



“I wanted peace of heart”

Sr Jan Barlow celebrates 50 years



Sr Jan Barlow joined the Loreto Sisters on the 11 Feb 1957 after a realisation and conviction that this is what God had called her to do. She has found great peace of heart in this decision; has met wonderful people and in her words has had “a marvellous, happy and fulfilling life”. In February 2007 Sr Jan Barlow celebrated 50 years with the Loreto Sisters.

Jan Barlow IBVM is one of six Loreto Sisters celebrating Golden Jubilees this year, all having joined the Institute at Normanhurst in 1957 – the first group to have actually begun there in the (then) new Novitiate. Before entering the novitiate Jan tried a number of endeavours to determine if a religious life would be right for her. She felt that if she truly wanted peace of heart she would have to test if she had made the right choice. Choosing which Order to join was never an issue for Jan. She knew and loved the nuns at Kirribilli and had always had happy experiences during her schooling there. She recounts, “I had found the sisters to be caring, and above all, real women and inspiring. I remember their kindness and the way they cared for each student as an individual”.



Loreto Sisters celebrating their jubilees in 2007.

Back row (L-R): Sr Hilary Blackie, Sr Anna Gaha, Sr Marg Honner.

Front row (L-R): Sr Jan Barlow, Sr Mary Shelley

Jan grew up in Sydney, the second child in a family of four daughters and one son, with a long connection with Loreto (on her mother's side – great aunts having been among the early students at Mary's Mount and Normanhurst) and with the Sacred Heart Sisters on her father's side (more great-aunts were among their early students!) She has a huge extended family, so much so that some say she is related to half of Sydney!!

The four Barlow girls attended Kirribilli, where her father had been as a little boy, and where her brother, too, would begin his schooling. Jan first “met” Mary Ward in 1945, when Kirribilli had a huge celebration of the 300 years since her death and students presented a Tableau recounting her life story. But she also says that she “met” and came to know Mary Ward in the sisters who taught her.

On leaving school, Jan worked for six years in an Advertising and Publishing Company, and spent most of 1955 on a working-holiday in Europe. By the time she returned to Sydney in early 1956, she really knew that her future was with the IBVM, but it took her twelve months to actually get there!

Her life as a Loreto Sister has covered a number of areas --- teacher, formation of new members, Community Leader, administration, spiritual guidance --- and has taken her to a number of different places, though most of her time has been in Sydney, Melbourne and Ballarat.

Her first teaching appointment was at Toorak, where she very quickly learnt (from a Year 2 boy) that, if living in Melbourne, you simply had to have an AFL team. Fortunately, a family friend was a South Melbourne supporter, so her reputation was saved! Being a Sydney-sider, Jan's interest was in Rugby Union.

The following year, she went to Ballarat, where she was for the next nine years, teaching in the newly-established Commercial College, under the guidance of its first Principal, Mother Raymond Drew (later, Sr. Marion). When not teaching day and evening classes, Jan also had charge of Sport in the adjacent Loreto Convent, and studied Accounting. Life was full!

Things took on a different pace when, in 1969, Jan was appointed Novice Director, always a challenge, and especially so in those early post-Vatican II days. Associated with this role was a programme in Johannesburg, where she lived, studied and learnt much more than Spirituality in the Apartheid-wracked culture that South Africa then experienced. The next several years saw various involvements in the formation and training of the newer members of the Institute.

When Jan joined the Loreto Sisters in 1957, grateful to have travelled, she never imagined leaving Australia again. However, in addition to South Africa, she was also privileged to do a course in Ignatian Spirituality in Rome in 1981, and to attend a General Congregation of the Loreto Sisters in 1983. Then came a wonderful and surprising blessing: two years at the Generalate in Rome. Jan took to all things Italian with delight – the language, the culture, art and architecture and of course the food! She even grew to enjoy driving in Rome's chaotic streets and came home with record intact! This experience was, for her, "a window on the world" as it enabled her to meet so many visitors to Rome, especially sisters from other IBVM provinces. She remains deeply grateful for such an opportunity.

These experiences enabled her to draw on the treasures of IBVM history and to know more deeply the spirituality of Mary Ward and St. Ignatius Loyola. In recent years, and since her return from Rome, Jan has been engaged in leading groups of women through a process of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in Daily Life, work which she loves, as do the ladies in her groups! It provides a forum for them to share the fruits of their daily prayer and to talk about matters of deeper meaning, which, as so many say, they feel unable to do elsewhere.

Jan is the Community Bursar at Normanhurst and is involved as Province Bursar. When not with her women's groups, or paying accounts and preparing Financial Reports, Jan loves her weekly game of tennis, and delights in painting (Russian Icons and an attempt at watercolour), as well as being able to spend time with her ever-increasing family and her friends in Sydney. And if there is a Rugby Union test on, Jan will be at the television!

When asked who has inspired her over these years, she says, "My family is a constant inspiration to me and very loving. The sisters themselves are also inspiring. We live and work with wonderful people, with humour and dedication and sheer hard work." She takes great delight in the enthusiasm of young people and remembers with much love the exuberance of the young students at Ballarat and Kirribilli. It gives her great joy to see success in the eyes of students.

Now more than ever the sheer goodness of people around her strikes her she says. Much of her time is spent with women - mothers and wives - and she marvels at their strength in nurturing, supporting and keeping their families together.

She says, "Had I not been a Loreto Sister, I would not have been a teacher; had I not been a teacher I would not have met these wonderful people. I have had a marvellous, happy and fulfilling life". Her Year of Jubilee has been celebrated in various ways, culminating in a Thanksgiving Eucharist in the Chapel at Normanhurst, where it all began. Jan carries within a deep sense of gratitude for so many blessings, for so many wonderful companions, Loreto Sisters, with whom she has lived and worked along the way, all the many people, especially her family, who have inspired, encouraged and accompanied her since those early days in 1957.