



A CENTURY OF CARING - the celebration

St Joseph's Cowper, formerly known as St Joseph's Orphanage, Cowper, celebrated one hundred years of continuous service to the families of the North Coast and beyond, on 3rd March 2013.

The Orphanage was established in 1913 when the Bishop of Lismore, Bishop Carroll, asked the Sisters of Mercy to convert their boarding school into an orphanage. The Sisters considered the change as being very much in keeping with the aim of their foundress, Catherine McAuley. Closing the boarding school meant an almost complete loss of income for the Sisters but they accepted the challenge to provide food, clothing, an education and love for the children in their care.



The first children were accepted into the Orphanage in 1913, initially with only four children in residence. The numbers quickly grew and reached one hundred and twenty at its maximum. More than one hundred Sisters of Mercy have worked at St Joseph's since 1913 as teachers, carers or in administration, attending to the needs of well in excess of 2,000 children who have come into their care. Initially the Orphanage was licensed to take children from the age of three years, but following the end of the war in 1945, pressure from the community resulted in the regulation being relaxed so that children from the age of six months could be accepted.

The fact that the Orphanage survived and continued to flourish despite the many floods, as well as the fires and cyclones, is testimony to the outstanding commitment of the Sisters and the wonderful generosity of the local community, the Parishes throughout the Diocese and the service organisations. The children themselves played a big role in supporting the Orphanage financially by growing vegetables and running a poultry farm. On one occasion a crop of beans was grown and sent to the Sydney markets to raise funds to start a Library for the children.

A High School was opened in Cowper in 1950 but when it closed four years later the girls began travelling to St Marys in Grafton to complete their Secondary education and some boys went to the Brothers at Westmead to complete their schooling. This situation, coupled with the increasing challenge of providing suitable medical support for the children and the deteriorating state of the buildings at Cowper, prompted Bishop Satterthwaite to decide that a new home should be built for the children in Grafton. By this time the number of children being cared for had fallen to about forty and in January 1972 the Sisters and children moved into their new premises in North Street Grafton. The children were housed in four cottages, with each cottage providing accommodation for ten children and a Sister to care for them. The Sisters taught in the local schools each day and cared for the children at night.

The years since 1970 have seen many changes in the State regulations around the provision of Residential Care for children. Today children and young people are referred to St Joseph's by Family and Community Services. Most of the funding also comes from Family and Community Services, with community support allowing for some added extras for those in care. By law, the young people in residential care must be over twelve years of age, unless the Children's Guardian grants special permission. St Joseph's has established a reputation for providing a new start in life for some of the most needy and challenging teenagers in the State.

Since 2005 St Joseph's has operated under a lay CEO supported by a dedicated lay staff, but remains a work sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy. Its Mission Statement calls on those involved to endeavour, in the Mercy spirit, to empower disadvantaged young people and their families through service provision, support and advocacy in a safe and nurturing environment.

Making sure the children and young people receive the best possible education remains a priority, but St Joseph's has also expanded its services to include Foster Care, Respite Care, a Mentoring Program, a Students at Risk Program, a Supported Independent Living Program and a Family Restoration Program. Many of these programs are funded through the generous donations of the community.

St Joseph's Cowper is an integrated part of the history and fabric of the Clarence region. From volunteers for things like ironing, sewing, haircuts and gardening from the early Cowper days, to Board members and business houses who donate their time and energy today, there is and has always been a willingness to offer support. St Joseph's Cowper, after 100 years, is celebrating ongoing traditions – the Clarence Valley business houses who provide Christmas presents to the young people in residential and foster care – some of them having done so every year for the past 40 years, with the same person organising that collection for the entire time! St Joseph's celebrate the family in Sydney, who literally stumbled upon St Joseph's Cowper in the phone book, and who wanted their own children to grow up being aware of those less fortunate and each year provide wonderful equipment to allow the young people to experience new things. Also celebrated are all those people who have so generously made donations over the years, to assist in the provision of excellent standards of care for the young persons whom St Joseph's Cowper is fortunate to assist.

A Mass, concelebrated by Bishop Geoffrey Jarrett and Fathers Kelly, Hackett, Griffin and Wood to mark this wonderful achievement was held at Cowper on 3rd March where in excess of 300 people attended. This included Sisters, past residents, lay staff and many community benefactors and volunteers who have played such an important role in St Joseph's Cowper's rich history. Barbara Bolster rsm shared a wonderful history of the ministry with the congregation and Jim McDougall, Board Chair, thanked and highlighted all those involved in the work and the celebrations. A wonderful lunch was then enjoyed amongst much reminiscing and laughter! The book 'St Joseph's Cowper Orphanage - A Community Project' compiled by Judith Weiley rsm, was much sought after on the day and is now available through St Joseph's Cowper, Phone 02 66423022.

Sue McKimm - CEO



Above:
Bishop Jarrett, Sue McKimm, Jim McDougall (Board Chair)



Right:
L-R: Srs. Jan Holahan, Bernadette Eckersley, Patricia Smith and Barbara Bolster.

