Monsignor Kennelly in a black soutane and bowler hat, in attendance.

At the end of the meeting, Monsignor would mention there were families who needed some help. He would hand over money and stress to Bill and the members to visit only at night. Discretion was everything. People's privacy and dignity were to be safeguarded at all cost, thus the night visits. Bill remembers keenly the necessity of sparing people the sense of shame surrounding accepting handouts.

They would give ten pounds to families in need. Ten pounds was a considerable sum of money then but this really enabled people to get on their feet. It was rare that they would need assistance again. In the early days, there were only one or two visits per week. The parish was providing this money. After about six months, the conference organised their own source of funds.

In those days, the members went to the front door but never entered the home. The people expected the visit as the priest always let them know in advance.

“We never got involved. We simply handed over the money or food and walked away. It was so unlike today where we get involved with understanding people's personal circumstances and building a relationship with them.”

Bill is adamant that discretion is very important. The relationship should be confidential. He is also aware from hard experience that it can at times be very difficult to establish trusting relationships with everyone and Vincentians must keep trying. Even when an attempt doesn't go well, it is worth trying again.

The Conference organised a rag drive every couple of months. The Eccles family would all join in, taking the distinctive blue bags around and collecting the full bags a few weeks later. Daughter Andrea remembers the fun in this shared activity and the family's garage full of what seemed like a tall mountain of blue bags to a young child. The bags were then taken to the church where the garments were sorted.

The money derived from selling the rags was then the only source of funding and it kept the conference going. There were no collections in church then as no one was meant to know the Society was helping people. It was all very 'hush hush', almost akin to a secret brotherhood. And sadly in those days, it was only there to help Catholics.

The men also visited a range of institutions: hospitals, mental institution and aged care places.

Bill remembers again that the conference brothers never inquired after people's circumstances; it was more about a friendly visit and offering companionship.

Every Sunday morning after mass, Bill would accompany a conference brother to a retirement village. They would give the men haircuts and a shave with a cut throat razors. The men were old, frail and incapacitated. The conference remained involved in this work for many years even though at times, the appropriateness of it as Society work was discussed. Conference minutes from 1959 record:

“Discussed the matter of members giving haircuts and shaves to inmates of Corio and Alveston and whether we are interfering in the business of barbers, as some of these patients are well able to afford themselves.”



Three generations of Eccles assisting the Society - Bill, Junia and Michael

The Conference decided to open a store in Warrnambool and Fred Toohey took the running of this new undertaking. It was on the corner of Raglan Parade and Fairy Streets, only a few doors from today's Centre.

"We (Conference members and families) painted out the store and put up shelves and racks. We'd all go up on a Sunday morning to help set it up. I wasn't involved beyond this, preferring to remain active in the home and hospital visits."

Bill remembers attending regularly the festival masses across the district's conferences. There would be a guest speaker and afternoon tea. These were a feature of Society life that are disappearing which Bill thinks were spiritually enriching and motivating for members.

Bill and Gwen's kids loved being involved in Society works as they grew up and have remained involved in charitable causes, introducing their own children to the Society. Junia has worked for several years in the Box Hill Call Centre. Through her and Bill's exposure to the Society, grandson Michael initiated a collection of goods at his school. The other Eccles children have all supported the Society as well, particularly involving their workplaces in the donation and distribution of children's gifts and hampers at Christmas.

Employment with Fletcher Jones

At 18, Bill went to work at Fletcher Jones factory in Warrnambool. His eldest sister already worked there. He started in dry cleaning then trained as a machinist, making the garments and moved on to become a supervisor. Bill remained with the company for 34 years.

He remembers Sir Fletcher as a marvellous man. The Jones family had a holiday house on the beachfront at Port Fairy, which they made available to staff. Bill and his family used it several times a year.

One year, Bill had major back surgery and was off work for 6 months. Sir Fletcher would come to his home and present a regular pay packet. Bill remembers telling Sir Fletcher that he had used up his sick leave. His boss told him not to worry; he wanted personally to do this for Bill.

Bill decided it was time he and Gwen worked for themselves. They both loved gardening

In the 1980s, after Sir Fletcher's death, Bill saw that the factory was entering troubling times. Rather than wait for the inevitability of losing his job, Bill decided to come to Melbourne and look for work in the clothing factory. Now in his fifties, Bill, Gwen and their two younger children left all they were familiar with and started afresh in the city.

Move to Melbourne and career change

The family moved to Bundoora. Two children were already in Melbourne. Andrea had a job in a travel agency and Ashley was training as a nurse at Royal Melbourne. Junia soon started working at Myer and Jason started school at Parade College.

Bill found work at Stafford Ellinson, a company that made men's suits. The job only lasted 18 months as the local clothing industry was experiencing the effects of competition from overseas.

Bill decided it was time he and Gwen worked for themselves. They both loved gardening. Bill bought the very first gardening round from Jim of Jim's mowing fame. This provided an initial 40 customers, which built over time to over one hundred customers, mainly in the Doncaster area. It was a very successful career change.

“I maintained gardens, did the lot. I went on to do the grown children of original customers as well over the years. Jason would help on weekends while still at school. I enjoyed the work and being my own boss.”

Bill did this until he retired, with Gwen doing the bookkeeping. Bill still keeps in contact with many clients who have become friends. He takes some of his old clients to doctors' appointments or catches up for coffee.

Gwen and Bill moved to Ringwood North to be near Andrea and their first granddaughter, Erin and to be closer to Gwen's brother Charlie. Their large house was the centre of many happy family occasions but would eventually become too much for them to look after. Three years ago, they downsized to Croydon.

Returning to the Society

The garden business took up most of Bill's time so he did not resume conference involvement until the 1990s. Bill joined Holy Spirit Conference, Ringwood North and Bill took over from Tony Dalton as Council President. He recalls Society rules that three terms as president was the maximum. This is tricky however when no one else wants to step in. Holy Spirit parish priest Fr Kevin Mogg, insisted Bill stay on as president, effectively overruling the Society's stance on terms in office.

In the early days in this conference, all the calls for home visits came from the Ringwood Centre to Bill and Gwen's home phone. Bill responded to them all, visiting on his own. Once the call centre was set up at Box Hill, this alleviated his workload and the calls were channelled through to a number of conference members which has spread the workload.

Home visits usually result in people requiring help with food and cash vouchers. The current arrangement is that the conference gives supermarket vouchers which is much better for the recipient and conference members who no longer need to lug heavy groceries.

Bill became Regional President following Tony Tome's elevation to Eastern Central Council.

At this time the old Ringwood Centre was being closed and a new one opening. It was a period of some resistance as many members balked at doing things differently.

These days, regional council meetings are held at different conferences. Bill believes this rotation keeps everyone in touch with the happenings and approaches different conferences take.

Bill is still involved in the Conference and is Vice President. He plans on it being his last term but is philosophical about whether there is someone willing to take on the role.

Bill still does home visits but has ceased doing the fruit and vegie run. Several parishioners make regular generous donations of cash to the conference work and there is a regular monthly two dollar collection at mass. These funds enable the work of the conference to continue.

As well, Bill's golf club holds an annual Golf charity day. This provides in excess of \$4,000 each year to the conference work.

Bill has been working with a number of families with challenging issues, over the long term. Bill knows that conference members can develop a special connection with a person and that this is one of the special qualities of being a Vincentian.

He has tried to bring in a range of services to assist with different issues such as parenting, school refusal, suicide risk, financial difficulties. He recognises that importantly, counsellors are often a necessary intervention to work with single parents and assist them with parenting and budgeting issues that until addressed, will keep the family in a downward spiral.

Bill sees that obtaining easy credit has contributed greatly to low income people's financial woes particularly with a cultural belief that we need and deserve things which are really unnecessary.

The Conference has been effective in working collaboratively with a range of community services. Members are becoming increasingly skilled in knowing about services in the area and in advocating for people on matters such as nonpayment of bills and Centrelink payment queries.

The North Ringwood Uniting Church asked the conference to set up a food bank/centre. The two organisations still run this together.

Sometimes the Conference bans clients as a result of violent or threatening behaviour. Bill encourages the opportunity to re connect though and give people a second chance.

Conference meetings continue to commence with a spiritual reading, with members taking it in turns. Weekly discussions in relation to the Conference work invariably make reference to how Ozanam worked. Bill is always pleased to see the connection being made. Bill still refers regularly to his old brown covered manual which has inspiring stories about Ozanam.

Reflections on the Society

A strong belief of Bill's is that members develop their own personal spirituality through their conference work. He would like to see more opportunities to explore this theme through festival masses and events that bring in stimulating guest speakers who can speak on a subject of interest. There is always the need to expand knowledge of the world outside of one's conference and life experience. Similarly, he believes the Society could promote its work and advocacy more widely across the conferences and in that way, increase a sense of pride in being a Vincentian.

He also understands the importance of keeping hope alive.

"We have to keep at it even where we are not convinced for example, that a parent can make it."

Hope inspires Bill and he looks to inspirational stories to help keep hope alive. He cites the story of Irish woman Christina Noble, who refused to be a victim after a life of abuse, instead dedicating her life to working with orphans in Cambodia. He believes many Vincentians have inspirational stories.

Bill recognises the Conference comprises mainly retired members. Young people are very busy and less go to church these days so the natural link with the Society is not made. He concedes older people always have more time as retired but worries like many, that the Society is largely an ageing organisation.

He acknowledges the work of the Young Vinnies, knowing the work well through one started in Ringwood North. Members must allow the young to do things in their own way which might at times seem foreign to the old comers. Yet conferences also seek leeway to do things their own way.



Outer East Young Vinnies, Kids' Day Out to Puffing Billy, 2009

Bill and Gwen have made lots of friends across the Society. Particularly when Bill was Regional president, he met many people from across Victoria through attending many events at Box Hill.

Fundamentally, Bill sees the story of a young Frederic Ozanam and his helpers collecting fire wood for the poor as the crux of Society work. Everything must relate back to that message.

Conclusion

After a long and dedicated service, Bill is slowing down his Society involvement. The golf course – and some surgery – are calling and it is time to pass the baton. Times have changed in the fifty plus years Bill has been involved in conference work and yet, a fundamental aim remains unchanged. The Society is here to better the lives of poor people, without judgement or criticism.

Vincentians like Bill Eccles demonstrate through their words and actions - however modest they believe them to be - that they are all a part of a bigger movement, a powerful force for good. Belonging to this bigger organisation, spreading across the country, found in little country towns, not to mention across the world, means a great deal to members.

As Bill has seen, good begets good and the more this good work can be promoted, the stronger the Society will become. He advocates for new ways to encourage younger people to join in the work of the Society. He also seeks a balance between honouring the effective, hard earned ways of the Society while embracing any new innovations that assist the Society to better meet the needs of the people it serves.

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| 1957 | Bill joined St Joseph's Conference, Warrnambool. Appointed President for two terms. |
| | Continuous membership of Warrnambool Conference until 1980s. |
| 1966 | Warrnambool Centre opened. |
| 1989 | Joined North Ringwood Conference. |
| | Appointed as Conference President for nine years. |
| 2004 - 2007 | Regional President. |
| 2012 | Vice President. |
| 2013 | Continues today as active member of North Ringwood Conference. |

Bill and Eileen Norman

Stalwarts of the Society



Bill and Eileen Norman

**Their legacy lives on
at the Oakleigh Centre**

Introduction

The story of Bill and Eileen Norman's involvement with the Victorian Society covers over sixty years of devoted service. The Oakleigh Centre is the key setting, the beating heart to this story. That beating heart is encased in the suburb of Oakleigh, which is where Bill and Eileen grew up, married, raised their family, worship and continue to serve the Society.

As a young Vincentian in the late 1940s, Bill grounded himself in conventional conference work for several decades before becoming involved in establishing the Oakleigh Centre. On retirement, his involvement in the Centre became an almost full-time occupation for Bill. Under his watchful eye, it has developed into a thriving social enterprise. Eileen became involved in conference work once the wives were able to join in. She has played a significant role in the life and spirit of the place, inculcating a sense of fun and big heartedness alongside hard work.

There are many incredible people in the Victorian Society and Bill and Eileen are two examples. They embody the special qualities of a generation with a deep devotion to Church and country, who see hard work as non-negotiable and rewarding. They maintain cheerful dispositions no matter what. In sharing their recollections, they paint honest accounts of their lives and lengthy Society involvement. It is hard to imagine the Oakleigh Centre without them. It would certainly not be the vital, happy and successful place today if the Normans had not been around.

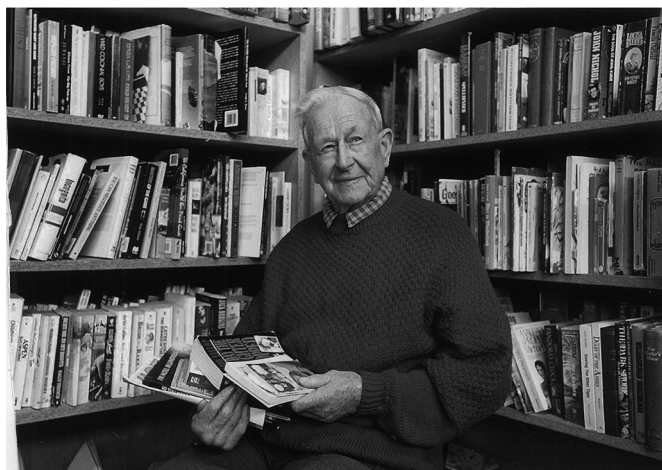
Oakleigh Centre

Bill and Eileen have asked to be interviewed for their story at the Oakleigh Centre. Eileen leads the way to the kitchen where Bill and several of today's cast are enjoying a cuppa. This is the engine room, the place where rosters are finalised, deliveries are discussed and all important matters are touched on. The place vibrates with warmth and goodwill. If the essence of what is on offer in this Centre's kitchen could be bottled, it would be the best fundraising and recruiting tool ever devised.

Everyone is at home here, none more than Bill and Eileen. Many of the volunteers have been doing shifts for many years and there is a natural camaraderie among today's team. Everyone is pleased to see Eileen, who doesn't come in as much these days since heart surgery.

Oakleigh Centre is a vast place, divided into different merchandise areas. There is a large space for furniture - one of their most successful markets - and the china and glass section is displayed in pleasing colour blocks in an adjoining area. There are racks of clothes at the front and out the back is a library of books, catering to all manner of book lovers. Easy chairs invite browsers to linger awhile as they make their selection.

Opened in 1972, this is one of the Society's first centres and it has been a tidy earner, with average, current daily takings in excess of \$1,000. Apart from



Bill in books section, Oakleigh Centre

paid drivers and a short period with a paid manager, the Centre has always been run by volunteers, many of whom do not have formal ties with a conference.

At ninety, Bill still makes an appearance every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, a pretty decent effort after 64 years of service to the Society. As Bill declares, the Society is "his life." Bill knows every nook and cranny of the Centre like the back of his hand.

Eileen's heart surgery has prevented her getting here so often but she is keen to keep tabs on progress with the current renovations. More on this later.

Growing up in Oakleigh

Bill and Eileen were both born in Oakleigh, Bill in 1923 and Eileen in 1927. In a lovely coincidence, Eileen was born in the house directly across the road from the Centre.

Eileen's father was a police officer. His work took the family to several country postings in the Bendigo area. Eileen moved back to Oakleigh at fourteen, staying with her aunt and grandfather, who was the Chief Commissioner of the Victorian Police.

Their families knew each other through attending mass at Sacred Heart parish, Oakleigh, where they both attended parish school. Bill and Eileen's grandfathers were great friends.

Bill grew up with the example of his father leaving bags of groceries on the doorsteps of people doing it tough

Bill's father had a chain of grocery stores. Although his family had not been involved in the Society, Bill grew up with the example of his father leaving bags of groceries on the doorsteps of people doing it tough in the 1930s and 40s.

Working lives

Bill himself went on to have lifelong employment in groceries, working with Safeway. His role involved training cashiers and managers in all aspects of money handling and security. He oversaw the opening of thirteen stores, including travelling interstate to be part of preparing staff in these functions. His experience and knowledge in these areas would prove to be of great benefit in the administration of the Oakleigh Centre.

In her mid-teens, Eileen embarked on bookkeeping studies, travelling by train into the city, often with her lifelong friend Peg O'Meara, who is also one of the foundational members of the Oakleigh Centre. Eileen worked for a time at a wholesale grocer in Market St. Later, she worked in the deli in Bill's father's shop and, much later, as a cashier at Safeways Oakleigh.

Her most memorable job was her fifteen years in a local fruit shop, where she became invaluable to the owners. When one of their family was suffering from post-natal depression, Eileen would visit her every morning to bathe and settle the baby and make up the day's formula.

"The family treated me like the queen!"

Initially, she worked one day a week but, at the owner's urging, ended up working full time for many years. Those were the days, long gone, of small, local shops with a high level of personal service. Boxes containing purchases were carried to cars or home delivered and the shop's produce was displayed with care and pride and wrapped individually in paper to protect it from spoiling.



L - R back Michael and Peter
front Judy, Bill, Eileen and Kerry

Wartime romance

Bill served in the infantry in World War II, seeing action in Papua New Guinea and the islands campaign. Like many of his generation, the war is not something he wishes to dwell on. Eileen mentions with pride his active service in a number of places including Milne Bay in 1942. This battle is viewed historically as the first in the Pacific campaign that decisively forced the withdrawal of Japanese land forces. The win was a great boost to the morale of the Allied Forces.

Bill still meets every year with mates remaining from the 37th Battalion. There are probably only twenty still alive out of his company of close to one hundred men. Bill and Eileen's daughter Kerry organises an annual dinner to ensure the men have the opportunity for this precious catch-up.

Bill and Eileen knew each other through the parish, school and friendship networks in Oakleigh. There were dances and everyone went out in groups to have fun. It was when Bill came home on leave that they started to see the possibility of a life together.

They wrote to each other and Eileen waited for him. Eileen recalls Bill's mother inviting her to come out to the Deer Park army depot for the official homecoming of the troops. The war was over, mission accomplished, and Bill and Eileen were soon engaged. Six months after the war, Bill was discharged.

Two years later, when Eileen turned twenty one, they were married at Sacred Heart Oakleigh.

Bill and Eileen went on to have four children: Judy, Peter, Kerry and Michael. There are nine grandsons, four great grandsons, four great grand-daughters. It took a 57-year run of boys before the family finally welcomed a girl with the arrival of great grand-daughter Ruby.

A Call to Serve - Bill and Eileen Norman

Joining the Society

One evening, shortly after they married, two men visited their home. The men were Marshall Hall, President Oakleigh Conference and conference brother, Ron Welford.

They asked Bill to join the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Bill looks back at those two men as some of the greatest Vincentians he has known. He remembers Marshall's honesty about his struggles with alcohol and how he worked to overcome his addiction and help others to overcome theirs. He recognised the vulnerability of being an alcoholic and single-handedly ran self-help groups to provide structured support.

Ron visited people and was always quick to lend a hand to anyone facing life struggles. Ron could often be found helping in people's gardens.

Society work was performed at night and on weekends by the customary men in pairs. The details of who was visited was only discussed at the weekly conference meeting, held every Tuesday evening.

Bill recalls that sometimes the parish priest told them who to visit; other times parishioners who knew those who were struggling to make ends meet.

It was not uncommon for a family to receive up to one hundred pounds

In the beginning, the Conference gave food vouchers rather than money. As time went by, the Conference started providing money to help pay outstanding bills, to buy clothing and furniture and to allow people to choose their own groceries from Halfpenny's grocery store.

The Society gave generously when people were in dire need. It was not uncommon for a family to receive up to one hundred pounds. It sounds like a great deal of money by today's standards, considering it represented roughly a third of average yearly earnings for a male factory worker in 1950. The Society reasoned that a generous amount effectively allowed people to resolve entrenched difficulties and debts. The experience for conference members then was that they rarely saw the person again. It did enable people to get back on their feet and make a new start. And, importantly, the assistance was given discreetly.

Bill mentions that the Conference has two long-standing volunteers who were themselves helped in the past and now work at the Centre as a way of giving back.

Another couple the Conference helped later moved to Tasmania. Every year, they visit Melbourne to see family and always pop in to see Bill and thank him.

“It is always good to see these people. And we receive wonderful letters where people say thanks and tell us they’re doing fine”.

Starting the Centre

In 1971, the late Bill Herron who was then Conference President found an old building in Crewe Road Oakleigh that in earlier years had variously been a bakery, a chocolate factory and a wholesale grocery. He believed its asking price was a steal and the building could easily be converted. Head office organised the loan funds and the Conference started a shop (as centres were then known).

“We paid the loan off pretty quickly as well as paying \$500 a month into a fund for the expansion of centres.”

“This store’s opened many a store!” Bill and Eileen explain proudly.



Eileen and Bill with Peg O'Meara (centre)

The Centre has always done a solid trade in furniture. In the early days, Bill collected furniture with another conference brother, Bill Underwood. Before the shop was purchased, there was nowhere to store the furniture so it went in the two Bills’ garages.

This was a common story across different conferences in past decades. In ‘Jack Dillon , an enduring influence’ (*A call to Serve- Vincentian Stories 2013*), it is reported that a number of Belmont conference members also provided storage.

Bill Herron worked at The Herald and bought one of the newspaper’s old delivery trucks. This made it easier to collect furniture and other goods.

The Normans and their friend, Peg O’Meara were the mainstays who started the shop, doing whatever they could to establish some order and systems as well as enlisting volunteers. Julia Byrden, Pat Fitzgerald and Eileen Mayo were also long-standing Centre volunteers who are still involved today.

Eileen remembers in the early days spending every Saturday morning in the shop and returning after closing, to vacuum and sort and display the donated clothing. Bill always enjoyed a drink at the pub afterwards.

At this time, Laurie Fitzgerald, who was Conference President, became Store President. Bill took on the role of Conference President.

Women and Conference work

Bill remarks that it was good when the wives became involved in the work and life of the Society.

The manager noted the civilising effect the women had on the men, many of whom had been living on the streets and hardly ever had contact with women

During Bill’s time as Conference President, Conference members went to Ozanam House once a month to provide companionship to the residents and help with the evening meal. Bill suggested to the manager they bring the women along to serve the meals.

The manager noted the civilising effect the women had on the men, many of whom had been living on the streets and hardly ever had contact with women. The women would organise a sing-along around the piano, sometimes even dancing. They handed out cigarettes and chatted with the men.

Soon, the women were able to officially join the Conference, which brought about other benefits. The Conference brothers had noticed that some of the women seeking help were uncomfortable discussing their circumstances with men. Having women to talk to further broke down barriers and enabled the building of trust and empathy.

Bill and Eileen believe conference life developed in leaps and bounds once women were able to become involved.

Eileen organised fashion parades, followed by a lavish afternoon tea. Volunteers would choose clothes, take them home, make any necessary alterations and then model them. Eileen was the compere, describing the outfits: she had a ball! The Centre advertised these events at the parish and crowds of people attended. It was great fun and, if fashion wasn't your 'thing', the afternoon tea was always memorable. Someone knew a bagpipe player and he'd wander around and play. The parades also boosted sales considerably.

Eileen looks back on a very satisfying time with the Centre.

She will always hold a special place in her heart for the Centre but there have been some challenging times

She has lived life to the fullest. She has been calling bingo at a number of clubs and loves being in the spotlight. She recalls that she was dressing up to do a skit at the South Oakleigh Bowling Club when she had a heart attack. On the way to hospital, she suffered a further two heart attacks. The ambos were very concerned she wouldn't make it but, as she has proven, the show must go on.

She will always hold a special place in her heart for the Centre but there have been some challenging times.

A thorn in the side has always been the long wait for the Centre to be renovated, to provide an adequate level of comfort for the volunteers. The building is over 100 years old and lacked proper heating or cooling. The issue that has caused the most anguish for Eileen was the toilets. The volunteers joke that they looked like they came out on the First Fleet.

There was a point of no return for Eileen who flatly refused to continue on at the Centre if the toilets weren't replaced. Eileen and Bill and others lobbied hard for years to have necessary upgrades carried out. An extensive renovation was recently undertaken, completed in early 2014. It has provided the Centre with a new kitchen, new office and, most importantly, new toilets.

In an amusing twist, the week before the opening to celebrate the renovation, Bill managed to lock himself in the new toilets which are tucked away at the back of the building. Bill believes the door handle or lock was faulty. Eileen wondered where he was, thought the banging noises were tradesmen still working on the finishing touches, until finally someone ventured into the back corner and heard his pleadings. Since they couldn't force the door open, someone had to get an angle grinder, demolish the door, release the detainee – almost an hour after his ordeal had begun.

Bill and Eileen were pleased to attend the opening of the renovated store. It feels as though the life of the Centre has gone full circle. They are delighted with the improvements. Looking back, a great deal has happened over the duration of its operation. They believe the spirit will live on through the good work of all the volunteers who assist there.

Supporting the Society

In the days when conferences managed their own funds, the Centre often contributed to causes such as the 1962 Dandenongs bushfires and the 1978 Sale floods. The Society asked Bill and Eileen to visit Sale, interviewing people to ascertain what assistance was required. They spent a week there.

Bill and Eileen are very proud that the Centre helped Sale get back on its feet and also helped Traralgon. The Centre kept visiting, taking furniture once a month and donated money as well as goods.

When the Society decided to build homes for the aged, they asked centres to contribute towards the cost. Oakleigh Conference donated \$50,000 towards the building of the Society's Box Hill hostel for the aged. Bill and Eileen feel a sense of pride to have been involved in contributing to these services, which represent the Society's response to need in the community.

Bill and Eileen recall events from when head office became more involved in the running of centres. Head office employed an area manager to oversee centres and he would turn up unannounced and, without introducing himself, would issue instructions to anyone he came across.

Eileen told him it would be appreciated if he could announce his arrival first.

“One time, he got offside with the truck drivers. There was no air conditioning in the trucks, it was very hot and he commented strongly on their unkempt appearance. Bill was furious and they wouldn't talk for a while.”

Eileen eventually brokered peace talks between Bill and the area manager and they became great friends.

Church and the Society

Bill and Eileen note that previously, most of the volunteers came from the parish but most volunteers now have no formal link with a conference. Oakleigh Conference had been operating for almost eighty years until it was recently closed. Chadstone Conference is presently conducting home visits in the Oakleigh area.

Acknowledging the volunteers

Bill and Eileen mention the wonderful commitment of the volunteers. They have a regular team of about forty. They are all a wonderful support and some in particular come to mind. Several like Jean, Pat, Pete and Les have been coming over a long period of time. In the days when the Centre sold electrical goods, Bruce tested and fixed all the appliances. Brian comes twice a week from Berwick to do price marking. Bill and Eileen recognise the Centre is the sum of many people who have made major contributions.

The Centre hold barbeques and the Society provides a Christmas dinner for the volunteers. The Normans feel enough can't be done to thank these people.

People volunteer at the Centre for all sorts of reasons. Many come because they want to give back to the community in some way; others are directed here through Centrelink requirements or because it is an obligation of their community-based order. Some see it as a way to develop social skills and to be part of a network. School students become involved: for example, Salesian College boys help after school and Sacred Heart College donates hampers at end of year. The parish school regularly donates goods.

The success of the Centre

Bill still interviews people if someone turns up needing help. They can help themselves to clothing and other forms of assistance.

The Centre is highly regarded for its furniture, which is good quality and cheaper than other centres. They have regular customers from Port Melbourne and the country.

The volunteers debated the issue of a Catholic-aligned organisation trading on Sundays

The Centre is open every day. There were rumblings when it opened on Sundays. The volunteers debated the issue of a Catholic-aligned organisation trading on Sundays. They recognised that people who work during the week as well as the op shoppers come out in force on weekends. On balance, they concluded it brings in funds that can be used for good purposes.

The volunteers are proud that their Centre is one of the most profitable stores for the Waverley Regional Council.

Changing pressures

Bill feels more people struggle today with the ever increasing cost of living, even for basic items such as food and utilities both of which have become very expensive. He sees more people coming back regularly for help, some every fortnight.

He also sees many people losing jobs now and wonders about the loss of unskilled work as so many industries close their doors. This is further justification for the Centre staying open every day. It is also an approach Bill has always taken: approach life at full stretch.



Peg O'Meara with Bill and Eileen receiving their over 40 years of service awards, 2013

Official acknowledgements of service

Bill was awarded an OAM in 2003 for services to the Society of St Vincent de Paul Victoria.

He was nominated for Australian of the Year in 2009, the year Pat Dodson was the successful recipient from 3,300 nominations.

Bill and Eileen have also both received community awards from the City of Glen Eira.

In 2011, Bill received a letter from State President, Tony Tome congratulating him on achieving:

“Your outstanding milestone of 62 years’ service with the Society of Victoria. Your work has touched countless people over the years; your quiet dedication and lifelong commitment to helping others are an example to us all.”



OAM award, Government House. L - R Michael, Kerry, Bill, Eileen, Judy, Peter

In 2013, Bill, Eileen and Peg O’Meara attended an afternoon tea at the Oakleigh Centre and were formally recognised for each of their more than forty years of volunteering.

Bill was humbled when he received a call from former State President Syd Tutton. The Society wanted to name a room in his honour. The Norman Wickes Room, named after Bill Norman and John Wickes is located on the top floor of head office.

Conclusion

In life, you come across people who have dedicated themselves to an organisation. Bill and Eileen Norman are two such people. There’s duty and there’s pleasure and the Normans seem to have combined the two in an extraordinarily balanced way.

Bill and Eileen’s legacy of hard work, service and fun will live on at Oakleigh and through the many people they have touched with kindness and care. They have given their all to the Society and have enjoyed themselves immensely. They see themselves as simply doing God’s work and finding it rewarding. As Bill says, the Society’s been his life. He’s enjoyed what he’s been doing and he and Eileen have had lots of fun.

They have recently moved to a retirement village in Springvale. While you can take the Normans out of Oakleigh, you can’t take Oakleigh out of their blood, their very being.

Bill’s doctor told him recently, whatever you’re doing, keep on doing it. At ninety, Bill will continue dropping in to the Centre several times a week. While Eileen has retired and may not be visiting the Centre much, she has the satisfaction of seeing the renovations completed and a more comfortable environment provided for the valued volunteers.

Their legacy lives on.

- | | |
|------|---|
| 1949 | Bill joined the Oakleigh Conference. |
| 1972 | Oakleigh store (now known as Oakleigh Centre) opened. |
| 1983 | Appointed as Centre President. Bill served on State Council. |
| 2003 | Bill awarded OAM. |
| 2002 | Eileen joined Oakleigh Conference. |
| 2002 | Eileen appointed Vice President, Oakleigh Centre. |

Sandra Walker

Never wait to be asked



Sandra Walker

A deep motivation to respond practically to disadvantage and human tragedy

Introduction

Sandra Walker's conference involvement spans twenty five years and is based in Gippsland. Initially joining the St Mary's Newborough Conference, she would later become a member of the neighbouring St Kieran's Moe Conference.

Gippsland is a region of varied hues and experiences. It covers a large area taking in several regional centres, a major power industry, expansive farming areas as well as bushland and some extraordinarily beautiful coastline. It has been particularly vulnerable to the consequences of an increasingly fierce climate, the decision to privatise electricity and factors affecting the viability of Australia's agricultural economy. All have caused significant hardship. It is a region ageing faster than the rest of Victoria as young people and families leave for education and work reasons. There are high levels of social isolation amongst many of its communities.

Sandra's approach has always been to act quickly where she saw unmet need. She started the Moe soup van in 1992, which is still going strong today. More significant recently, has been Sandra's response to victims of the Black Saturday bushfires in the Traralgon South/ Callignee area. She took on the role of main "go to" person in the local Vinnies Recovery Programme, an experience she will never forget.

Like many Vincentians, her story reveals a deep motivation to respond practically to disadvantage and human tragedy. She has utilised her own special gifts in the service of others while also being prepared to turn her hand to new challenges.

Her story chronicles her own ups and downs and the part they played in placing her on a course to help those who are struggling. It also reveals how Society members like Sandra provide a lifeline, not only through the distribution of financial and material aid but often by simply being there for people experiencing immense hardship and isolation.

Her relationship with God has remained a constant solace throughout the challenges she and others have faced. Her many lifelong Society friends have also stood with her through challenging times.

She continues to live by the mottos "Never wait to be asked" and "Never say it can't be done".

Growing up

She was the youngest of five children, arriving after the family had lost their farm to bushfires

While Sandra settled in the Moe district in the 1980s, she grew up and spent her earlier years in other regional centres. Sandra Kinnersly lived in Ballarat until her early thirties, then moved around regional Victoria in the first decade of her married life.

She was the youngest of five children and very much the baby, arriving seven years after the fourth child and after the family had lost their farm to the 1939 bushfires. There was never much money but the family made do. Apart from a period of hospitalisation when young, she recalls a happy childhood filled with many wonderful memories. Sunday nights were always memorable, with her mother's wonderful home cooking.

The family had no car and she remembers her father riding his bike to work as a fitter and turner at Irish & Sons Steel- works where he devised a new feature for tractors: a foot plate as an effective way to climb easily and safely into the driver's seat.

For a young child, her father's work shed was "a joy to behold", filled with every imaginable tool. She recalls her father at his lathe, making and repairing all the family's shoes. She also retains a vivid picture of him patching his overalls on a Singer treadle machine.

Sandra's parents were Anglican and she attended local state schools. Her early school years were disrupted at the age of nine when severe breathlessness and ill



Sandra at left, Jephson & Sons Haberdashers, Ballarat

health, only later in life diagnosed as rheumatic fever, quarantined her for three months in the Ballarat Base Hospital. Patients were only allowed visitors twice a week.

Sandra has unhappy memories of this time and particularly of the stern, disciplinarian charge nurse who showed little compassion for a young child separated from her family and deeply homesick. One grim recollection is being forced to eat pumpkin. Sandra wrote to her mother every day, imploring her to take her home.

Sandra turned ten in the hospital and was able to leave shortly afterwards. Her father's tractor innovation held great promise of business success and his employer asked him to be their travelling salesman, introducing and explaining the workings of the foot plate to farmers all over the State. After the misery of the hospital, Sandra enjoyed a wonderful twelve months on the road with her parents, living in a caravan.

On their return, Sandra repeated grade six due to the disruptions from the travel. She went on to high school, leaving at fifteen. She gained work at Jephson & Sons Haberdashers, then moved on to the post office and later worked as a telephonist at both Burns Jones and Torney Solicitors and the Queen Elizabeth Homes.

Family life

In 1963, Sandra was attending a local dance where her date stood her up. Another young man Bill Walker was there. He stepped in and walked her home. Bill was a Catholic lad with many friends and Sandra, although quite shy, easily fell into his crowd. After she and Bill had been going out together for eighteen months, Sandra converted to Catholicism and they were married in 1965.

Bill was working on the railways in Ballarat and he and Sandra were soon in a position to buy their first home. Sandra's health had been affected by her childhood rheumatic fever and her doctor discouraged her from having children. In 1970, Sandra had her first heart surgery. In 1971, Sandra gave birth to a daughter Leah. A son Wade was born two years later. The doctor made it clear there could be no more children without damaging her heart.



Family photo - L - R daughter Leah, son Wade, daughter-in-law Stephanie, Sandra at front

Leah now lives in Morwell with her son Nathan aged 22 years, and Wade's oldest son Dylan aged 20 years; Wade and his wife Stephanie live close to Sandra in Moe with their two children, Millie aged 15 and Finn aged 13. All are healthy and happy.

On the move

For a couple of years, Sandra and Bill ran a general store in Smythesdale. This was a successful business, known to have "the best hamburgers in the area". Bill's brother ran a pub in Sebastopol and Bill would often lend a hand. Bill enjoyed the pub life and he and Sandra took over the lease when his brother moved on. Sandra remembers doing the brewery exam as part of gaining the licence. "I poured many ice creams in those early days!"

Sandra did not enjoy pub life. It was a hard life and lonely for the children who weren't allowed to join their parents in the bar.

When Bill was badly injured, falling down the cellar, this sealed the deal for Sandra. No more pubs.

Sandra and Bill worked as caretakers at a motel in Alfredton for a short while and then took over the Kangaroo Flat General Store in Bendigo. They ran this business successfully until a shopping village was built nearby which affected their income, so they decided to move on. Next stop was a take-away business in Corio, Geelong. The family lived upstairs.

Sandra worried that it was a rough area. One day Wade, by now eight years of age, came home from school crying that a youth had pulled a knife on him. Again, it was time to move on.

Gippsland

Sandra's cousin told them there was plenty of work in the Latrobe Valley, so in 1981, Bill and Sandra moved to Newborough. Bill obtained shift work immediately as a trades assistant with the S.E.C.

Within a few months, Sandra also had a job as a kitchen hand at the Moe Hotel. She worked as a pub cook for many years, eventually gaining enough experience to qualify as a mature age apprentice chef and obtained her trade certificate. This allowed her to teach others and she enjoyed passing on her skills to apprentices working for her. When the State Government sold off a large portion of the S.E.C., many job losses occurred. Bill took a package, paid off the house and managed to find some work in a

She prayed that if she recovered, she would devote her life to the poor

bar and bottle shop. As always, they made a go of whatever was thrown at them. Leah and Wade were settled happily in their schools.

In 1989, Sandra's health took a turn for the worse. She developed a heart infection that caused her to temporarily lose her sight. She was admitted to the Alfred Hospital where further complications led to a staph infection. She remained there for three months.

Sandra remembers lying in hospital, thinking she might die. She prayed that if she recovered, she would devote her life to the poor.

Joining the Society

In 1990, shortly after coming home from hospital, Sandra attended an information session about the work of the SVDP, run by Peter Joseph. Peter was the sole conference support officer in those days and travelled across Victoria running these sessions. Sandra liked what she heard about the Society's work and joined the local conference.

The St Mary's Newborough Conference, in Sandra's words, was very small but good. The President had been the one and only president, which was then a common scenario.

The President was diligent in preparing new members for conference work. He ran role-play sessions, as an introduction to what they might experience in their service to others. There are many situations members encounter that may be entirely foreign to their own experience and expectations about people needing the Society's support.

The role-plays prepared Sandra well, challenging her assumptions and helping entrench a lesson she has carried since then: never judge people.

The Victorian Society decided that Presidents were required to stand down after three years. The incumbent did not want to do this so closed the Conference. It remains in recess.

Starting the soup van

Sandra moved to St Kieran's Moe Conference in 1992.

One of her first initiatives was to establish a local soup van. Repeatedly visiting the same people, she realised many were going without adequate daily meals. She also recognised many had limited food preparation, cooking and coping skills. She wanted to build people's capacity and imagined a family care centre where people could get together, learn how to cook and acquire other skills in a friendly and collaborative setting.

State President Syd Tutton liked Sandra's idea and sent State Treasurer Jim Grealish to visit for a day. Sandra recalls the two of them measuring and working out space requirements in the old Presentation College building, which had been in private hands for some time. The idea was to formulate a proposal to take to State Council. The idea was gaining support but just as the lease was about to be signed, the landlord decided he had other plans for the building.

Sandra realised they weren't reaching enough people so they started taking one of the volunteer's cars and setting up in different spots around Moe.

Sandra's grander vision could not then be realised but she persevered with a scaled-down idea of operating a soup van and held a meeting with local interested parties. The idea was strongly supported by Council and local police who understood the critical need this would meet.

The first night of operation was run out of the carport of the Moe centre. Only four people came. One of them Sandra recalls was Harry, a local destitute man. Next week, Harry came again.



Moe Soup Van, Sandra at left

A return customer! Over the next few weeks, Sandra realised they weren't reaching enough people they needed to so they started taking one of the volunteer's cars and setting up in different spots around Moe. The soup operation grew and grew.

Over the next twelve months, the Conference raised \$11,000 through donations from businesses and raffles, towards purchasing a van. State Council contributed the difference and the soup van was up and running.

In its heyday, the van fed over 100 people each night. In the beginning, the food was prepared in volunteers' homes until Council gave the Conference the use of the kitchen at the back of the town hall. The Conference then applied successfully for a Council grant. A new stove was purchased and the Centre's kitchen was refurbished to comply with required commercial health standards. The soup van has operated from here ever since.

The van has in the past done home visits including caravan parks and boarding houses as well as street stops as it was felt both were needed.

Sandra has many special memories of her years with the van. Every Christmas, she organised for Santa to ride on the van and distribute presents. She remembers the children excitedly announcing his arrival and receiving the gifts.

Sandra has not been doing the soup van for a couple of years due to ill health but she still meets regularly with some of the first members who volunteered with her. She understands that more of the clients are now families needing help where in the past it was predominantly single people, many of them older people. Loneliness was and remains a common

definer. While needs can change and ebb and flow the van continues to fulfil a much-needed role in the Moe district.

Annette O'Dowd has been the coordinator for a number of years and continues on with this excellent work, alongside a number of valuable volunteers. The soup van is still going strong, regularly feeding about 80 people on each of the two nights it operates.

Black Saturday fires, Feb 2009

Mention of Black Saturday evokes unforgettable images and recollections about the experience and impact on many people and communities who were victims.

Mostly, people link that terrible day with Kinglake and Marysville due to the enormity of the impact there and the media attention, but many other communities across Victoria were hard hit. In particular the areas of Traralgon South and Callignee, not far from Sandra's base, were significantly affected.



Bush fire damage, Callignee 2009

At the time, Sandra had been holidaying in New South Wales, returning home on the following Monday. She immediately drove out to some of the worst affected areas around Callignee, Boolarra and Churchill, to gain some sense of the extent of damage and loss. Four years later, she struggles to put into words what the experience of these early days was like.

She spent a week at the emergency warehouse that had been established in Rowville to receive and sort the mountain of goods donated from all over Australia. She worked alongside an army of volunteers, trying to put order into the truckloads of donated goods that were constantly arriving. The week helped focus her mind on what people would need and the best way to help those affected by the fires.

The Society ran an appeal and raised \$3.8million. Sandra stepped up to coordinate the recovery programme covering Traralgon South, Callignee, Callignee South, Callignee North, Devon North, Boolarra, Hazelwood South, Koornalla, Jeeralang and Balook. Or as the locals say, "on the hill."

Sandra visited sites where people were affected by the fires, asking what was needed. She remembers two distinct things: either people were unable to identify what they needed due to shock; or sought very basic and practical assistance which reinforced that many were starting from scratch. She remembers people needing firewood. She was often reminded of young Frederic Ozanam and his band of students.

Initially, Sandra and another Moe Conference member set up a table at the control centre to ascertain needs. Sandra talked to people as they came in. She decided the conference should visit them - what Ozanam would have done. Go out on the road and stop wherever they saw a house burnt down or damaged by fire.

In a short time, Sandra was joined by others wishing to help - Marguerite from the conference, Sandra's grandson, her daughter, anyone willing to come. Doug Knez and others from Fish Creek Conference started coming a couple of times a week for many months.

Doug has been writing an extensive account of the contribution of conference members he worked alongside and knows well the pivotal role Sandra played. He and other members from Fish Creek Conference established many working bees, taking direction from Sandra, who in the midst of so much need, implemented a triage system to prioritise assistance. Doug and his crew turned their hand to cleaning out water tanks, gutters and downpipes at properties that weren't burnt out; they helped make temporary quarters as habitable as possible for survivors; they re-fenced for people who were burnt out so that they could at least bring cattle back or re-stock; they dug and relocated storm water pipes where houses would be rebuilt.

His conference undertook to keep coming as tasks were identified. Doug writes here about some key people and the impact Sandra had.

"Sandra and I worked together for many months visiting those affected in their makeshift homes, tents or caravans, or where they relocated until they were able to plan something more permanent. These fire victims were not our usual Society recipients; they were very proud and initially didn't want any handouts but we kept persisting and were able to convince them to accept the goods supplied.

Working in conjunction with the Case Workers made our job a lot easier. They were in most cases, extremely gifted and focused on sitting down with the fire victims, going over their situation in detail to decide what was best and where to go next. Another important person from the Hill was Peter Ollerenshaw, known to most as Ollie. He was also burnt out and needed help like everyone else. As a member of the Victorian Police, he was given extra powers and responsibilities. Ollie's assistance in the community is well known along with his untiring work with Sandra. It was unbelievable what short cuts they made to help those in need. They both relied heavily on each other and Ollie named Sandra "The Angel on the Hill".

Central office helped Sandra set up voucher arrangements with a number of furniture and department stores that could provide whatever people needed. These vouchers were a godsend.

No matter how much hardship and tragedy Sandra had experienced in previous conference work, her exposure to the victims of the bushfires caused her world to shift and be ever transformed. She admits she ran on adrenalin for twelve months.

Surprisingly, her health stood up throughout the fires.

"It was go, go, go. Every day I was out there from nine until dark, visiting everyone. There were about 300 homes or what was left on a block. Sometimes I'd catch someone on site or next time I visited. The word spread that I was there to help.

Sandra recalls that most of all, people just wanted to talk. She listened to their stories - hundreds of them, often repeated

More people would ask me to come and see them. They might be in emergency accommodation in Traralgon or somewhere and we'd visit them there."

Sandra recalls that most of all, people just wanted to talk. She listened to their stories - hundreds of them, often repeated. The circumstances were always similar; being caught out, feeling no one came to help, a sense of abandonment at the most critical time of need.

For most people, it is too uncomfortable to stand with people experiencing the horrors of personal and financial ruin that a bushfire wreaks. On a full-time basis for a year, Sandra placed herself in this position and managed the collision of two worlds, passing

from the frontline to the comfort of her own home every night and then back again every morning.

All the time, Sandra hoped to achieve some normality for people thrust into abnormal and seemingly indefinite uncertainty.

As Christmas approached, Sandra wanted to do something for the families. She decided to distribute Christmas trees. In a strange twist of fate she stumbled across a container sent to Moe three months earlier from the Society in Western Australia, which had somehow been overlooked. It contained bed linen, toiletries, clothes and toys. She was able to distribute the goods with a tree and a box of decorations to every affected household.

Sandra's conference spent \$1.3m from the total \$3.8 million fund. Kinglake and other affected areas received the remainder. When the money ran out, Sandra felt deeply a sense that she was no longer helping people.

Even with a heavy heart, Sandra knew she had to let go. The Salvos were still helping people as was Latrobe Shire, so others were picking up the slack and stepping in. Still, on a personal level, this didn't ease the feeling for Sandra that she had abandoned the people "on the hill".

The experience for Sandra and other conference members was profound. Sandra formed lasting friendships with many fire victims. She has kept all correspondence from people she met. Thank-you notes, personal accounts, a poem. All express their gratitude for Sandra's ongoing presence, her friendship and support through very tough times, which helped with their recovery. The practical help, the purchase of white goods and the repairs were all seen as invaluable, particularly humbling for people who had never relied on charity in the past. More special perhaps are the writers expressing gratitude for a sense of hope that Sandra engendered in them while they were in a very dark place. One card expresses poignantly that Sandra "put the 'heart' back in the mountain."

Today, five years on, Sandra, Doug and many other conference members continue to have contact with people they encountered who lived and lost loved ones through this harrowing experience.

The healing is still not complete for many, and may never be. Some have lost faith in life itself. Having lost everything and having to battle bureaucracies, has worn some into the ground. Others, in even the hardest circumstances, have held on to hope. Many have rebuilt where previously they thought they never could.

Vincentians like Sandra will often fail to see the enormity of what they did in responding to need. For any of us sitting in the comfort of our homes unaffected by the raw reality of the bushfires, it is apparent how much she contributed. Speaking to those who worked alongside her is a further gauge of the extent of what she achieved.

International Year of the Volunteer

2001 was proclaimed International Year of the Volunteer. State Council President Gerard Dowling asked Sandra to chair the Society's committee appointed in response to this.



Luncheon for donors and supporters of the Society, 2006
L - R Noel O'Brien, Sandra and Patron, Professor David de Krestler AC, Govenor of Victoria

Sandra remembers this official duty with affection. She visited conferences around the State with Gerard and his wife Paula, distributing commemorative Frederic Ozanam medals as a way of thanking volunteers.

Opening the Doors Foundation

In 2004, at the Society's 150th birthday celebrations, State Council decided to support Opening the Doors Foundation. Sandra was on State Council at the time. The Opening the Doors Foundation addresses the severe educational disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, by providing assistance to enable them to choose and successfully maintain supportive education environment for their children.

The Foundation is a great example of a cause that provides early intervention and assistance which significantly benefits a number of young people.

The Foundation provides grants towards the funding of educational costs not otherwise funded from government or other educational funding sources. The grants cover costs such as school uniforms, books, school camps and other school - associated expenses.

The Foundation is a great example of a cause that provides early intervention and assistance which significantly benefits a number of young people. It effectively helps to address the educational divide that exists between children of privileged families and those that are on low income.

Sandra became a trustee of the Foundation for 4-5 years, along with Mitch McKenzie who was also on State Council. This involved monthly meetings at the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Thornbury and assisting with the selection of student recipients from nominations by school principals.

The Foundation has been of great benefit to Aboriginal families who want their kids to receive a better education. The number of students supported has increased considerably. In its first year, thirty- two students were assisted. Now there are approximately six hundred assisted every year.

Tertiary Education Sponsorship Program

While Sandra was Gippsland Central Council President, 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 him to put forward a proposal to address this area of need in consultation with local school coordinators.

Pat devised a fund 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 initial top-up funds from State Council. Sandra was the coordinator for 10 years. The role is now held by Trevor Fogarty of 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.

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

Other Society recollections

Sandra credits many people in the Society for helping her learn the ropes and being wonderful examples of the Vincentian spirit of service to the poor, lonely and despairing.

Sandra served on State Council for ten years, under the leadership of three presidents.

Syd Tutton was a mentor and friend that Sandra continues to think of often. She often wonders what Syd would think about the Society today. She also credits previous State Presidents Gerard Dowling and Jim Grealish for their support and example.



Celebrating Syd Tutton's installation as National Council President, Canberra 2008. L - R Sandra, Syd, Sr Roseanne Murphy, Sr Toni Matha

John McLean, who was Diocesan President was another mentor. Sandra was Vice President to John and went on to become Diocesan President herself in 1999.

As with many long-term Vincentians, Sandra has seen many changes. She speaks about the impact of occupational health and safety in the centres. It was necessary but it did cause some ructions! She and Bill volunteered at Moe centre for about ten years. Bill was another of the infamous bale jumpers affectionately chronicled in an earlier Vincentian story. (See Des Holford. His legacy lives on, *Vincentian Stories – 2013 Chapter*).

There were services provided in the past, such as assisting clients to move house, which no longer are provided. Perhaps the Society tried to be “everything to everyone” and there are other agencies that are also out there providing assistance as well. Still, with little or no regulations in the past, Sandra says she felt free to follow her natural way of operating. Never wait to be asked and never say “can’t”.

The future for the Vinnies

Sandra believes that one of the challenges remains attracting younger people who will make a long-term commitment and be prepared to chip in and do a job whenever required. She feels that becoming a member of the Society is something that no-one should take lightly. Sandra recognises that the Young Vinnies do a great job and she hopes that some of them will move on to a long-term commitment to the Society.

Conclusion

The extent of Sandra's contribution to the Society and those it serves is all the more extraordinary when one considers the health challenges she has confronted throughout her time with the Society.

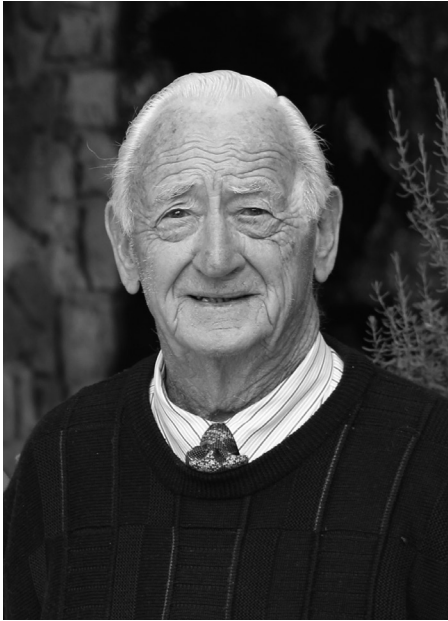
Like many Vincentians, she has shown unswerving dedication to the cause, remaining true to the original aim of Frederic Ozanam. In emulating his example, she has both set out alone to tackle disadvantage while bringing others along with her.

Her unfailing support to the many affected by bushfires must have come at a personal price although Sandra regards the experience as one of privilege. The ability to be present for people in their toughest hour is a mark of a true Vincentian and Sandra was indeed “an angel on the hill” throughout the aftermath of the worst bushfire Victoria had ever experienced.

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 1990 | Sandra joined St Mary's Newborough Conference. |
| 1992 | Joined St Kieran's Moe Conference. |
| 1994 | Appointed St Kieran's Conference President. |
| 1996 - 1998 | Regional President, Latrobe Valley. |
| 1998 | Established Moe Soup Van. |
| 1998 - 2000 | Central Council Vice President and Twinning Officer. |
| 2000 | Elected Gippsland Central Council President, State Council member. |
| 2001 - 2005 | State Centres Board of Management. |
| 2001 - 2010 | Vice President, State Council. |

Leo Walsh

A Life of Service



Leo Walsh
1933 - 2014

In every country town, Leo became an active member in the local conference

Introduction

Leo Walsh's story is partly a travel tale covering many towns in Victoria. More significantly, it is an account of the development of Vincentian spirit, shaped by personal understanding of hardship and many decades of conference experience.

Growing up on a struggling farm in the drought-ridden Wimmera-Mallee, Leo understood first hand the difficulties a family could encounter. Conference involvement as a school boy provided another layer of experience he would take with him and add to as he and his family moved to a number of country towns. Wherever they moved, Leo would always become involved as an active member of the local conference.

Despite the hard times, Leo's story contains the charm and poignancy shared by many in the Vincentian stories series. His story depicts a country childhood from a bygone era. It also highlights a familiar theme for many Vincentians raised within a strong Catholic tradition whose enduring faith is lived practically.

Leo is the sum of all these influences and of having the love and support of a large family. In both obvious and subtle ways, these parts shaped the path he would take in his life.

At a time when Victoria is facing many challenges with industry shut downs, Leo's observations about need and rural disadvantage have particular relevance. At the heart of all the towns he and his family have called home, has been the beacon of hope the St Vincent de Paul Society's local conference and good works provide.

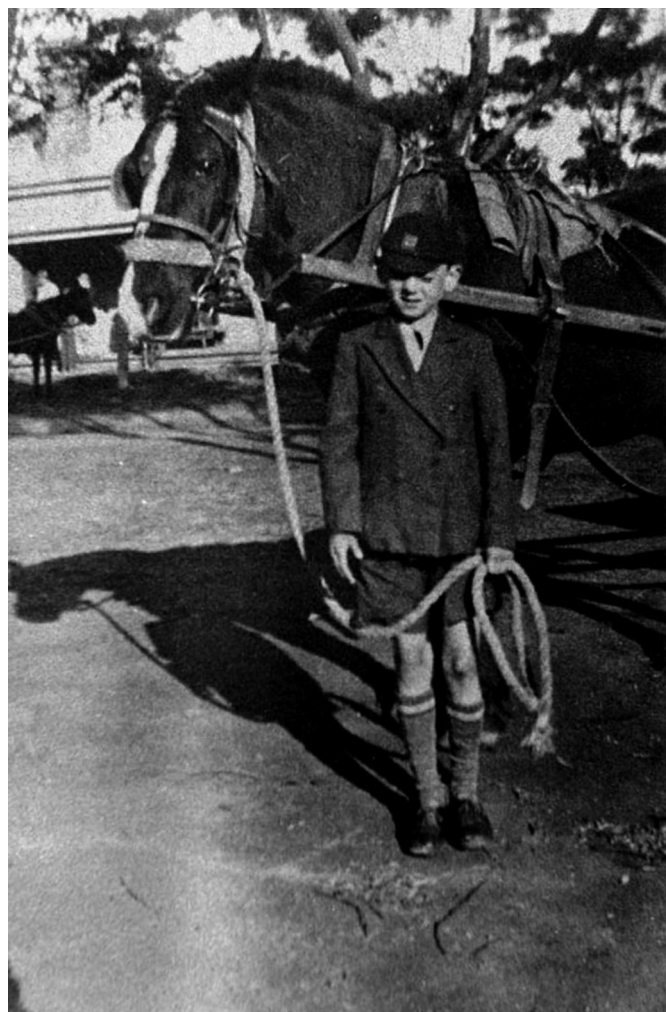
Conference colleagues and friends describe Leo as quiet and thoughtful, yet someone who always spoke his mind when it counted most. His contributions have enabled the development of many conferences across western Victoria and the initiation of innovative responses to need. Most importantly, he has provided yet another fine example of what it is to be a true Vincentian.

Growing up in western Victoria

Leo was born in 1933, one of six children who grew up on a farm in the small Victorian settlement of Swanwater in the Wimmera Mallee wheat district. Although young, Leo recalls the shadow of the Depression on his family. These were hard times and his father struggled to make a living from the land.

He attended Swanwater South State School no 4470. He remembers the morning roll call of at most, fifteen names.

Leo commenced school just before the war. While life in the country was undisturbed by its presence, he was still aware of it “happening over there.” The school master at the nearby Cope Cope school volunteered for the war effort and student numbers swelled that year at Swanwater South. Of great excitement were the mock exercises the children practised, in the event the enemy invaded.



Leo with horse and cart, Swanwater Primary School, early 1940s

Harold Young was the school teacher. He lived eleven miles away in St Arnaud and travelled to school on a small ‘put put’ bike. It was great entertainment watching him arrive and leave every day.

Leo and his siblings travelled two miles to school, initially on horse and cart, with Leo’s older siblings holding the reins. Over time, the children progressed to bikes and riding horses.

The school served the handful of families on similar settlements most of whom Leo still remembers by name: the Driscolls, O’Shannassys, Romeys and Grants.

Leo enjoyed school which provided opportunities to do and learn new things. In those days, state school continued until the end of Year 8.

As his time at Swanwater South was drawing to a close, the Chifley Government introduced a junior government scholarship scheme aimed at assisting bright students from lower socio economic income families. The scheme paid all tuition and part of the living away from home expenses.

Leo remembers sitting the tests at St Arnaud state school. It was considered a great coup to win and Leo was a fortunate recipient.

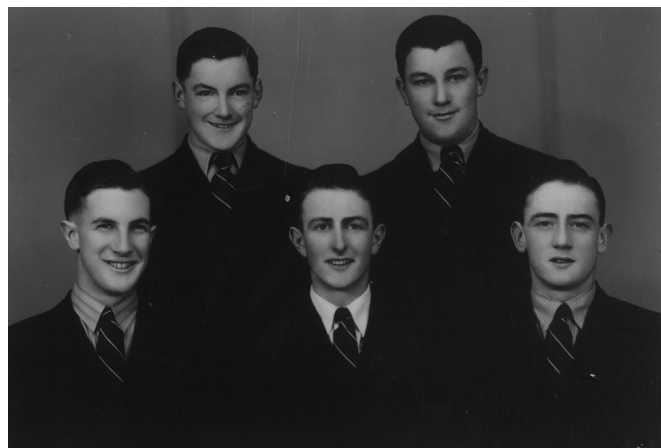
St Patrick’s College, Ballarat

In 1946, Leo commenced as a boarder at St Pat’s College, Ballarat, a school with a rich history and a close knit community. The alumnae continue today to take a deep interest in each other and affairs of the school.

Leo enjoyed his four years there and remembers its highly competitive environment where some flourished and others suffered. Academically strong, he was spared the worst of the harsh Christian brothers discipline other less capable students experienced. Footy coach Br. Bill O’Malley was a figure revered in this sports environment to such an extent that he taught many subjects with no specific credentials besides sports coaching.

The students were constantly reminded to uphold the school’s honour on the sporting field and across other spheres.

Leo’s interests were the humanities. He studied Latin and French and participated actively in the Literary and Debating Society. Coming from the farm, he considered the possibility of pursuing studies aligned to the land but was ever mindful of the precarious nature of farming life.



St Pat’s prefects, Leo front row, right

The 1950 St Patrick's College Annual includes summaries of prefects. Leo is described as a model student and his contributions included membership of the Sodality of Our Lady and the Holy Name Society as well as achievements in tennis and cricket.

Introduction to the St Vincent de Paul Society

It was at St Pat's that he was introduced to the St Vincent de Paul Society. The St Pat's College Conference had been inaugurated in 1943. In the spirit of Frederic Ozanam, it commenced with only eight active members. The conference directed its energies into visiting the old and infirm at a number of Ballarat institutions. In Leo's time, the boys visited elderly men at the Queen Elizabeth Homes every Sunday.

It was a fairly typical institution in the 1950s catering to people of little or no means; uninviting and lacking much in the way of human warmth or dignity.

The boys tried to provide a little cheer through conversation and parcels containing biscuits and a few essentials.

Leo describes long dormitories with many beds facing each other. The need for privacy was largely overlooked in the design of these facilities. There was sawdust on the floor and spittoons along the walls. The boys tried to provide a little cheer through conversation and parcels containing biscuits and a few essentials. It was an introduction to the different forms need can take that Leo would continue to encounter in later years.

Family struggles

Boarders went home at term's end so Leo was quite isolated from the dire circumstances happening on the farm. His father's health was deteriorating. The drought years continued and the farm became less and less viable. Leo suspects his family was further assisted by the school in meeting a range of costs. Even the bus fare for the eighty mile trip home in the holidays was seven shillings and sixpence, quite a sum to find then for a cash-strapped family.

"We must have received help, unless it was the good Lord," Leo says.

As his matriculation finals approached, Leo's father died, aged fifty five. For a few years, his mother managed to keep the farm going. The eldest son

Martin had work on a share farm at Minyip. This was a critical source of income for the family. The second eldest, Brian had moved to Melbourne and was working at the Commonwealth Bank in Collins St. It was the third son Laurie who stayed, keeping the farm going. But it remained an uphill struggle and finally, the hard decision was made to sell. Leo's mother bought a house in Ballarat and those in the family remaining, moved with her.

Teacher training

Leo moved back home after matriculating. His mother knew that Leo was strong academically but did not know what he wanted to do. He was also dealing with his father's death and the shock of the sudden loss of the farm. His mother had a long standing friend who offered to help identify what career Leo could pursue. Leo remembers them, discussing his options, with teaching raised as the best possibility.

Yet again, timing played an important part in Leo's future. He sat the exam and was successful in gaining a studentship. This entitled him to tuition-free, four year Bachelor of Arts and Diploma of Education at Melbourne University with a living away from home allowance, on condition he was indentured to the Education Department for three years.

During second year he started teaching rounds, combined with part-time study at Hawthorn State school and soon gained a better understanding of teacher training and what was involved. During this time, he completed three months National Service training. He finished his studies and started a career teaching in country secondary schools. He also completed on a part time basis, a Bachelor of Education. Twenty years later he did further study and gained a Master's degree in Educational Administration from the University of New England in Armidale N.S.W.

Nhill and meeting Maree

In 1957, Leo took up his first position at Nhill high school. In those days, Nhill had a population of about 2,200 people. Inevitably, in a country town, everyone knows everyone and it is important to join in. Leo joined the football club, tennis club, Apex club and attended the Saturday night dances. He also went to the movies, Nhill having its own theatre, with pictures showing three nights per week.

On his first day, he met the school secretary, Shirley Merrett who also played the piano at the Saturday night dances. He boarded around the corner from where the Merrett family lived and soon met Shirley's

sister Maree who was an usherette at the theatre and also worked at the local solicitor's office. Their father was footy club president Jim Merrett.

Marrying Maree, family and country postings

Leo spent three years in Nhill, marrying Maree at the end of his last school year there. He had been promoted to Mildura high school where they lived for six years. Brendan, Karen and Diane were born during this time. In 1966, the Walshs then moved to Eaglehawk with Leo commencing as senior master at the local high school. Angela was born in their first year there. Next, was a move to Hamilton, where they settled for thirteen years. Their last two children, Mark and Gregory were born there.



Wedding Day St Patrick's Nhill, 1959

In 1981, the family moved to Shepparton. Leo became the principal, Wanganui Park Secondary College. After seven years as principal, Leo took early retirement. He and Maree had established a happy base in Shepparton and felt very much part of the community. Several of their children were also living close by. They decided to stay. Today, they have eight grandchildren and one great-grand-daughter.

The Walsh family hold a reunion every four years, the most recent in April 2014 in Shepparton. Over 100 family members attended from four generations. It was the first time in many years that Maree and Leo's six children were together with Greg coming from London. Shepparton turned on beautiful weather after several days of high rainfall. Over the weekend the family enjoyed many activities together. In 2018 they will meet again on the New South Wales coast.



Family reunion 2014 L - R Mark, Karen, Maree, Diane, Gregory, Angela, Brendan with Leo

Ongoing involvement in the Society

St Patrick's Conference, Nhill

Throughout his teaching career, Leo maintained involvement in the Society. Five years after being a student member of his school conference, he was invited to join the Nhill St. Patrick's Conference. He was young, community-minded and keen to become involved.

There were only three members, and the only funds they could draw on came from the Nhill Court's poor box and the secret collection. The main focus of the Conference then was delivering food. Leo acted as secretary of the Conference for part of his term as a member.

Sacred Heart Conference, Mildura

When the Walshs moved to Mildura, Leo joined the Sacred Heart Conference. Kevin Phipps, a forward thinking teacher, was the president. Leo credits Kevin with imbuing a strong sense and understanding of the spirit of the Society. It was within the Mildura Conference that Leo gained the most insight into accepting people as he found them, the importance of discretion and treating people with dignity. Leo reflects that Mildura Conference was way ahead of other conferences in its approach and doing wonderful works.

Two interesting special works which Sacred Heart Conference embarked upon were providing an overnight shelter for travellers and the construction of a swimming pool for the sisters at the Mercy convent. Conference members carried out quite a deal of the manual labour on both projects. Conference minutes from April 1962 record progress of the pool and the sisters' gratitude.

“Another successful working bee was held when the concourse was poured and the floor of the pool was rendered. Most brothers attended a social evening tendered by the sisters in appreciation of the work done on the pool.”

Overnight shelter

Most people think of conference work involving home visits and centre operations, but often there is so much more. Mildura Conference has one particularly inspirational example of seeking to respond to a particular need the town had been seeing for some time.

Some people became stranded there with car problems or because they were simply down on their luck.

There were many itinerant workers arriving in search of casual fruit picking and others who may have been driving or hitchhiking between destinations. Some people became stranded there with car problems or because they were simply down on their luck.

Even if work was found, many could discover, for example, that they were not suited to the rigours of fruit picking in the extreme heat.

The Conference was receiving many calls for food and accommodation. The brothers became accustomed to this trend and, in urgent cases, would pay for lodgings at local boarding houses.

The Conference decided it needed to provide some form of temporary accommodation. The Society rallied considerable community support with an initial donation of £ 600 coming from Apex, followed swiftly by £1,000 from the Hospital and Charities Board. Bricks were donated by the local brickworks and tradesmen volunteered their time. A builder supervised the project, loaning scaffolding, cement mixers and barrows. The labour was done largely by volunteers. Local businesses donated beds and bedding. A government grant was also provided in response to the community's contributions.

Leo remembers helping out with this and the enormous sense of satisfaction in seeing the shelter take form. It opened in 1964, free of debt.

The shelter project exemplifies what can be achieved when a community pulls together. Over its life, it went on to provide over 400 stays per year, with heavy use during grape picking seasons. Conference brothers were rostered to supervise the shelter on a weekly basis. It was predominantly a shelter for men although there were occasions when a family

was accommodated. One time, a family of twelve travelling from Geelong to Broken Hill, cooked their engine. Breaking with the usual practice of 1-2 night stays, the family remained for a week until it was possible for them to be back on the road.

Having this facility opened up the possibility of using it for a variety of purposes. The police constantly referred people to the shelter who they found to be in “the too hard basket.” Prisoners sentenced for minor offences were often released at 6pm, with nowhere to stay so the shelter became a convenient half way house. People of no fixed address leaving hospital could also stay. This was far preferable than the alternative which in many cases was sleeping on the river bank, which was most detrimental to their health and recovery. A sense of the unique value of the shelter is gained from an excerpt from *St Vincent de Paul Society Record*, January 1968.

“In the event of needy men calling on other religious denominations, including the Salvation Army, seeking shelter, they are automatically referred to the Society for admittance to what is the only charitable shelter in the district.”

The hostel was not without its problems. Items were stolen and lodgers did not always comply with the house rules. But in true Vincentian spirit, the conference had responded to an urgent need and was prepared to face the consequences.

St. Liborius Conference, Eaglehawk

Leo came to realise being a Vincentian was a work in progress

Moving to Eaglehawk, Leo joined the St Liborius Conference, serving for a period as president. He was able to pass on the sum of all he had learned at previous conferences. It was at Eaglehawk, that he had his first contact with St Vincent de Paul op shops, as they were then called.

Leo came to realise being a Vincentian was a work in progress. Until Mildura, he had known very little about the foundational story of the Society

Mildura's Kevin Phipps was very strong on the Ozanam legacy and had passed this onto Leo in the six years they worked alongside each other in the conference. He realised that Eaglehawk carried out their good work without much knowledge or connection to the Vincentian story. He set about passing this on.

St Mary's Conference, Hamilton

Leo had no real sense of the Society as a regional or Statewide organisation until the family moved to Hamilton. His involvement had always been confined to membership of a particular conference. Even as President, the perspective was always local. At Hamilton, in addition to Conference President, Leo was appointed Regional President. He was also involved in establishing an op shop in Hamilton, becoming the store's Foundation President. Maree recalls the phone never stopped ringing with volunteers organising roster times. Daughter Karen who was about twelve then, said:

"Gee, Mum, Dad knows a lot of women!"

Leo continued to learn as he progressed through different conferences and different roles within the Society.

St. Mel's Conference, Shepparton

In 1982, moving to Shepparton would see Leo join his sixth conference. At the request of Parish Priest Monsignor Hickey, Leo became the Foundation President of St. Mel's Conference. He went on to serve a second term as conference president as well as a term as Goulburn Valley Regional President. Leo maintained a deep commitment for home visits even though many conferences in the Goulburn Valley Region conduct interviews for assistance from their centres. He was frequently found at the Shepparton Centre in the mornings and would then spend afternoons with a fellow member, conducting home visits. Even as his conference involvement became less active, he continued to regularly volunteer his services at the Centre. He has always had many good business contacts and would use these to obtain donations of food and goods.



Leo with Margaret Walsh packing the pantry at St Mel's, 2006

Goulburn Valley Region and North Eastern Central Council Involvement

Apart from being Conference President for two terms, Leo also served in other executive positions including as Goulburn Valley Regional President for five years. He was hands on, always visiting each conference several times to ensure they were connected and supported. Leo and Maree recall some interesting fact finding trips during this period.

Leo was respected and admired by the members of the ten conferences in the region.

He also undertook several coordinating roles on behalf of the region. These included Vic Relief Foodbank Officer which involved ordering food for distribution to the conferences within the region. He utilised his wide network of contacts in this role. SPC Ardmona was particularly generous donating many pallets of fruit products for this purpose.

In this role, he organised the insulation of a shed at the Shepparton Centre to comply with health requirements so that donated food could be stored there.

Relating to the above role, Leo was also the Food Distribution officer for the region and later the North Eastern Central Council, responsible for distribution of the donated food to the region's conferences.

Leo was a member of the North Eastern Central Council (NECC) from 2002-2012 and served as Vice-President for seven of these years.

The No Interest Loans Scheme (N.I.L.S.)

Leo has operated as the NECC's N.I.L.S. Program Officer since it began approximately ten years ago. He applauds the scheme as a wonderful innovation and effective hand up for people struggling to make ends meet. Over the years, he has seen many people helped by this scheme run by Good Shepherd. Leo has assisted conference members to prepare comprehensive applications, checking them thoroughly before sending them to the N.I.L.S. committee in Ballarat.

The scheme is also dynamic, constantly changing to best meet different requirements. It is well known across the community and consequently, many applications are made for a loan. People's requests are rejected frequently because there are eligibility limits but Leo believes the guidelines are fair and reasonable. They are mainly designed to ensure money is not wasted. A recent trend has been an increase in the number of cases where people seek assistance to repair their cars. In country areas, people are significantly disadvantaged if they don't have transport so this has been a great benefit.

Twinning Officer

Victorian conferences have been active in establishing twinning with conferences in other countries. It is a wonderful opportunity for Society members to support the work of overseas conferences through regular quarterly payments. Conferences also take up opportunities to support their twin in specific projects.

Leo has been the Goulburn Valley Twinning Officer for a number of years. This region has an active twinning history with twenty one twins across a number of countries. Shepparton Conference has three twins, in India, Indonesia and Myanmar.

Community Award

In 2009, in recognition of their contribution to the community, Leo and Maree were awarded the Shepparton Kiwanis Club annual community services award, known as the Beth Raleigh Award.

Leo acknowledges the back up and support Maree provided which enabled him to commit considerable time to the Society. Maree meanwhile, managed to run their home while making a significant contribution throughout the community.



Leo and Maree receiving the Beth Raleigh Award 2009

Maree continued to contribute to the local parish as she had done in Hamilton. She played the organ at mass, funerals and weddings and the piano, on visits to nursing homes around Shepparton and Nagambie, entertaining the residents. For fifteen years, she also played at weekly debutante rehearsals and balls.

Healthy rivalry

There are two conferences in Shepparton; St Brendan's Shepparton North is the second one. There is a healthy competition between the two and pride that

the town can provide enough support for both to be viable and profitable enterprises. Leo marvels at the success of centres across the Goulburn Valley region and the contribution they have made to the work of the Society.

Marian Community

Leo recognises that much has changed in the thirty years he has been involved in St Mel's Conference. The Marian Community is a service first established by the conference in response to the needs of women and children escaping domestic violence. He has good memories of this service's early days. It has evolved to become a more professional service, which relates to government, receives government funding and employs qualified staff. Local conferences still refer women and children needing support.

Reflections over the years

With so many years of conference experience across different country towns, Leo reflects on what he has learned about Society work. Of no surprise is the recognition that while the needs of people are constantly changing, there will always be need.

“Organisations like the Society, need to have the wherewithal to meet the need,” is how he sees the challenge before the Society.

The Shepparton region for example, has the second largest Indigenous population in Victoria and this brings its own set of circumstances.

Leo is quick to comment that there are many opinions about what works, and what is needed but it is hard to fix many entrenched problems.

The capacity to operate profitable enterprises as a way of providing a revenue stream is valuable. The Goulburn Valley region is fortunate to have several, well run and viable centres such as Shepparton, Mooroopna and Bendigo. All consistently achieve high levels of takings which enables the region to contribute significant funds. A further feature of these successful centres is that they are all able to pursue their own approach successfully.

Leo recognises that local conferences can be parochial in nature and by the same token, head office does not always communicate strategic decisions down the line as clearly and transparently as it could. There is also the general issue of the Melbourne/country divide, exacerbated by distance,

that exists across Victoria. He feels more information about dispersal of funds generated by the conferences through their regions, would be greatly appreciated.

It is understandable that local conferences hold a certain level of ownership of their conference and their centre. This needs to be respected while members also need to understand the bigger picture of how they relate to the Victorian Society and centres management. It was only through involvement in regional and Statewide roles that Leo came to gain a better understanding of the big picture in Society affairs and he realises many members are cut off from this possibility.

There can be challenges with the purchase and lease of buildings for centres in terms of what constitutes good business decisions. These are the kinds of areas where communication channels could be improved at times.

Leo valued being involved in all manner of activities for the Society such as joining the organising committee for the Victorian Society's Sesquicentenary celebrations.

His preference has always been that members of a conference become involved in all facets of its life, be this centres, home visits and other activities. He recognises this is not always possible but is concerned when people deliberately cut themselves off from experiencing the whole.

Conclusion

Leo has dedicated his life to the Society. It has been a constant feature as he and Maree moved around Victoria. His involvement has spanned the Society's hallmark home visitation, time assisting in centres, particularly the Shepparton Centre, as well as implementing innovative solutions to diverse needs.

He is a true believer in the power of communities to pull together and has used his considerable network of contacts to obtain donations of food and in kind support. He has shown his knack for practical solutions to resolve obstacles.

As he valued the knowledge and example imparted to him by many Vincentians he has respected over the years, he too has given every possible assistance to conference members. He has worked enthusiastically to engender a sense of the Vincentian spirit in each and every conference in which he has been involved.

Leo looks back with gratitude for the people who helped develop in him, a sense of the Vincentian purpose. He believes organisations like the Society of St Vincent de Paul will always need leaders who inspire and keep the foundation story alive.



Leo with State President Jim Grealish, SVDP Festival meeting, Mooroopna

- 1952 Leo joined St Pat's College Conference, Ballarat.
- 1957 - 1960 Joined Nhill Conference. Acted as secretary for some time.
- 1960 - 1966 Joined Mildura Conference.
- 1966 - 1969 Joined St Liborius Conference, Eaglehawk. Appointed President for some time.
- 1969 - 1981 Joined Hamilton Conference.
- 1969 - 1975 Regional President, North West Central Council.
- 1977 - 1981 Appointed Conference President, Hamilton Conference.
- 1982 Joined St Mel's Shepparton South Conference.
- 1982 Appointed Foundation President and several terms as president.
- 2002 - 2012 Appointed North Eastern Central Council member.
- 2005 - 2012 Vice President, North East Central Council.



St Vincent de Paul Society

good works

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 |

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Honoured members

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Conference members

Kevin Slattery, St Vincent de Paul Society Archivist

Mission Identity Advisory Committee (MIAC)

Mission Integration Officer, Livia Carusi

Anne Tuohey, Project Writer

Annie Lewis, Design and Layout

State Council of Victoria

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St Vincent de Paul Society
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St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.
Locked Bag 4800, Box Hill Vic 3128
43 Prospect Street, Box Hill Vic 3128

Phone: 03 9895 5800
Fax: 03 9895 5850
Email: info@svdp-vic.org.au

ABN: 28 911 702 061
RN: A0042727Y