

Sr Therese Power rsm laughs at the suggestion that after nearly sixty years as a Sister of Mercy, she is now a mother and nanna. Not the biological sort, but one who mothers others, who cares for them and works hard to ensure they receive all the care and support possible.

For decades she taught children, nurturing their gifts and talents (mostly in maths and science), as they moved through schools where she taught or led in the Ballarat Diocese. But now Therese has been asked to 'mother' women whose own mothers are worlds away, or lost to them forever. Therese, a Sister of Mercy, lauded educator, and staunch justice advocate, accompanies trafficked women as they rebuild a new life in Australia.



Therese pictured with Jim Ryan, Chair of the Commission in 2013 when Therese talked about her work with ACRATH to the Ballarat Diocesan Social Justice Commission

A long-time member of ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans) she is a person many NGOs go to when a trafficked woman, who is accessing their services, needs someone to support them through emotional, relationship, legal, health and educational challenges. She now accompanies several women in Melbourne and still supports two Sudanese families in Ballarat, where she has left her mark in the education sector. 'Who would have thought? I certainly couldn't have imagined years ago that I would be here today, a religious Sister, never married and now being called nanny by a lot of children', Therese said with a laugh.

Her work with trafficked women began about five years ago when the Red Cross asked ACRATH if there was a volunteer willing to provide practical assistance to two women who had been trafficked into Australia. 'I said yes because it is one of the objectives of ACRATH. I thought it was a great opportunity for our organisation to really connect with the women we work for,' she said.

'I began as a teacher many years ago so my ministry has always been about supporting young women. This seemed like an extension of that ministry and also a perfect fit with what our foundress Catherine McAuley asks of us.' Therese quickly realised that the women needed more than the support package provided by agencies or the practical advice that she was more than willing to provide. They needed someone in their corner.

Today, Therese accompanies seven women, some 'high needs' and others whom she phones or sees each week, to touch base and encourage them in whatever they are doing. Some were rescued from brothels where they were working against their will. One woman was trafficked into the sex industry after being sold by her mother when she was very young. Another woman feared for her life long after being rescued and Therese was on hand to stay with her day and night as she overcame her fear of being found by the brothel owner. Their stories are all different and often harrowing. Five years ago the seven women, from South-East Asia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Burma, were all alone. Now five have partners and four have children. Some live in Melbourne, others are in Sydney.

Therese juggles a diary that currently includes a regular commitment as coordinator of Bethany House, the St Ambrose Parish refugee house in Brunswick, as well as being ACRATH's representative on several education and forced labour networks and groups. Then there's her work with the women (and families) she accompanies, which includes teaching English, parent-teacher interviews, meeting with principals, enrolling children in schools, immigration tribunal hearings, birthday parties, Centrelink meetings, cups of tea and a lot of administration support with job applications, school reports, forms and more forms. It's a demanding life and Therese loves it!

Some of the women have built a full and happy life in Australia and Therese is very much part of that life. Some have reconnected with the families they once lost and most have established new families. Their children think of Therese as their nanny. 'One of the things that has always inspired and energised me is the commitment that I will not let these women down. Along the way they have been let down by so many people, often people they trusted. But I won't let them down,' she said. 'Seeing these women flourish is just wonderful. Seeing them reunited with their children or watching them graduate from courses are the special moments.' Education is a priority for Therese and she shares the women's desire for their children to have opportunities they never had. She uses her Mercy networks to try and have the children enrolled in good schools.

In August 2015, Therese was awarded the Sir James Darling Medal, named after the founder of the Australian College of Education. This honour is awarded to an eminent Victorian Educator, who has made an outstanding and sustained contribution to Victorian education. The citation that accompanied her award spoke of Therese's outstanding contribution, not only as a teacher and principal for many years in Mercy education, but also as the first female Director of a Catholic Education Office in Ballarat. Her involvement in several state education projects and policy developments was also highlighted. Her focus is now on adult education, particularly for asylum seekers and refugees, including some of the women she accompanies. Four days a week she teaches English to women at Brimbank Council Learning Hubs. 'My focus in working with the women is always to be looking at what we can do today to make tomorrow different,' she said. 'And they are very open to that, very resilient. I am always amazed and humbled by their belief that no hurdle is too great and something better will always come along. It's a great sense of hope', she said.

Therese knows that committing to accompany a family means staying for the long haul. The first two Sudanese families she was asked to mentor, through the Multicultural Centre in Ballarat, had just moved into the area. When she moved to Melbourne about eighteen months later, it was suggested that someone else would support these families, but their response was, 'No, we keep Sister Therese'. 'So I am still

visiting them regularly, assisting one mother in activities like enrolling her sons at St Patrick's College,' she said.

'The people I accompany all have something in common. They don't complain and they don't get angry about what has happened to them, which is extraordinary because most have lost their childhood, the life they once had or hoped for. There is a belief in them that nothing is insurmountable ... it's contagious really,' she said. 'It is a privilege to support these women.'

Rosie Hoban

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