

2013 Catherine McAuley Alumnae Award Recipient - Marie Parmenter

Mr Walsh, Teachers, the OLMC Parramatta Alumnae Executive, my family, friends and the young women of OLMC.

It is an honour to be here and be the recipient of the Catherine McAuley Award for 2013.

My message to you today is to go forward in the charism of Catherine McAuley. Believe in compassion and the dignity and respect for all people. Wherever possible, reach out to people on the very edge of society, People with Disabilities, Ethnic Minorities, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and Refugees. Be prepared to push the boundaries to challenge the status quo to achieve your goals! It starts with your education here which embodies these ideals and which will carry you forward to any tertiary endeavours you may aspire to.

Early Life

I came to OLMC in Year 6 as a boarder, following the untimely death of my mother, and completed the Leaving Certificate in 1963. I participated in tennis, debating and drama and was a senior prefect. I felt at that time very privileged to be gaining a broad education as I grew into womanhood. OLMC influenced me most markedly for the richness of friendship gained in that period. You will have many friends as you move through life but there are none more special than the friendships you forge at school. Today I feel very privileged to have three of my OLMC friends here. Thank you Jan, Dianne and Christine.

After school, my family moved to Lebanon, where I studied at the American University of Beirut and was awarded a Diploma in Nursing where I was on the Dean's Honour List. I worked for a short period at The American University Hospital. I was one of the first Australian nurses to graduate from a university-based program.

Professional Life

I returned to Australia at the end of 1968 and commenced midwifery training at the Royal Hospital for Women in Paddington. In 1974, I was motivated to further my studies and subsequently completed a Bachelor's degree at Macquarie University and a Master's Degree at the University of Sydney in Psychology. These qualifications allowed me to become a registered Psychologist leading to a career change with the Department of Community Services, firstly as a District Officer and then as a Senior Specialist District Officer. In this position I managed the Specialist Section for State Wards with mild intellectual disability, supported by a staff of 20 (District Officers and Social Workers).

This led to my strong commitment to people with intellectual disabilities. These young adults were and remain very vulnerable. Many had come from backgrounds of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. This made some of them vulnerable to the Criminal Justice System. Furthermore, many of the young women were now of child bearing age and needed intensive support. I continued to work in the Department until the arrival of our children, Natalie in 1987 and Sophie in 1989.

When I returned to the workforce, I began working at Macquarie University as a Research Fellow then in 1997 I joined the research team at the newly developed Centre for Developmental Disability Studies in University of Sydney Faculty of Medicine. Here, until my retirement at the end of 2009, I played a significant leadership role in a wide variety of research studies.

In my retirement, I have returned to something that is dear to my heart; volunteering to support people with intellectual disability in the criminal justice system. They may be defendants or

victims. Many of these defendants also have mental health problems, behaviour problems and additional physical illness. It involves providing emotional support, helping them receive and understand their rights, legal advice and outcomes of court and the legal process. In supporting victims, I may support a young woman who has been raped. Again my role is to provide emotional support during legal meetings and court appearances and to ensure that she is linked up to professional services. This support is coordinated by the Intellectual Disability Rights Service.

Currently, I am involved in research into the needs of people with life-long disabilities who are ageing, together with the needs of their frail-aged parents. In all of this work I have formed a close partnership with my husband who shares and supports the work I have done.

Strong Influences in my life

I like to think that my life's course was influenced by the era of 1960s and 1970; A time of innovation and change. (the time of peace and love when there were anti war demonstrations and the civil rights movement was beginning to take off). At a personal level, I consider myself as being on the cusp between the influences of the Pre-Wyndham Scheme and the emerging women's movement. We were beginning to move away from the era when many women were expected to only find husbands and have children.

Opportunities for women

Look at the opportunities there are today! You may enter the occupation of your choice with supposedly little discrimination! Some would say discrimination still exists as evidenced by the vitriolic attack on Julia Gillard and the glass ceiling being so hard for women to break! However, it is a far better situation here in Australia than in many other societies where female babies are drowned at birth or are aborted following their identification by ultra sound.

But, here is a good news story:

In a recent opinion piece, in the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH December 26, 2013.), Paul Sheehan feels that journalism is being feminised. Not by quotas, but by talent and sheer weight of numbers and drive. He stated that:

- The majority of graduates from journalism schools are women.
- The majority of all university graduates are women
- The majority of top graduates are women.
- The majority of high school graduates are women.
- The top 70% in English last year were young women!
- He pointed out that 50 years ago the number of women in higher education was less than 27% and now it is 54%.
- He believes the main impediments to women's climb up the ladder is child bearing and child rearing.
- Finally, he indicated that Herald journalism used to be male dominated. Now he "is far from missing the boys that used to run the place "to embracing women who are "the most motivating crew I've ever had."

Vision for the Future

We need to broaden the focus. We need to do things that increase the collective might and improve the social fabric. We need to build communities and increase our community capacity. Can we move away from the cult of individualism of today to one that cares what is

happening to all of us? Cooperation and reciprocity are more effective than competition. It is social bonding which defines us.

Always remember we are a community not an economy. How do we measure the quality of a society? It is not through economic wealth alone, but through the strength of social networks, feelings of well-being and a good quality of life. We volunteer in many ways to improve another person's quality of life, e.g. I volunteer to teach medical English to nurses in Vietnam through a medical foundation.

Perhaps within your school community, a group could be formed to develop strategies to enhance greater social inclusion for fellow students, especially those with a refugee background and students with disabilities as many of them feel lonely and isolated.

Pushing boundaries can be difficult and often goes unrewarded. It is far easier to conform than to challenge the way things are.

A fine example of this is a young woman of your generation, Mala la from Pakistan, who stood up for education for girls and was shot in the head by a young Taliban militant who mounted her school bus. I would certainly not recommend you to have to suffer the consequences of her ideals, but what a trail blazer she is! At 14 under threat of being killed she imagined if confronted by a terrorist the first thing to come to her mind would be to take off her shoes and hit him, but then considered that would make her no better than he. She contemplated, "OK, shoot me but first listen to me. What you are doing is wrong. I am not against you personally, I just want every girl to go to school".

This is a young girl of 14 who shared with her friends everything for example Justin Beiber songs and the Twilight movies. She never believed that the Taliban would come for a small girl! Malala has become a much celebrated young woman who was taken to the UK after the shooting for expert medical care. She recovered and completed her schooling in the UK, but she misses her homeland and her friends. Her message to the US President is still: "Do not send troops and arms to Afghanistan. Why not send books and teachers!" At 16 she spoke at the UN in New York and has become the global symbol of peaceful protest and the youngest ever nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Throughout my life, I feel that I have tried to build on the values that were imbued in me at OLMC. My children have followed their parents in this regard. I feel I have handed down to them the Mercy values of mercy, compassion, justice, dignity, excellence, hospitality, stewardship and service and I am very proud of them. I have been fortunate that I have been supported throughout my life's journey by my father who was a strong advocate for education, my immediate family (husband Trevor) daughters, (Natalie and Sophie,) my brother Michael and his family and my step daughter Jacqui, husband Joe and the grandchildren Bethany, Lachlan and Holly.

My life experience reflected the era I grew up in 1960's when Australia's population was just 11 million now it is 23 million +. What wonderful things will you bring to this world as you go forward? Never forget the charism of Catherine McAuley. "What would the charity of God have profited us, if His mercy had not come to our aid?" A final message is be passionate in all your endeavours. Never forget the richness of opportunities you are now receiving at OLMC. May you reap the love, education and guidance afforded to you now.

Keep your friends dear and near to you and I wish you every success and happiness.