The Sisters of Mercy, Ballarat East and the Good Samaritan Sisters recently farewelled much loved members of their communities with the deaths of Sisters Sheila Fiscalini RSM (17/9/2008), Valda Ward RSM (18/9/2008) and Kathleen Finigan SGS (29/9/2008). These Sisters will be known to many around the Diocese. Reflections on each Sister follow:

SHEILA FISCALINI RSM

Born in Ballarat, Sheila lost her mother at a young age and since she was three years old she has been a part of the Ballarat East Mercy family. For a short while it was as a day-scholar, then as a boarder and finally as a Sister of Mercy. Despite what some would call an overdose of institutional living, Sheila became a strong-minded woman. At the age of three, she is reputed to have stood up to Mother Anthony, one of our more dignified and austere members. This was a feat that those who were older and wiser would not have attempted.

When she was young, she didn’t always have the last say. Grandma Fiscalini laid down the rules and Sheila obeyed them or else. There was the memorable day when she went over to play at a friend’s house. Before she left home, she was reminded that it was Friday and she was not to eat meat for dinner. Her friend’s mother asked Sheila if she would like bacon and eggs for lunch. Sheila thought that would be fine and tucked in. On her return home, Grandma asked, “What did you have for lunch?” Note that Sheila was about 8 years old at the time. When she said she’d had bacon and eggs, she was ordered to walk over to St. Alipius’ to go to Confession. Mons Gleeson opened the door to her and then he sent Father Crowe over to the church where Sheila confessed her “mortal” sin. When she told this story, she ruefully added: “I suppose they had a good laugh at my expense later.”

As seniors at school we loved the Babies as they were called and so did the nuns. Apparently things weren’t always rosy for Sheila. One day I picked up a holy card on the ground and I saw that it belonged to Tricia Hamm. On the back Sheila had written in her childish scrawl, ‘Dear Tricia, please pray that God will help me in all my TRILES’. Sheila used to laugh about the fact that she failed in Religion at school. She knew that the reason for this was that her name was in Mother Bonaventure’s dreaded black book. What could be worse? Despite this, to everyone’s delight, when Sheila left school, she became a Mercy.

Over the years, Sheila became a much loved and extremely valued community member. According to Mother Marie Therese who was the life and soul of Sacred Heart Teachers’ College, Sister Pius as Sheila had now become, was a born teacher. She was also an excellent musician – a violinist, pianist, organist, and singer. Her nimble fingers turned out clever craft work Most recently she knitted beautiful garments for poor children in Africa and East Timor.

A major trauma for Sheila was her first move to the country to Manangatang. When Sheila heard the news, she was on holidays and she cried her heart out. She was a true ‘Eastie’ and couldn’t imagine life away from Ballarat. Being the obedient religious she was, she packed her bags and went. Later she was appointed to Edenhope, Penshurst, Birregurra, Wendouree, and Mortlake where she is still much missed. Because of ill health, she finally came home to Ballarat.

Despite being such a homebody, Sheila went on a remarkable overseas trip with her Uncle Leo, Monsignor Fiscalini, and Monsignor Tom O’Brien to the Holy Land, Rome and Lourdes. In Sheila’s words, the only things they looked at were missals, vestments and cruets. Sounds like fun, doesn’t it?

Sheila made a wonderful contribution to the Congregation and the Diocese Over the years, even though she suffered from many debilitating illnesses, she lived every day of her religious life with
all the energy, determination and commitment she could muster. Like Catherine McAuley, Sheila could never say, "It is enough." When she ran out of puff, she was not stopped in her tracks, but she took to the gopher like a champion.

We will miss Sheila greatly - we have lost a loyal friend, a wise, deeply spiritual woman, a patient sufferer who never complained, someone who faced death with dignity and courage believing she was loved by a compassionate God. With hope and great love we entrust Sheila to her God who will not be outdone in generosity.

- Anne Forbes rsm

VALDA WARD RSM

Welcome

Today is our Mercy Feast Day. What better day to honour a Mercy woman? It is my privilege to welcome you all on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy and of Wilma, Genny, Bill and their families to this celebration of the life and entry into eternal life of Valda Mary Ward, a Sister of Mercy and a woman with altitude. In particular, I welcome Fr Adrian McInerney our parish priest and main celebrant, Bishop Mulkearns who was a good friend to Valda, Fr Leo Donnelly, Fr Damien Heath who has known Valda since they were children in Casterton, and priests of this diocese and elsewhere who were her friends and ours. I welcome Sisters of Mercy from all over Australia, members of other religious congregations, Valda’s former colleagues from ACU and St Martin’s, students and friends from every phase of Valda’s life, and the ever faithful staff of Talbot Place. After the Mass, we invite you all to join us for refreshments at the Mercy Gathering Centre to continue the celebration of Valda’s life.

Eulogy

And now to the eulogy! I have here a little document dated 15.12.1958. It is a letter of recommendation addressed to the Reverend Mother and signed by Fr William McGrath, PP of Casterton. It reads in part: ‘Valda needs no recommendation from me. Believe me she is everything that a young Catholic woman should be. She will be a credit to Ballarat East. Sincerely yours in JC. W. McGrath.’ That letter was written exactly eleven days before Valda took the plunge and threw in her lot with the Sisters of Mercy, the spiritual daughters of Catherine McAuley.

Some three months earlier Valda had come back to SHC and signed up. On that occasion, Mother Marie Therese escorted her around the classrooms and introduced her to the students. I remember that day. She came into our French class and addressed us in French. The room was suddenly full of French. I remember her dancing eyes and striking demeanour. I remember hearing something of Valda’s story later that day from Sr. Anne Forbes who had been at school with Valda. I had a clear sense that Valda was a former student of whom everyone was immensely proud, someone who embodied the values of the school. It was no surprise to any of us when she later turned up as a postulant.

As you came into the church today you received a bookmark bearing a photo of Valda and the words of her motto, ‘I can never love enough’. Valda’s brother Bill will speak of her love for the family, a love that was evident to all, most recently in the look of recognition for her sisters and her niece in the days before her death. In my 50 year association with Valda, since that first encounter at SHC, I have had ample opportunity to witness the dedication with which she lived her motto, and the manner in which she realised the promise expressed by Fr Bill McGrath.

Valda had taught for some years before she joined the Mercies. The School Inspector’s report of 24.07.1957 refers to her ‘use of modern techniques’ and comments on ‘the very good response’
she received in her classes. Music and drama were an integral part of those classes. Valda continued throughout her life to be an innovative and amazingly effective educator, in schools, in teachers colleges, and in Australian Catholic University. Countless students attribute their success in life to her teaching and to the confidence she inspired in them.

Valda was herself a lifelong learner and researcher. She told me not so long ago that her 1991 Diploma in Social Justice from YTU was her most significant qualification. ‘That’s what all the rest was about’, she said. Indeed her studies, from BA to PhD to Diploma of Theological Studies, were consistently directed to the advancement of knowledge and wisdom for the sake of a more just and equitable world and to the living out of her motto. In other words, she was ‘ambitious for the higher gifts of faith, hope and love’ and she knew well that ‘the greatest of these is love’. She featured twice in the World Who’s Who of Women and earlier this year was honoured Among Ballarat’s Finest: A Showcase of Achievement and Contribution by Ballarat’s Women.

Valda always enjoyed her work. She loved those with whom she lived and worked: in Ballarat East where she did her novitiate and later served for eight years as Congregation Leader; at Patrician House where she ran the Teachers College; at St Martin’s in the Pines where she taught in the early days and then spent 12 years as Principal; in Armidale where she did most of her studies; in Ascot Vale where she headed up the Campus; and last but certainly not least at North Melbourne. I asked her once to tell me about her favourite ministry. She replied without hesitation, ‘Anything I did for the Sisters’. Just as Valda inspired confidence in her students, she also gave many of our sisters the confidence to take up study and research, to extend their horizons beyond what they ever thought possible. At that time, I happened to be Valda’s vicar. It was a time of transition and change in the church and in the world. Not everyone shared Valda’s world view and she had no lack of critics, but she had an extraordinary capacity to turn the other cheek. Her immediate response to an adverse reaction was to indulge in retail therapy—generally furniture in those days before Hong Kong specially crafted clothing became an option for her. Incidentally her trips to Hong Kong turned out to be a blessing for someone on a Mercy budget and a love of clothes. Last Christmas, she informed me that she wanted new shoes for Christmas. I said, ‘You do not. You’re getting like Imelda Marcos and in any case everyone remarks on how good you look in those lovely pewter coloured shoes!’ ‘Oh, do they? Then get me the DVD of Double Jeopardy.’

Her contribution to the sisters went far beyond the Ballarat East Congregation. During her eight years as our Congregation Leader in the 1970s, she played a leading role in the movement towards the creation of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia. Some of those with whom she worked and dreamed are here today, in particular Catharine Courtney, Marie Gaudrey, and Dorothy Campion. Valda travelled to Rome with Dorothy Campion, who was to be our first Institute President, to present the petition for acceptance of a new structure. In more recent times Valda has taken a vital interest in the reconfiguring of our Institute. She was never afraid of change. She understood the pain that is often involved in the process of change, but that never deterred her from moving to a new and more life-giving place. I reminded her the other day that her work is not yet finished. I am confident she will be with us as we take the next step in our reconfiguring journey.

Over the past five years, Valda has lived at Talbot Place. After her stroke on August 17, 2003, she adjusted to a life of near total dependency with courage, determination and faith. She who could never love enough was surrounded by love, from the wonderfully dedicated staff, from immediate and extended family, from former colleagues and students, from innumerable friends, and of course from her Mercy sisters and friends. Tricia Vagg deserves special mention as an extraordinarily devoted carer and reader from the outset. Tricia remained with her to the end. Carmel Giles was neighbour to Valda and trusty substitute reader in Tricia’s absence.

The gospel for today is Matthew’s version of the beatitudes. Valda lived the beatitudes. Believe me, she was everything a Mercy friend should be. Blessed are the merciful, Valda, for they will be mercied, to use a literal translation. Like Catherine McAuley, you were ‘tough-minded and tender-hearted’. May you be mercied forever in the embrace of a loving God.

- Veronica Lawson rsm
When Sister Kathleen Finnigan was nominated in 2000 for the ‘Older Person of the Year Award’, her nominator found a number of ways to describe her: “a teacher for fifty-five years”, “the nurse…the hero of tooth pulling”, all summed up in a final judgement: “I know that one day, whether it is one, ten years away, she will be deeply, sadly missed and not replaceable”. It is now eight years on that the time has arrived when she is deeply, sadly missed.

Kathleen Finnigan began her long life at Port Fairy where she was born on 26 June 1923, the fifth of twelve children born to John and Dorothy (nee Russell) Finnigan. Up until her 22nd birthday, life for Kathleen revolved around the family dairy farm at Toolong in the Western District of Victoria. In her early years, skills in catching and bridling the horse to bring in the cows for milking, in which she also took part, were put to good use as part of her daily routine. Years later she would defer the completion of her secondary education to help her father on the farm, as all her brothers were younger than she. The family home would finally be the place from where she would embark on a new journey, following in the steps of her sisters Irene and Dorothy.

Along with other members of the family, Kathleen completed all her primary education at Toolong State School, and after a year at home, went on to boarding school at St. Brendan’s School, Coragulac, where she gained her Leaving Certificate in 1941. She spent the next three and a half years working on the farm, helping with housework as well as looking after the younger members of the family.

On her 22nd birthday, Kathleen left the family home to respond to the call to enter religious life and was admitted to the Novitiate of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, Pennant Hills, New South Wales on 2 July 1945. In this new stage of her life she was joining her sisters Irene and Dorothy, who together had already made their profession as Good Samaritan Sisters in 1940. Kathleen was given the religious name of Sister Mary Euphemia, by which she would be fondly remembered by many of her former pupils. She made her profession of vows on 6 January 1948 and after teaching preparation at St. Scholastica’s Teachers’ College, Glebe Point, embarked on a ministry of teaching, in one form or another, for the next fifty-five years, mainly in schools around Sydney, in Canberra, and finally, in 1983, in Hamilton.

Failing health suggested a transfer from Hamilton to Marian House, Northcote, where she took up residence in November 2005. It was a great joy to her that her sister Dorothy was able to join her for her last months there.

Kathleen will be remembered for her great fidelity, her love of family and friends and her quite sense of humour. Her talent for creating beautiful knitwear gave great joy to many people.

She died on 29 September 2008. She is survived by Dorothy, Tom, Mavis and Bishop Brian and remembered with love and gratitude by all her sisters of the Good Samaritan.

- From the Funeral Mass Booklet

Photo: Sr. Kathleen (centre) with Sr. Dorothy and Bishop Brian.