

Eulogy for Joan Gaskell RSM
Born: May 7, 1923 and Died: June 18, 2009

BY Sister Sister Anne Waugh

Joan Gaskell was born in May 1923 and died in June 2009.

In the intervening years, Joan grew from a rather determined young child, nicknamed by her father, "Gimme Gaskell", to the woman described in her obituary notice as full of "...wisdom, wit, justice and compassion".

When she was received into the Sisters of Mercy in December 1952, Joan was significantly older than the other novices. I did ask her why she had decided on religious life, she said that she had looked around but not found anything or anyone particularly, interesting. Again she was not very interested in having children so choosing to devote her life to God seemed like the best creative option.

As the time approached for her actual entrance day, Mother Michael who had been encouraging Joan all along, began to prepare the current novices and postulants by warning them, that they wouldn't know what had struck them when Joan Gaskell came. It is rumoured that Mother Michael may have actually said that Joan could run the entire convent with "one hand tied behind her back". This may not have been strictly true but Joan was heralded as a particularly efficient and capable woman. After seeing the beautifully prepared sewing case that Joan brought with her, her peers in the novitiate saw with their own eyes, that what Mother Michael had been predicting about Joan was probably true. Joan readily fitted into the Novitiate and easily made friends with its inhabitants.

Besides her sewing case Joan brought a great deal more. She had completed Year 11 and Leaving Honours at school then went on to Uni to gain a BA, a Diploma in Education, Secondary and then an MEd and a Graduate Diploma in Aboriginal Studies. Joan completed these latter studies while also teaching in school. She was an experienced teacher before she entered and her worth was immediately put to the test with a large class to practise on.

In the years between 1952 and 1973, Joan taught a range of subjects to a variety of year levels. While teaching some history about apartheid in South Africa, to senior students, it occurred to Joan that here in Australia something very similar was happening and, as she said, she decided "to put her money where her mouth was" and between 1981-1993 Joan held.

When it came time for Joan to have a sabbatical, she chose to go to Derby in Western Australia to teach at the St John of God School; here she encountered classes with large numbers of indigenous students. So instead of enjoying a study holiday or doing something else which would have given her pleasure, she used this time in a different activity, where the seed was planted in her for a new ministry among Australia's own aboriginal people. In 1975-77, Joan spent time at Davenport Aboriginal Adult Training Centre. Then, having been elected a Provincial Councilor, Joan returned to teach at Mercedes College as well as being the Superior of the convent at Springfield.

Joan, the teacher, strove to inculcate the ideas and ideals of 'social justice' into her classes, and between 1981-1993, Joan held various positions at the Alice Springs, Aboriginal Adult Education Training Centre, including that of Co-ordinator and then as a tutor in Alice Springs and then with the Distance Education Centre.

It was not all hard work. Joan loved the out back and its people and visited many of the magical places to be found in and around Central Australia.

I spent some time with Joan in Alice Springs when she was living with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. We visited places that I never expected to see in my life time, like Uluru after heavy rain had been falling on it, and Chambers Pillar and I think, King's Canyon. We closely examined the preserved skeleton of a camel and Joan was pleased to tell me that a camel in a bad mood, could wrench a man's arm right out of its socket. I have been careful about camels ever since.

Joan could remember the name of every place we visited as well as the various plants, I could not. The same applied to the names of films and books and plays and music. In the last weeks of her life I was still asking her who wrote a book we had both enjoyed, though the title had also escaped me.

When she finally retired Joan came back to Adelaide and lived in various places round about, finally coming to rest at Talbot Street. She made friends with the neighbours and enjoyed the cat and the chickens and especially the canary. She knew where every free entertainment could be found but did buy tickets when necessary. She and I went to see Wagner's *Parsifal* when it was staged in Adelaide. Then we outdid ourselves by attending the entire *Ring Circle*, which provided us with material for many a profound discussion. Joan especially loved and enjoyed modern dance and would go to any performance she could manage. She was very physically strong and would happily attend up to three events in a day if she could organise them.

We saw many films together and I always appreciated how she would explain what some of the more obscure ones meant and persuade me to broaden my horizons by seeing others she felt were particularly noteworthy, though I never did grasp the significance of *Blade Runner*, or for that matter *Matrix*.

WATAC (Women and the Australian Church) was an organisation dear to her heart and she attended meetings regularly. Then, in her spare time she took over the duties of the librarian for our Mercy library. With various assistants, she overhauled (?) the books and as well, kept up a steady and regular supply of theological, spiritual and religious magazines to our sisters, home and abroad.

Joan dearly loved her family; John, her brother who died several years ago and Pat, her sister-in-law, who lovingly accompanied Joan on her last journey. In addition there were nieces and nephews of several generations in whose welfare and adventures, Joan took great interest.

It would be possible to go on listing all Joan's characteristics and her interests, but it is the woman whom we knew and loved that is being celebrated here. In John's Gospel, in the story about the death of Lazarus, Martha says; "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died..." Jesus makes her a promise "...They who believe in me will live, even though they die and whoever lives and believes in me will never die". (John 11, 21-26)

Some one we love has died. While we mourn her loss, we believe in and wait for, with her, that resurrection from the dead into the eternal glory of God.