



Moments that take our breath away

Australia Day Honours for Sr Toni Matha



On Australia Day, 26 January 2007, Loreto Sister, Sr Toni Matha, was appointed as a Member of the General Division of the Order of Australia for service to the community, particularly the provision and development of services through St Vincent de Paul; to people suffering from mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction and to education.

The appointment highlights Sr Toni's extraordinary achievements in the social justice and welfare sector. Sr Toni has played an active role in social welfare in Australia and in particular in the collaboration between social welfare services, Church and State.



Sr Toni Matha (left)
pictured with Sr
Natalie Houlihan.

Sr Toni reflects that her life has been filled with moments that take her breath away. She sees a career filled with opportunities – not achievements. “I have been extraordinarily privileged to have been given these opportunities to meet and work with so many people. My experiences have opened doors to places I would never normally have been”.

Sr Toni entered religious life in 1954 following a calling to help those less fortunate. At the time she was studying physiotherapy however she felt a deeper calling to help people and make a difference to people's lives. Born in West Wyalong (mid NSW) and educated at Normanhurst in Sydney, she grew up admiring the work of the Loreto Sisters and their commitment to the education of women. It was a natural progression therefore for her to choose to join the Loreto Sisters, a group of women, whose values of education, freedom, justice and sincerity she had grown to know and love, respect and admire.

And how times have changed since then! Sisters dressed in full habit, few sisters engaged in social welfare and relying on others just for transportation! Education and social welfare have also come a long way Sr Toni reflects, “Today we educate children for justice, to leave school with a social conscience and sense of service. People have better understood the needs for social interaction and the importance of policies and provision of services”.

Sr Toni's religious life began in Ballarat where she trained as a teacher soon after joining the Loreto Sisters. She started her teaching career as a Year Three teacher for two years at Loreto Mandeville Hall Toorak, later becoming principal of the junior school until 1973. One of her biggest joys was watching the children enter primary school, seeing them grow, learn and finish school and then crossing paths with them again at university.

In 1964, while principal at Loreto Mandeville Hall Toorak, she undertook a short course in social welfare at Lisson Grove in Hawthorn, graduating with prison officers from Fairlea Women's Prison and Pentridge. Her placements at Allambie Children's Home in Burwood, Winlaton Home for Adolescent Girls and Fairlea Prison gave her an insight into the needs of the women and children she encountered.

"Whether students of Loreto or children living at Winlaton, all the children had one common need – to belong to a family". This experience and understanding influenced her to pursue a career in family therapy. When asked by her Provincial where the Loreto Sisters could contribute to welfare in Melbourne, she chose Winlaton, and became the chaplain there for nine years.

Sr Toni always sought to upgrade her skills and qualifications in order to give and help in the best possible way. She completed a Diploma of Social Work in 1968 at Melbourne University, later updating it to a Degree in 1981. Her devotion to welfare and education, her compassion, and her capacity to study, work hard and give to others so tirelessly is what makes Sr Toni so remarkable and inspiring.

One of the lasting impressions she made on Loreto Toorak was to instill in the students a sense of commitment to social justice and friendship to those in need. To this day Year 11 students still visit Turana Boys Home, providing social interaction and friendship with the children there.

In 1981 Sr Toni was asked by Fr Kevin Mogg, Episcopal Vicar for Social Welfare, to become the Executive Officer of Catholic Social Services and in that role was instrumental in changing the profile of catholic social welfare in Australia.

At the time there were so many agencies doing great work. She recalls drawing up a list from A to Z, listing all these agencies and was amazed by the number of organisations all going important and worthy work but acting on their own. Different organisations with similar interests in the catholic welfare sector were drawn together, to meet and develop ways of working together, thus giving a voice to the welfare sector. Her work involved networking at the inter Church and inter Agency level, including developing partnerships with ACOSS (Australian Council of Social Service) VCOS (Victorian arm of ACOSS).

In 1987 she moved to Sydney to be Superior at Loreto Kirribilli and ACOSS Treasurer until 1993, and became an active part of an interchurch group concerned with social welfare matters. She feels one of her most significant achievements while at Loreto Kirribilli was taking a Year 10 Community Service Course for six years, where students developed friendships with disadvantaged youth. It gave her the opportunity to work with students to help them understand that it was a privilege to meet these people. The students would visit disadvantaged youth for a school term, develop friendships, mutual respect and understanding.

This Australia Day Honour celebrates her extraordinary and tireless devotion to assisting the disadvantaged and in particular for her recent work with the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Returning to Melbourne in 1993 she began her work with St Vincent de Paul Ozanam Community and became a member of the Board. She worked with a small group to set up a community centre in North Melbourne, providing a luncheon and socialising place for homeless men, thereby allowing for more privacy and opportunity for the case management of the men living at Ozanam House.

Recently she assisted St Vincent de Paul set up a program called Compeer that assigns volunteers as companions to people with a diagnosed mental illness. The program includes interviewing, training and matching people with similar interests, and providing ongoing support. Once assigned, volunteers meet regularly with the same person for one hour per week to provide friendship, conversation and even a trip out of the house – something that we take for granted. The program is in its third year and welcomes volunteers.

One of Sr Toni' favourite quotes is, "Life's not measured by the number of breaths we take but by the number of moments that take your breath away."

Her compassion and sense of service is clear, "Everybody has the capacity to be open and available. If our eyes, ears and hearts are open there is much we can do. We live in a wonderful world but for many the world is fractured and they are lost and lonely. We can make a difference.

"Our greatest hope is our young people - that we continue to educate them to be good leaders and have a sense for and commitment to social justice."

For further information about the Loreto Sisters please visit <http://www.loreto.org.au/>