

LENTEN REFLECTION – SUNDAY 17TH MARCH – ST CARTHAGES:

Mary Keating

Hello everyone. My name is Mary Keating. I've been coming to St Carthages for a number of years.

In the late 1980s, I was appointed Community Health Nurse at Ozanam House., a Homeless Shelter in North Melbourne. Administered by the Society of St Vincent De Paul the Society was founded by Frederick Ozanam.

Ozanam House had a Medical Centre where I would run a morning clinic and an 8 bed sick bay for drug and alcohol detoxification.

At that time in Melbourne, a homeless person was usually identified as a "dero" or derelict and was an older man who walked the streets. Ozanam had a dormitory of 48 beds for these men,

We had 200 men on site and most of the men had a mental illness or a drug and/or alcohol addiction..

I worked side by side with Sister Geraldine Whelan, a Josephite Nun who had been there for many years. Geraldine would ride her bike to Oz house each morning and would run a cigarette kiosk for the men from early to late morning. The men loved her and she knew exactly what was going on with them. She was well known across Melbourne, by Barristers, Judges, the Coroners Court and the Police and was often asked to identify the body of a homeless person.

Enduring memories of Ozanam House?

1. One of the older men in the dining room said to me " what is a beautiful girl like you doing with an old bugger like me.
2. A funeral in the Chapel (we had many) of two men whom Father Steve Sin said had loved each other. We knew they regularly whacked each other with their walking sticks.
3. Steve Sin loved the men, and when I told him that the body of an older homeless man had been collected by the funeral home that morning, and had been handled roughly, he told me they had forgotten the humanity of the men.
4. A bottle of beer for a Chest XRay. These were given to persuade men to have Chest Xrays. We picked up cases of open TB in inner urban Melbourne.
5. Accompanying Geraldine to Pentridge Prison to visit "Kenny" in the prison ward. The men told Geraldine that many of the prison officers were quite brutal.
6. Attending the old Mlebourne Magistrates Court where "Charlie" in a wheelchair was being prosecuted by a police officer for being obstructive. Charlie said repeatedly, "I'm going to kill him, kill him" and Geraldine asking him to speak more softly.

7. One of the men in sick bay experienced hallucinations and put a fork to my throat. 2 men in the sick bay who had worked as a team in Vietnam disarmed him.
8. Rotting flesh was the most difficult thing I saw at Oz House. From walking miles each day. Frequent dressings were needed.
9. I accompanied Dr Peter Pierce, an older Doctor who had great expertise with alcohol addiction, to take health care into the squats in north Melbourne.
10. I remember putting space blankets on the men who collapsed in the quadrangle at Ozanam House.
11. "Mitzi" was a gay older man who resided at Ozanam House. Men on the street would frequently beat him up, - and "Cecil" a former State Ballroom Dancing Champion would defend him, and throw him over his shoulder at the Vic Market and bring him home to Oz.
12. One of the saddest things I saw were the families of the men at their funerals at our Chapel. They felt such guilt that their family member had ended up at Oz House. Geraldine would talk and console them.
13. One of the most poignant memories I have involved Geraldine and I driving 4 of the men to their mates grave site at Yan Yean Cemetery. The Society had funeral plots for the men that avoided them having a paupers funeral. 4 faces loomed out of the mist around the grave. They were there until the end for their friend.
14. A man who was reported as dead arrived at Geraldines cigarette kiosk to buy his regular smokes. She came to me white as a ghost to tell me he had appeared.

God was with us at Ozanam House. The men who were so broken were there with their friends. In what was a very tough life, they had a home. 3 meals a day, a bed for the night, a shower if they wanted one, and Geraldine to talk to.

I feel very privileged to have ever had the opportunity of working at Ozanam House. I loved the men and will never forget them.

As God was with us at Ozanam House, he is with us as we journey toward Jerusalem.