

CATHERINE McAULEY AWARD SPEECH 2013

Thank you for this great honour of being awarded the Catherine McAuley Award for 2012. It is especially meaningful to me, being presented with this award in 2013, as this year marks fifty years since I finished my schooling at my dear Alma Mater. While I was a student here I was assigned McAuley as my house and I could never have imagined that I would be returning fifty years later to accept such a prestigious award.

When I was contacted last year by Deretta Andrews to say that I was nominated for the award I was really taken by surprise. There are so many wonderful ex-students of this College, women who have accomplished so much, that I am truly humbled to be the recipient. Thank you to the Selection Panel for bestowing this great honour on me. I am sharing this occasion with my husband of 43 years Ross and my daughter Emma. Unfortunately Cowra was just a little too far away to send my daughter to OLMC and as the boarding school had closed by then, she attended St Vincent's College at Potts Point. Also today with me are three other Mercy women, my cousin Lorraine, who attended OLMC Epping and two very dear school friends from my time at OLMC Parramatta Diane and Marie. Our two sons were not able to be here today as one lives in Dublin and the other in Melbourne. Thank you to those family members and friends who are here to share this special occasion with me.

Today I thought I would just share some reflections with you on my life and on the Mercy values and tradition and how they have been incorporated into my life. My years here at Our Lady of Mercy College, were very happy ones indeed and gave me, together with the influence of my family, the values that I have carried with me throughout my life. I am most grateful to my parents (who would have been so proud to be here today) for giving me the gift of a Catholic education at OLMC. And thank you to all those inspiring Mercy sisters who guided us during our school days and beyond. During my time at the College I learnt a lot about myself and my abilities, my Catholic faith and about relationships. And I had the opportunity, especially in my two years of boarding, to establish friendships, which have lasted the whole of my life. Both at OLMC and in the intervening years I have truly learnt what it is to be a "Mercy" woman.

It is my belief that the education I received at OLMC from 1959 to completing the Leaving Certificate in 1963, was well ahead of its time, especially in the education of young women. We were encouraged to seek a career, and to contribute to our communities, as well as undertake the more traditional roles of wife and mother. Ex-students who had distinguished themselves in their chosen career were held up to us as examples of what was possible to achieve through education and in a work environment which at that time was dominated by men.

I was an average student. The fact that I had obtained Honours in the Primary Final Examination was not a true indication of my ability. I was streamed in the "A" class, where I struggled with Latin, French and Maths 1 and 2. I finally gave up French when I received 4 out of 100 in a test and my friend Diane here suggested that I had probably received those four marks for writing my name correctly on the top of the page!! I really should have tried harder at French, because one of our sons has married a French girl and already our two year old grandson has a greater French vocabulary than I have!! Finally, choosing subjects

that were more suited to my abilities, History, Geography, Biology and Art, I managed to gain 2 As and 4 Bs in my Leaving Certificate. I am sharing this with you because it is knowledge very relevant to life. Find those things that are suited to your ability or that you have a passion for and you will succeed. And remember it is never too late to undertake anything that you choose to do in life. If your marks don't allow you entry into the course you want, there are other options and possibilities. Find work or study in a similar area and try again as a mature age student. I am currently a very mature age student, undertaking a post graduate course in counselling, 50 years after finishing school! There are wonderful opportunities out there for you to keep learning for the rest of your lives. As Catherine McAuley said "The adage 'never too old to learn' is a great comfort to me."

When you are at school a lot of emphasis is put on academic achievement. Yes, it is important to apply yourself to your studies and achieve your own personal best, but you are more than the sum of your academic ability. You need to see and understand yourself as a whole person. There has been a lot of research lately on Multiple Intelligences. Gardner has put forward a theory defining at least eight intellectual abilities, including the important one of Interpersonal Intelligence or Social Intelligence. I'm sure that Catherine McAuley would have scored very highly on that one! So with time and maturity you can identify your particular intelligence and then use your talents to contribute to your family, your church, your workplace and your community. I think we all have special gifts that we can use to enhance the lives of people in whatever community we live out our lives. The Mercy value of Stewardship is the celebration of our God-given gifts and using those gifts in a responsible way to care for our world and its peoples.

Just as I believe that my education at OLMC was a privilege that taught me the Mercy values and shaped my life, so too I believe that the opportunities that you have as a student today at OLMC is also a privilege not enjoyed by many other young women in society. And I believe that the privilege that we both share carries with it both the challenge and the responsibility to assist those less fortunate than us; those for whom life is a struggle, those who need our compassion and hospitality and those who need us to join them in their fight for justice.

Mercy is that value that encompasses all others. Mercy is demonstrated to us within our Catholic faith, when we ask for and are granted forgiveness for our transgressions. We can show mercy in our everyday life to those who have wronged us. We can demonstrate Mercy to those who have risked everything to travel across the sea in the hope of a better life in Australia. I was interested to read in the OLMsCene of the "Mercy in Action" trip to Cambodia, undertaken by 14 OLMC students in December 2011. We all don't have the opportunity to go to Cambodia to serve in such a practical way, but there are so many instances where we can serve closer to home. There is always something that we can do to assist the downtrodden, the mentally ill, the bereaved or the lonely. The Lenten Program Project Compassion, funding Caritas, is an example of a project that we can all be involved in.

Justice is a value close to my heart. As Micah 6:8 informs us "This is what God asks of you. To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God". It is a command that speaks simply about how we should live our lives and it is a passage that has always held

meaning for me. Catherine McAuley believed that “While we place all our confidence in God, we must act as if all depended on our exertion”.

My employment at Cowra Family Support Service has allowed me to be involved in committees, such as Habitat for Humanity, Domestic Violence and Child Protection, which address issues of social justice. Also as part of my employment, I was on a Drought Relief Committee 2006/2007, with my husband Ross, which oversaw the allocation of funds to drought relief. One of our main activities was organising the delivery of water for household use to farm families in the Cowra district.

As a volunteer with my local church, St Raphael’s Cowra, I had the privilege of facilitating the World Youth Day 2008 “Days in the Diocese” Social Justice Day, when WYD visitors interacted with and learnt about the Wiradjuri people of the Cowra region.

Last week, on Valentines Day I was part of the VDay celebrations in Cowra. It was just a small group of us getting together to watch a film on VDay activities throughout the world. VDay is the campaign to end violence against women. In Africa, VDay has provided funds for a safe house for girls at risk of female genital mutilation and funds for a jeep to transport an educator to visit villages to speak up against female circumcision.

The Mercy Tree, blessed in 2012, is an inspiring symbol of OLMC’s ongoing commitment to social justice. Throughout your life, by efforts both large and small you can make a real difference to the lives of people around you. Catherine McAuley tells us that “The proof of love is deed”. There are so many ways that we can serve and engage in those deeds that were so much a part of her life. While Catherine McAuley carried out her work in Dublin, we can emulate her good works here within our communities. In Australia we have a wonderful history of volunteering and volunteers engage in diverse activities to assist people at all stages of their life.

A lot of the service that I have undertaken in the community has been as a volunteer for Red Cross, whose current motto is “The power of humanity.” Red Cross principles are not so different to the Mercy values and those principles of humanity and voluntary service have always resonated with me. As a Red Cross Volunteer, it has been my privilege to work in hospital wards, at a blood bank, at First Aid posts, welcoming refugees, and conducting training in First Aid and currently as part of the Red Cross Disaster Welfare Team in the Cowra area.

When we live the Mercy values in our lives and in our relationships, we gain a great deal of satisfaction. In Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” Portia informs us that ‘The quality of Mercy is not strain’d, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest; It blesses him that gives and him that takes.’ Some people believe that there is no true altruism, that the deeds we do carry something for us, which I believe is true to some extent. But I believe that living the Mercy values sometimes involves us stepping outside our comfort zones, stretching our personal resources and taking on challenges because we really believe in a cause. It may not be true altruism but it improves the lives of the people we assist and gives meaning to our own lives.

I hope that something in what I have shared with you today will have some meaning for you or might inspire you in your life. I am just one ordinary person, not doing anything extra ordinary. Having accepted the honour of this award I would like to contribute something back to the College. I have some ideas and I will share these at a later date with the appropriate people. This year I am very fortunate to be visiting Dublin with my husband to see our son and his family. I will call at the Mercy International Centre that was built by Catherine as her response to the poor of Dublin. And there I will reflect on a woman who could never have known how far her influence would spread in the world.

I wonder what life will hold for you. I hope that you can see life as an exciting journey where you can choose to grasp opportunities that are offered to you along the way. But life can also throw unexpected and unwanted experiences upon you, offering you the chance to grow, in ways that you had not expected or planned for. Since I left OLMC fifty years ago, life has offered me experiences that I could never have imagined. Not all those experiences have been good ones or what I would ever have chosen. As Catherine McAuley said: "This is your life, joys and sorrows mingled, one succeeding the other". Four years ago our beautiful granddaughter, Matilda (Emma's daughter) died, after only 29 days with us. This continues to be a great sorrow in all our lives. In 1994 a car accident was responsible for me having to give up my career as an Early Childhood teacher. These experiences shape our lives and in reminding us that we are human, give us a greater depth of compassion for others. After undergoing rehabilitation after my accident, I embraced a new career as Coordinator of a Family Support Service. In this work, I am called on daily to put into action the Mercy values, especially those of compassion, dignity, justice and service. We work together with families who are seeking assistance with their parenting or their relationships and those families who are coping with the challenges of mental illness, intellectual disability, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence or sexual assault. This career has allowed me to apply my Mercy values to another aspect of my life.

Whatever path you choose in life you can live by the Mercy values and they will provide you with a moral compass by which you can chart your path. Strive for excellence in those things that you undertake. One of the creeds that I have lived by is to be the very best person I can be. I hope you can model your life on those values that you are learning and experiencing at OLMC – Mercy, Compassion, Justice, Dignity, Excellence, Hospitality, Stewardship and Service. Wherever life takes you you can incorporate the Mercy values into your life to make it a richer and a more meaningful life. Your time at OLMC will see you grow from an OLMC girl into a Mercy woman.

Thank you again for this great honour and for the opportunity to share some of my story with you today. May God bless you all and be with you on your life's journey. I would like to finish with a quotation from our founder Catherine McAuley: "May we be shining lamps, giving light to all around us". Thank You.

Jan Maree Chivers OAM (nee Hargreaves)
OLMC Student 1959 – 1963
19th February, 2013