

Catherine McAuley Alumnae Award Speech 17 March 2015

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, the Darug Peoples, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I have been asked today to tell you a bit about my life as an example of the way that Mercy Values have continued to inspire me throughout my life.

I will reflect on my life under three main headings:

- Family
- Education
- Participation in Social Movements that have affected changes in government policy and social change more broadly.

Family:

I grew up in north-western NSW in a family that taught me to strongly value education. I remember my father saying to me ' Getting a good education is very important because possessions can be swept away in a Depression, a Revolution or other Social Disruption but your Education is something that will always be with you to help you to deal with Life'.

My mother's family are of Irish Catholic origin and they instilled in me a desire to pursue social justice for all and an understanding of the impact of Colonisation on Indigenous peoples both here and in other parts of the world.

I recall looking with my mother at the photos in Great Aunt Philomena's encyclopaedia of *Peoples of All Nations*. We came to a photo of group Aboriginal Americans taken in the early 20th century and I commented that they had 'sour mouths' (referring to their unsmiling faces). My mother said 'You would have a sour mouth too if you had been through what they have' And so we discussed the impact of colonisation etc. My mother also was a sounding board for my questions about Australian Aboriginal people and why, in the 1950s in town in north-wester NSW, they walked along the side of the road with their heads down and why some white people had such negative attitudes towards them. My mother was the first to draw my attention to the efforts of Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) to challenge social and political discrimination against her people.

Education:

I feel very privileged to have been educated by the Sisters of Mercy who I have come to understand are held in high regard in the general community as well as the Catholic community. The Catholic values of social justice, 'do unto others', 'there am I among the least of them' that I learnt at home and at St. Francis Xavier's Primary School in Narrabri which was run by the sisters of Mercy (Gunnedah based) and at OLMC run by the Sisters of Mercy (Parramatta based), have underpinned my community work in later life.

In 1963 I obtained my Leaving Certificate here at OLMC, where I was a boarder. Subsequently, I obtained a B.A. at UNSW (being awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship), and later a PhD from UNSW.

My working life was primarily as a Academic – teaching and researching at a number of universities - the University of Sydney, the Australian National University, Charles Sturt University and UNSW. My disciplines were political science and later criminology with sub-disciplines of Aboriginal studies and Women's studies. The focus of my teaching was inequality, human rights, policing, social movements, public policy.

Social Activism:

Early in my University studies I started to focus on the condition of Indigenous Australians, their lack of human rights and their efforts to try to obtain both equality with other Australians and to have their cultural differences respected. I should point out that in 1963 when my class did the Leaving Certificate no Aboriginal people had graduated from university. Much has changed since then for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People largely as the result of social activism by Indigenous Australians and their non-Indigenous supporters.

Throughout my life I have been committed to achieving social justice, particularly in relation to Aboriginal people and women, and human rights for people more broadly. From my university days until the present, I have been involved in many organisations that have struggled to achieve social justice, including some that had a seminal role in promoting progress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

During my student days at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) I was an active member of **Abschol**, a student organisation which both lobbied governments for policy change in Aboriginal Affairs and which supported Aboriginal communities in a number of ways, both large scale and small scale. Small scale – after school tutorial assistance to Aboriginal students.

Large scale - I first became involved in the **Gurindji Campaign** through Abschol. This campaign lobbied the Government to grant land rights to the Gurindji people whose land in the Northern Territory at that time was being leased by a British transnational company. This campaign took place throughout the early 1970s until the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972. As well as lobbying government, raising funds, and raising public awareness, we worked at a very practical local level, helping the Gurindji people with activities such as building a village, developing vegetable gardens, registering a corporate entity and preparing to support a pastoral venture (cattle station and contract mustering) once they had secure title to their lands. We raised funds, lobbied government, raised public awareness. I was a member of the Coordinating Committee of the Gurindji Campaign. During this period I made two trips to Wattie Creek/Daguragu in the N.T. to assess the needs of the Gurindji people and the progress being made in meeting them by the combined efforts of campaign members and the Gurindji people themselves. The Gurindji leaders were uneducated, illiterate, cut off from information about the sources of power in Australian society. They reached out for help to achieve their goals (planned from at least the early 1950s) to unionists, political activists and Abschol. The latter had a strategic role in the campaign at the national level. Through this campaign I met a number of icons of the Aboriginal struggle for land rights, in particular **Vincent Lingiari**.

Also through Abschol I became involved in setting up the first **Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS)** in Australia at Redfern in Sydney. Senior members of the Law Faculty at UNSW and a group of young Aboriginal men (some studying law) initiated the idea of the ALS. I was a

member of its **Management Committee** and a **signatory to the bail fund** until the ALS became a Government funded service agency after the election of the Whitlam government in 1972. The ALS became the model for other Aboriginal legal service agencies throughout Australia.

During this period I was also a member of an **Aboriginal support group** led by Father Tony Kelly of the Sacred Heart Church at Randwick which supported the work of Aboriginal community worker **Mum Shirl** (Mrs Shirley Smith another icon of the Aboriginal struggle in Sydney) and the setting up of the **Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS)** in Redfern. We raised funds and public awareness and assisted in other practical ways. Through my involvement in the Gurindji campaign I had met **Ophthalmologist Fred Hollows** and introduced him to Gordon Briscoe and Mum Shirl who then got him involved in the AMS.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s I was involved in the **NSW Land Rights Support Group** which was instrumental in the lobbying effort which eventually led to the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (NSW). During this period I was also a regular contributor to the Catholic Magazine *National Outlook: An Australian Christian Monthly*, which offered 'a forum for debate among people concerned about questions of social ethics, economics and politics'.

I then moved to Canberra, living and working there between 1983 and 1993 where while teaching at ANU I was involved in the **national Aboriginal land rights support campaign**. We raised funds, lobbied government and supported Aboriginal lobbyists when they came to Canberra for meetings and demonstrations.

During this period I was also involved in the Australian arm of the international struggle to end Apartheid in South Africa, a system that institutionally entrenched racism against the majority black population in that country. In Canberra I was a member of the **Luthuli Group** which was **an anti-apartheid group** affiliated with the ANC. We endeavoured to raise public consciousness of the injustice of the apartheid system and supported and hosted the ANC lobbyists when they came to Canberra. After the **end of the policy of apartheid** in the early 1990s, this included meetings with **Nelson Mandela** when he toured the world to thank such groups such as ours for the years of support that we had given.

From these activities you can see that it is possible through small scale local actions to be part of activities that lead to large scale social and political change in the long run. If you feel passionately about achieving social justice and human rights it is worth working for these things, at whatever level you contribute your efforts can make a difference.

From the 1970s on, I was also a member of a number of other bodies that worked for social justice for **Women**. I was a member of the **Women's Electoral Lobby** which lobbied government to achieve equality for women and worked to raise public awareness of issues of concern to them. I was a supporter of the newly formed **International Women's Development Agency (IWDA)** (and still am). I became a member, and subsequently a life member of the **Black Women's Action in Education Foundation (BWAEF)** which raised funds to send Aboriginal and other black Australian Women to Harvard University to further their education and thereby improve their employment prospects and enhance the intellectual capital of their communities. Over time black men have also benefited from

BWAEF scholarships. (Since the death of its founder, Roberta Sykes, the BWAEF has become the **Roberta Sykes Foundation**).

Currently, I am a member of the **Society of Women Writers** which supports and promotes women writers and the **Jessie Street National Women's Library** which is 'dedicated to the preservation of Australian women's work, words and history'. I am also a member of the **Older Women's Network (OWN)** which promotes the rights, dignity and wellbeing of older women and advocates on issues of interest and concern to them.

I am the President of **The Women's Club in Sydney** which has been in existence since 1901 as a cultural club to support professional and academic women in developing both friendship networks and their intellectual skills. It was initially set up by women involved in the suffrage movement and a large women's literary society. The ages of our members range from about 19 years to 103, some have played and continue to play prominent roles in public life. The Club has a commitment to providing lifelong cultural activities for women and introduces women to likeminded networks of women.

Nationally, I am President of the **Independent Scholars Association of Australia (ISAA)** which is a community of scholars whose 'purpose is to encourage and support individuals who undertake independent scholarly work outside the nation's formal institutions'. Many of our members are retired academics, public servants and administrators who continue to maintain an active interest in research and debate about issues of public concern. Presently, I am **Currey Memorial Fellow** at the State Library of NSW undertaking research into the Sydney based Gurindji Campaign in which I participated so long ago. Such work fits into the framework of modern social history, which studies 'history from below' – that is history as it is generated by ordinary people, not just those in the political, social and economic elites.

Conclusion

In all these aspects of my community work I draw on the role models, knowledge and values that I gained in my education here and subsequently added to in the university system. I encourage you to value your time here at OLMC and the friends that you will make here. They will remain with you throughout your life and give you strength and inspiration.