

PROFILE

Celebrating a golden milestone

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BY Stephanie Thomas*

This year marks a significant milestone for Good Samaritan Sister, Margaret Keane. It's the fiftieth anniversary of her profession as a religious sister. And as Margaret looks back on those 50 years, it's her time as a teacher and principal that loom large in our conversation. She recalls with great affection the many people and places encountered along the way.

"I think I liked every place I taught in," she remarks.

Margaret's first teaching placement was at St Joseph's, Nambour in Queensland. It was 1963, and fresh out of the Good Samaritan novitiate and teacher-training college in Sydney, the 20-year old Sister Margaret launched into teaching grade three.

"I was just hopeless!" admits Margaret.

"I liked it up there, although I found teaching very difficult because we didn't have much training at all; [just] one year."

Margaret's time at Nambour was cut short because of a bout of rheumatic fever, an illness she'd also had as a 14-year old. So at the end of her first year, Margaret was transferred back to Sydney where she moved into secondary teaching at Rosebank College, Five Dock. She says she enjoyed it there, but continued to find teaching "hard".

It wasn't until her next placement at Mater Maria, Warriewood, a new junior secondary school for girls in Sydney's northern suburbs, that Margaret became more confident in the classroom.

"I learnt to teach there, I think, because it was so small," she explains.

"I went there for six years... It was fantastic, just the intimacy of it. And they were lovely parents and lovely students and teachers."

From Mater Maria, Margaret went to Queanbeyan in 1970, where at age 28 she was appointed principal of St Gregory's a junior secondary co-educational school. She recalls an experience during those years that revealed her compassion and readiness to take risks.

"I had a girl in year 10 who became pregnant and her parents were distraught. She was school captain. So they said to me, 'When do you want her to leave?' I said, 'What does she have to leave for? She doesn't have to leave until the baby's due'.

"So I kept her on amid some criticism of some very holy people in town," she explains.

Margaret proudly relates how the young girl successfully completed her year 10 certificate and was farewelled by her fellow students with a baby-shower in class.

"I got a couple of letters from parents about [the baby-shower]!" laughs Margaret.

But there's more to this story that Margaret is pleased to tell. After no doubt much deliberation, the girl's parents decided the baby would be adopted.

"The happy part of that is," says Margaret, "some years later [the girl] met up with the father and they got the baby back. Now they've got two or three children."

A few years ago Margaret had the opportunity to meet up with the family again.

"I like that story," she adds.

In 1972 Margaret returned to Sydney as principal of St Brigid's Marrickville. She served there for three years before heading to Ayr in North Queensland where she held a leadership role at Burdekin Catholic High, a newly established secondary school run by the Marist Brothers and Good Samaritan Sisters.

An eight-year posting as head of the junior school at St Monica's Epping in Melbourne followed, before she was appointed principal of Mater Christi College, Belgrave from 1987 until 2001. Margaret has very fond memories of Mater Christi and says she only left because of her election as a member of the council of her congregation.

While her new full-time ministry meant a move back to Sydney, it didn't mean a complete move away from school life. Margaret also served as a member of the Good Samaritan Education Council, a role she relished.

After six years on her congregation's council, Margaret had a year-long sabbatical which included six months' spiritual renewal at Marymount Mercy Centre in Sydney. This was her first break from full-time ministry since joining the Good Sams. Like many other sisters, her previous study opportunities (she has a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Theology) were completed part-time in addition to a full-time teaching load.

In 2008, Margaret was appointed manager of Mount St Benedict Centre in Sydney which offers faith formation opportunities for individuals and groups. Life seemed to be chugging along nicely for Margaret, but then one evening in mid-November 2010, without any warning, her world was thrown into chaos.

Earlier in the day Margaret had attended the profession of another Good Samaritan Sister. She'd also been out for a bike ride, something she did regularly. But after dinner, in conversation with some visiting sisters, she had a massive seizure.

"[There was] no sign. I wasn't sick or anything," explains Margaret. "I found out the next day in the hospital. They were very quick finding out what it was."

Margaret was diagnosed with a brain tumour.

"I found myself in shock for most of the first three months, but in spite of two surgeries, not in great physical pain. Then the losses struck when the doctors were not certain what would happen next."

Margaret thought she'd get back to normal after a course of radiotherapy, but normality didn't follow. There were "oddities in scans", she lost peripheral sight in both eyes and her mobility was seriously affected. The cause, according to the doctors, was a stroke.

As Margaret reflects on the last 15 tumultuous months "if only" has been a constant thought, and many times she has asked "what is 'of God' in this?"

Margaret is understandably frustrated by the impact of her illness. She is conscious of being dependent on her "wonderful community" and misses her ministry intensely. But Margaret feels

like she is improving. Twice a week she visits a rehabilitation centre where she undergoes a rigorous regime of physiotherapy, occupational therapy, hydrotherapy and speech therapy.

"I'm working on being able to walk and not fall. I pray for trust (not easy) after 15 months of this burden (or gift) given to me," she reflects.

In the meantime, Margaret is not allowing her illness to overtake any celebrations to mark her golden jubilee. In December last year she celebrated with other members of her congregation. "It was wonderful," says Margaret.

Recently she returned from a holiday with family in her hometown of Koroit in Victoria. During that time there were also celebrations with family and friends to mark Margaret's significant milestone.

"Time in Victoria was precious," says Margaret.

"My family were so pleased to see me and to give me all the care anyone could want. A very special day was the golden jubilee celebration in the parish church where I grew up."

With the year still young, the celebrations are bound to continue.

*** *Stephanie Thomas is editor of The Good Oil, the e-magazine of the Good Samaritan Sisters.***

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