

mercy foundation®

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION 2020

A message from the Congregation Leader, Sisters of Mercy North Sydney

Since 1865 the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney, have devoted their lives to carrying on the legacy of Catherine McAuley and Mother Ignatius McQuoin.

Catherine was a charismatic social reformer, driven by the words of the Gospel and her unrelenting pursuit for social justice. Mother Ignatius McQuoin established many ministries to address the needs of the community. In particular education, health care and concern for the vulnerable and poor.

In 1990, the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney, established the Mercy Foundation as their vehicle to continue their commitment to alleviate poverty and challenge the structures that contribute to social inequity.

For 30 years the Mercy Foundation has been challenging unfair structures and systems and continues to give support to communities and organisations. The Mercy Foundation has been committed to addressing homelessness, human trafficking and slavery.

We are extremely blessed with such dedicated staff who continue to promote the mission and provide ongoing leadership.



Above: Mercy Foundation Opening Ceremony, 24 Sept 1990. Sr Loreto Conroy RSM carries the flag, followed by Sr Josephine Byrnes RSM, Sr Maureen McGuirk RSM, Sr Anna Koeneman RSM, Mr Dermot Dorgan, Mr Jim Cleary, and Sr Joanne Kirk RSM.

This poem Our Mercy Foundation, by Sr Mary Joseph Wightley RSM echoes the sentiments of the Sisters.

*Oh I did my Mercy heart good
To hear our front liners last weekend
The fledgling woman who vowed her life
Resurrected with cries of
Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes.
Here was the charism
Here was the reading of the times
Here was flexibility
Here was Mercy Service.
At the end of our time
There still is LIFE.
As this critical point in our history
The Foundation validates the
strivings and sacrifices
Reassuring it was all worthwhile and authentic.
Once again we realise
Small indeed is beautiful.
Strength to your arms
And blessings on your endeavours
Responding to present day needs,
You carry our hopes and identity
Into an uncertain future.*

This is our legacy.

**Mercy Blessings,
Sr Loreto Conroy RSM**

30 YEARS

Bob Hawke was the Prime Minister, the Australian and Torres Strait Islander Commission was established, Tom Flood won the Miles Franklin literary award for his book Oceania Five, Medicare was being overhauled to have a greater focus on community care and preventative programs and the poverty rate was 13.8%. This was the context in which the Mercy Foundation was established.

The Foundation's vision remains as relevant today as it was then, we continue to strive for a just, equitable society where all have dignity in God's vision of Mercy.

Over the years the focus of the Foundation has been to respond to emerging issues and to do so in ways which are consistent with our values and which are based on evidence and demonstrable benefit.

During all this time, the Board and staff of the Foundation have been guided and inspired by the spirit of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy North Sydney.

The Foundation has been privileged to have employed skilled, dedicated and loyal staff who have worked across Australia in support of the aims of the Foundation.

The Board has been a critical component in the governance and operation of the Foundation, providing expertise and commitment to act in ethical and moral ways.

One of the great strengths of the Foundation from its inception and still today is the focus on inclusion. This would not be possible if there were not a deep-seated respect for difference and a preparedness to take on challenges but always with our values as our guide.

The service of human dignity is inextricably linked to the culture of the Foundation and this reflects the initial principles on which we were founded. It is a great privilege to be involved with the Mercy Foundation.

**Annabel Senior,
Chair of the Mercy Foundation 2016 to present**



Celebrating 30 years

Welcome to our 30th anniversary edition newsletter!

In this edition, we take the time to reflect on the work of the Mercy Foundation over 30 years, with contributions from a few of the many important people that have helped shape our work.

Who would have thought that 2020 would bring the many challenges facing our world today? Bushfires, a global pandemic, economic downturn and growing inequality has marked a year like no other.

Earlier in the year, in response to the devastating bush fires in NSW, we contacted a past grant recipient, Bermagui Preschool to discuss how we might help. The director spoke about the trauma the children were facing, the hardship of their parents and the damaging effects of the bushfires on the community garden that was funded many years ago. A grant for \$10,000 helped to rebuild the gardens and cover costs for counselling sessions for parents, staff and children.

Coincidentally, the focus of our Social Justice Small Grants program was 'Justice in the digital world'. When governments across Australia put their states into lockdown, this grants program provided digital devices, internet access and online assistance to ensure marginalised groups across Australia were able to stay connected and reduce isolation. Our policy is that 100% of donations are channelled towards additional grants and the Home in a Box program. This year, the budget for Social Justice Small Grants almost doubled, funding 13 projects in communities across Australia.

The focus for Grants to End Homelessness for 2021 is ending homelessness for older women. In NSW, a woman over 70 years

facing a housing crisis has 50,000 applications ahead of her on the social housing wait list. Our country desperately needs a transformative investment in social and affordable housing.

In 30 years, through our grants programs, the Mercy Foundation has touched thousands of lives, creating lasting change in communities across Australia. This is made possible by the hard work and concern of the many grass roots organisations and community groups, determined to make their communities fairer.

We take this opportunity to thank you for your support in 2020. We thank the Sisters of Mercy North Sydney, for daring to make their dream of a Mercy Foundation a reality and for continuing the legacy of their founder Catherine McAuley.

From all of us at the Mercy Foundation, we wish you a Happy Christmas and may 2021 bring you peace and joy.

**Sue Mowbray CEO,
2019 to current**



I believe the Mercy Foundation was the greatest gift the Sisters of Mercy North Sydney gave to those most marginalised in the community.

The Mercy Foundation provides seed funding to enable small projects to get off the ground in order to put in place educational and/or life skill opportunities to assist those most marginalised. Often the organisation was then able to attract further funding from other organisations in order to enable their work to continue.

The Mercy Foundation was so successful as a unique model that other Religious Congregations approached us to learn what they could do to set up their own Foundation with a specific focus.

I remember various people from different projects we assisted early on coming up to me at functions or when I visited and saying "you have no idea what the funding from the Mercy Foundation has done for those we are endeavouring to support and how it has changed people's lives for the better." Some of these were Pioneer Club House at Balgowlah which was funded to develop employment opportunities for those with some form of mental illness; Asian Women at Work was funded to change current practices and laws for women earning

\$2 for garments they made, which were being sold for \$100 plus. I remember we took a group of students from Monte to Pitt Street Mall and they went into various clothes shops and explained what was currently happening in the garment making trade. This was true Advocacy and then they in turn looked at their own clothes and uniforms etc. The Mercy Foundation helped establish the Asylum Seeker Centre, then at Surry Hills, by developing and helping to put in place educational programs with volunteers and getting the Mater Hospital involved in treating the health issues for these traumatised people. This Centre is still fulfilling a need in the community today.

Is it any wonder that the Mercy Foundation set me on the road to further Social Justice Ministries and continues to hold such a very special and relevant place in my heart today.

**Sr Lorraine Phelan RSM,
Executive Officer, 1992 - 1998**



30 years of contributing to a fairer Australia

Amongst the Sisters of Mercy North Sydney 155 long years of work and commitment to the community was their wise decision in 1990 to establish the Mercy Foundation. A Foundation that remains, 30 years later, focussed on social change and justice for the most vulnerable people in Australia.

I had the pleasure of participating in 11 years of the Mercy Foundation's social change agenda. Although that was a just a blip in the 155 year old commitment of the Sisters, it did feel like a long time, at the time. But a cherished time, a time that focussed the Foundation on ending homelessness in Australia.

As the Sisters already knew and I have since learned, it takes time to change attitudes, programs and policies – but it is with some sense of achievement that everyone associated with the Foundation can now witness a much greater acknowledgement of the need to end people's homelessness rather than endlessly service it. This can be seen in changed State and Federal policies and the many Housing First and Permanent Supportive Housing projects now

being implemented throughout Australia. We are not there yet, but we are getting a little closer each year. The Mercy Foundation has helped create that change.

I have always thought it remarkable that since the Sisters of Mercy began in the 1830s, they didn't just tend to the sick, they built hospitals; they didn't just care for the aged, they built care homes; they didn't just teach children, they built schools. They didn't accept the prevailing systems, they challenged them.

As a result of this tradition, the Mercy Foundation does not just feed, temporarily accommodate or hand out blankets to our homeless fellow citizens, it challenges the systems that create homelessness and the services that simply continue to mop up after the societal failure to ensure housing for all. The Mercy Foundation, guided by the Sisters of Mercy North Sydney, continues to create change and to reignite hope for a fairer Australia.

It was a privilege to be part of their journey and the ongoing journey of their Foundation.

**Felicity Reynolds,
CEO 2008 – 2019**

It is with much pleasure I write this small contribution for the celebration of 30 years of the Mercy Foundation. I was privileged to accept the request from Sister Jenny Ryan RSM to chair the Foundation's Board for three years from 2010 to 2012

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It was a time of change in the board membership but the Foundation's objectives remained our foremost focus – at the service of humanity.

Our principal focus was supporting the advocacy of the then CEO, Felicity Reynolds, (who was ably supported by the present CEO Sue Mowbray) on homelessness. It was wonderful for the Foundation to be associated with the opening of the first Common Ground building at Camperdown, NSW due in no small part to Felicity's advocacy.

At the same time as we focused on ensuring that the Common Ground building became a reality, we started the first Home in a Box project. It's wonderful to see that project continues with the initial supporters still providing support and to know how much the boxes mean to someone who has nothing when he or she finally gets accommodation.

As always fundraising was difficult, but with the wonderful Mercy Foundation Supporters we were able to hold a sold-out dinner dance

at the then Westin Hotel with the Hon Justice Virginia Bell as our guest speaker. The highlight of the night was a wonderful thank you from a recipient of a Home in a Box.

The Mercy Foundation premises in the Poche Centre were officially opened by Ms Therese Rein. She spoke to a packed auditorium about the experience of her husband, then the Prime Minister's experience of homelessness.

As now, the Board approved many small grants which have made a significant difference to their many recipients. The Foundation's work, which remains close to the needs of humanity, is a true work of Mercy. May it be blessed to continue to fulfill its core mission in the tradition of Catherine McAuley.

**The Hon Jennifer Boland AM,
Chair of the Mercy Foundation, 2010 - 2012**



Ending Modern Slavery

Bringing them home

Exit trafficking and forced marriage are now recognised as two types of modern slavery that exist in Australia. Exit trafficking includes situations where a person is sent overseas believing they will be returning to Australia, however, the perpetrator has conspired to ensure they do not return.

For example, a young man may be sent overseas for what he believes is a holiday, however, his family has planned for him to remain overseas, against his will, because they don't agree with the choices he was making in his life. An example of exit trafficking for forced marriage is when a young woman believes her overseas trip is to spend time with family, but is deceived about the purpose of the trip, and on arrival her passport is taken and she is forced to marry a person not of her choice.

It can be almost impossible for people caught in this situation to return to Australia. However, as Australian citizens or permanent residents, they have a right to return home.

Anti-Slavery Australia approached the Mercy Foundation to discuss the possibility of a grant to help pay for costs to bring people back to Australia, who have been exit trafficked. The individual concerned generally does not have the funds to pay for their fare. The Mercy Foundation was able to provide a grant to help cover costs such as travel, phone and accommodation, needed to bring the person home safely.

This grant has assisted a young person who was taken to East Africa where they faced forced marriage, to return home. This person spent months living in fear of an imminent marriage. With the support of a number of organisations, they were able to return to Australia and is now being supported by specialist services to help them restart their life. In another case, a child was exit trafficked by their parents. They were able to return to Australia safely, using funds from this Grant.

Anti-Slavery Australia works with the Australian Federal Police, DFAT, Red Cross and a number of agencies and services across the world. Every effort is made to ensure that contact with the individual is discreet and that he or she is not placed in any danger. The safety of the individual is paramount in all decision making.

Exit-trafficking is highly traumatic for the person concerned. On returning to Australia, it may be impossible for the individual to continue any relationship with their family. Prevention is a much better option for all concerned. It is important for the community to be aware of the signs of trafficking and forced marriage, and to know how to respond. **See www.mybluesky.org.au for more information.**



Ending Homelessness

Wongee Mia: An international example of a best-practice approach to supporting and sustainably housing First Nations peoples.

Aboriginal people are ten times more likely to experience homelessness than others in our community. They are also more likely to experience overcrowding, which can contribute to loss of tenancies and returns to homelessness. The Wongee Mia project was established to develop a model that directly addresses these concerns.

The Wongee Mia project works with a single extended Aboriginal family, providing wrap-around support and help to access housing. The family have experienced intergenerational homelessness and poverty. The community support workers hold the whole family as their caseload. Key to the success of this project is an innovative, flexible support approach and an open diary.

The design of the support methods is drawn directly from feedback from family members in yarning sessions, insights from family elders and reflections in action research sessions. The project workers have developed a close working relationship with family members and strong connections to family elders for advice and guidance.

COVID-19 made it difficult to conduct many in-person yarning sessions in the first half of this year. Workers kept in touch by phone and prioritised home visits to family elders as soon as restrictions

were lifted. These yarning sessions are critical to informing the design of the model, building the workers' understanding of the family and culture, and exploring ways elders actively support family members to keep their homes.

At the beginning of the year, the action research team set up yarning sessions with a key family elder to contribute to an article about the project. The outcome of these sessions is a published article on the innovative model in the International Journal of Environment Research and Public Health. This can be found www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/15/5501/

The model now stands as an international example of a best-practice approach to supporting and sustainably housing First Nations peoples.

Through the Grants to End Homelessness program, the Mercy Foundation provided seed funding for this project in 2018 and again in 2020. The grant is funding action research, the participation of Elders in the project and the development of learning kits and training resources, which will be available in 2021.

“This is an outstanding paper demonstrating the value of gaining deep understanding of the complexities of a situation through a respectful and empowering action research and service methodologies, placing families at the centre, and shared through clear conceptual frameworks that can be easily understood. The work presented has relevance across many sectors that require urgent transformation in the ways they work that will deliver more effective and sustainable outcomes. I would like to thank all the authors for choosing to submit your excellent paper to this Special Issue.” IJERPH Editor





Social Justice

Cath Leary Social Justice Award 2020

Congratulations to Angela Reed RSM PhD, recipient of the Cath Leary Social Justice Award for 2020, in recognition of her outstanding work, effort and commitment to upholding human rights and human dignity and for her outstanding work in combatting modern slavery.

Mercy Youth Awards 2020

Congratulations to Year 9 student Leila B from Merici College ACT, winner of the Mercy Youth Awards for 2020

"To me freedom means the ability to make your own decisions and to live your life in a safe, healthy, and happy way. This includes having the right to a fair wage, freedom of religion and to not be discriminated against because of colour, race, or creed."



Angela Reed RSM PhD

Thank you to the students at Mercy Catholic College Chatswood

for their generous donation in excess of \$3,700 towards the Mercy Foundation's Home in a Box project!



Bridging the digital gap for mums and kids

Thelma Brown Cottage provides families escaping domestic violence and family abuse access to accommodation that is safe and comfortable.

Thelma Brown Cottage approached the Mercy Foundation for funding under our Social Justice Small Grants program earlier this year, to help fund computers, modems and internet access in each apartment within Thelma Brown Cottage.

At the time of applying for the grant, there was one computer on site for families to use, which was kept in the Service Manager's office.

The pandemic has revealed how necessary it is to have access to the internet. Access to computers and the internet enabled mothers to look and apply for jobs online, to apply for private rental, to make appointments online and stay connected with friends and family. It enabled children to study from their accommodation and learn online when needed.

Leaving home to escape family violence is traumatising for mothers and their children. Offering families free access to the internet helps lessen the disruption to their lives. They can stay connected to their friends and continue to have access to the digital world.

The staff at Thelma Brown Cottage estimate that this grant may help as many as 600 people per year.

“ Every single family that enters the service asks, do you have Wi-Fi? Usually I say no, today I can say yes ”



Project Snapshots

Mercy Family Centre Waitara (1993)

Seed funding for a family mediation centre that attracted funding from the Federal Government.

Asian Women at Work and the Fairwear campaign (1993 onwards)

A ground-breaking campaign that brought about structural change and greater protections for outworkers in the textiles industry.

Asylum Seekers Centre (1994 onwards)

The Mercy Foundation helped establish and develop the Asylum Seekers Centre in Sydney, providing accommodation and practical support to men, women and children seeking asylum.

Marist Youth Care Affordable Housing for Life program (2008)

Providing housing, training and employment for young people at risk of homelessness.

Registry Week (2010 onwards)

The Mercy Foundation has worked with a number of communities across Australia to end homelessness for their most vulnerable citizens, using the Registry Week methodology.

Common Ground Camperdown Sydney (2011)

An innovative model providing permanent housing and on site support to 52 formerly homeless individuals and 52 people living on low incomes.

Older women's pathways out of homelessness in Australia (2014)

One of the first research projects that identified the increasing risk of older women who have led conventional lives to homelessness, and identified solutions to their homelessness.

Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Corporation (2016)

This project provided safe, permanent housing and support to eight Aboriginal women with children that were experiencing homelessness in Sydney.

Baptcare Ltd Houses of Hope project (2018)

This project helped provide housing and support to twelve people seeking asylum in Melbourne.

Service or Servitude: A study of trafficking for domestic work in Australia (2019)

A pivotal, comprehensive piece of research on domestic servitude in Australia, designed to inform policy and practice.



