

## **The Opening of the Judith Redden Centre**

**Address by Dr Deirdre Jordan RSM**

**May 12, 2008**

I have been asked to speak as a "historic" person linking the past and present of SAC. I feel I am well qualified. It is almost 70 years since I began school here as a boarder, and I continue to work for the school in marketing its International Program. I have chosen only two things to talk about from the past and present – the academic character of the school, and the Mercy charism.

For us as school girls, earlier graduates famous for academic achievement were still living legends. There was the first woman to qualify as a doctor; Mary Kitson was the first person to qualify as a lawyer in 1917 and Mary Tenison Woods was appointed Chief of the Status of Women Commission of the United Nations in 1945; Roma Mitchell was to become the first woman judge, the first woman Governor, the first woman Chancellor; Aline Fenwick was appointed to the United Nations as a legal officer in the division of human rights, and as Secretary, Status of Women Commission; the first University educated female pharmacist was Ursula Cock; the first South Australian woman to be awarded the nation's highest honour, the Companion of the Order Australia was a graduate of SAC. (Editor's note: Sr Deirdre Jordan!)

The school year books abounded with "Firsts" – academics, lawyers, authors, opera singers, musicians, educators, actresses. They were magnificent role models for the students. In the 1950s some of these brilliant students entered the convent, and the leadership team at the Sisters of Mercy achieved a "first" by sending them overseas for post graduate studies - Helen O'Grady to Oxford, Monica Marks to Louvain and Deirdre O'Connor to London. They were the beginning of a steady stream of sisters studying in the UK and the USA and then enriching the school and the wider community on their return.

At SAC, there was a great combination of academic leadership nurturing academic ability, in a school fully staffed by sisters. Then came the "troubles" of the late 1960s and early 1970s when the whole world was affected by cataclysmic events, which affected religious structures and educational structures. Some good things emerged. Free university education had opened up opportunities for a wider spectrum of society to aspire to attend university. Commonwealth government grants made possible the payment of lay staff taking the place of Religious. Government grants made possible the upgrading of facilities in schools. The base for those completing Year 12 education widened; numbers in the upper classes exploded.

This was a different era. The school was no longer noted in the same way for 'firsts' as in bygone times. Over the last twenty-five years, under the great leadership of Judith and her staff, the school has again become noted for high academic achievement right across the board from its sociologically very diverse entrants. Every year an average of 97% or more of students are successful in completing their Year 12 SACE, and have the opportunity of going on to higher education. Every year the top student achieves a tertiary entrance score of 98 or 99, placing her in the top 1% of students all over Australia.

It is not a source of wonder that graduates make their mark in fields widely different from those early firsts. For example, in engineering, where last year Ha Do, working on upgrades of submarines, was awarded Young Professional Engineer of the Year by Engineers Australia. Tegan Brink has just been awarded a prestigious Fulbright scholarship to focus on International Economic Law at Columbia University and all five daughters of a member of the SAC Board have been awarded PhDs. That must be a first, too!

SAC graduates are to be found in leadership professions all over the world (sometimes to the chagrin of Sr Judith who is attempting to be anonymous in a foreign country). And so, the hall mark of academic excellence at SAC continues.

The other great mark of the school I should like to speak about is the charism of Mercy. Sisters of Mercy undertake to serve the poor, the sick and the ignorant. As a child at school, the charism of Mercy was lived out in practice, but there was no articulation of the theology and philosophy underlying this ethos. It was just there, part of lived life. Today, staffing has passed predominantly to lay staff. Under Sr Judith's leadership, this charism of Mercy has been formulated clearly. Intensive and continuous staff development means that new staff are inducted into the values and ethos of the Mercy charism. It is embraced by both staff and students.

The school - staff and students - has a passion for promoting social justice, not as an ideology but in real terms. And so, SAC welcomes the marginalised in society - refugees, indigenous people and the growing groups of rural and urban people who are suffering under the duress of the present economic situation; those who echo the words of an Afghani refugee who had never been to school - "Sister, I am HUNGRY for learning". Outside the school, children come face to face with those in need (and incidentally learn to appreciate at great depth the sacrifices their parents make for them).

The school supports in a practical way the work of Sr Janet Mead and her Romero community in their work for homeless men. They support the work of Catherine house for women and children at risk. They support the work of Craig Evans, a member of staff who has pioneered a project in the slums of Buenos Aires (the Adelaide Mercy sisters were founded from Buenos Aires), bringing clean drinking water to hundreds of families and providing an eye clinic and community learning centre. What used to be called in the early days "the Works of Mercy" permeate the school. SAC is a training ground for academic excellence, for young women who will be leaders in society, for young women who will be mindful of the needs of others and have the same passion for mercy and for social justice which characterises the Principal and her staff.

Judith has laid firm foundations for the future for the Mercy charism to continue when there will no longer be a Sister of Mercy leading the school. It is a great source of hope to all those who have been associated with the school in the past and in the present, that the goals of academic excellence and the pursuit of social justice are the ideals which will continue to be fostered in this wonderful new centre. I am honoured to name this building the "Judith Redden Centre".

**I now declare the Judith Redden Centre open.**