

PEOPLE PROFILE



Sr Mary Gregory sgs

Foundation Principal of Mater Dei

Born: 1923, Grafton

Early Life: Attended local school at East Bank, Coramba, where I learnt to write on a slate. The school closed down due to dwindling numbers and my parents sent me to stay with my grandparents at nearby Coffs Harbour so that I could attend the local convent school run by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan Order. When I was 11 years old, my mother died so I stayed in the full time care of my grandmother. Every school holidays my five siblings and I would be reunited at one of my aunt's places. When I was 15 years old, my grandmother's health declined, and a teacher who had taught me at Coffs Harbour recommended that I go to boarding school at St Mary's Star of the Sea at Wollongong. It was during this time that I became aware of Mater Dei - as each year a busload of students from St Mary's would travel to Mater Dei for its annual fete. Eventually I studied to become a teacher of Commercial Studies - shorthand, typing and bookkeeping.

Young working lady: When I completed my studies, I secured a teaching position at St Mary's. From a young age I had felt a calling from God to become a religious Sister. However my father, whilst being a convert to Catholicism, was not keen for me to enter religious life and would not give me the permission I needed. So I lived the life of a normal single lass, had a job and boyfriends!

In my 20's: When I turned 21 years of age, I entered the Congregation of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan. I trained at the Novitiate at Mt St Benedict at Pennant Hills and then at St Scholastica's at Glebe Point. I later taught at St Benedict's at Broadway, St Bede's at Braidwood and St Mary's, Moruya.

In my 30's: In 1955 I was enrolled in the Diploma of Social Studies at the University

of Sydney and graduated in 1957. At this time, there was much discussion by welfare authorities and the Catholic Bishops with the Good Samaritan Sisters regarding the future of Mater Dei. It was decided that the home for dependent children be converted to a special residential school for girls with an intellectual disability, as there was no such institution in NSW. I was appointed to implement the changes that would make this changeover possible.

Founding Principal of Mater Dei: Whilst I was committed to seeing through the task that was entrusted to me and excited by it, I also felt overwhelmed by a situation that required me to find a way to adequately assess and test all the children, offer places in the special school to those who "could be trained for a life in the world" and prepare the other children for relocation to other institutions. This last task was particularly traumatic for everyone and made more difficult by the resistance of some Sisters to the change that was to take place. There were some positive outcomes however, as some families who had regularly taken children for school holidays offered them a permanent home. *More of Sr Mary's story during this time can be found in the book 'Journey to the Heart' (see page 4).*

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After Mater Dei: Unfortunately, and rather abruptly, I was transferred to our school in Moruya in January 1958. In later years my work has focussed more on the ministry of social work. I have worked at the Arncliffe Centre for socially disadvantaged adolescents for 11 wonderful years and worked for 3 years at Centacare Sydney where I established a School Social Work Program. I lived at Marrickville at this time. I returned to Arncliffe to establish a School Community Program on the campus of the three Catholic schools at Marrickville. In 1984-85 I did a Master of Arts Degree at Fordham University, New York, graduating in Family Ministry. For the next 10 years I worked in Family Ministry in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn. My next

appointment was to Claymore where I pioneered the Animation Project sponsored by the St Vincent de Paul Society in the public housing estates across the Macarthur. I also spent 3 great years at Ingleburn with elderly people at risk, another program pioneered by the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Today: I have remained in the Macarthur and now live at Camden Lodge on the Mater Dei property. I am still involved and am now a Life Member of the Animation Committee. I am also involved with the Aboriginal Reconciliation Group which meets at the Brown Sisters at Minto and I assist at the Stables, located on the Mater Dei property, where the Tuesday Art Group meet. In my spare time I grow African Violets and have had some of these now through 12 generations! I also enjoy reading biographies, memoirs and, of course, spiritual texts.

60 SECS WITH SR MARY:

Do you still have your old habits? No

Who would you invite to a dinner party? Some of the "old girls" from Arncliffe and Mater Dei, and friends I have made in Claymore and Ingleburn.

Heroes/Role Models: Sr Clare Slattery, sgs, RIP. Former Principal of St Scholastica's Teacher's College.

Favourite Holiday: Calgary, Canada.

What are you reading now? The Secret River, by Kate Grenville.

Favourite Food/Drink? Fish / Lemon Lime & Bitters.

Last movie you enjoyed? Miss Potter.

What do you enjoy listening to? Late Night Live. Classical Music.

Your favourite saying? Bright as the noon-day shall be your vindication.

Your mantra? Keep me safe, O God, You are my hope.



Sr Mary with some of the first students of Mater Dei school.