



ACK Story: Br. Doug Walsh

1. From what age did you become interested in becoming a Marist Brother?

I was in Year 8 when my family moved to Bendigo and I enrolled at Marist Brothers Bendigo. Three of my closest classmates spoke highly of the Brothers, which sparked my interest and was the beginning of me wanting to become one.

2. How long have you been a Marist Brother?

I have been a Marist Brother for 63 years. I joined the order in 1955 and after completing my novitiate training in Mt Macedon, I moved to Sydney to begin teacher training. Along the journey I have spent time in various schools in New South Wales, West Australia and Victoria.

3. Can you share a brief overview of your association with Assumption College Kilmore?

Prior to 1987, when I relocated to Kilmore, Assumption was a place I had only visited with other Brothers for our holidays. During my first working year at ACK, I was a Maths teacher and in charge of Religious Education. I also was given responsibility for one of the Year 11 Dorms. In 1988, I became the Brother responsible for the Boarding House. I moved away from teaching and devoted my time to running the Boarding House, which at the time had 200 boy Boarders. During my final year 1995, I introduced girls into the ACK boarding community.

4. It seems the boarders had a special relationship with you when you were responsible for the Boarding House. Why was that?

In my new role I had a special responsibility, not only for the boarders, but also for the families of the boarding students. I needed to be on the same page as the parents for so many things that were not related to the classroom. I formed a wonderful bond with these families and they in turn have taught me so much. During this time, the boarders needed to relate to the expanding local school community. I was the go between for the families of the boarders and the local families as the young people mixed socially etc. I knew about most things going on (but I am sure not all!)

5. When you joined the Marist Order, you accepted a mission of educating, forming and caring for young people. Can you tell us how your role evolved to also include caring for the homeless on the streets in Melbourne?

I was fortunate to have the chance to spend an academic year in Manila at the Ateneo University doing a Pastoral Course centred on caring for the marginalised. During this time, I lived with a very poor family on the weekends, where I shared a single room with Dad, Mum and five kids. I experienced first-hand the meaning of material poverty and was enriched with their inner peace and acceptance. I spoke often of this experience at ACK and we found a way to be able to put the eldest child of this Filipino family, Nida, through college. After Nida graduated she assisted her four younger siblings to go through college from her own resources. It was during this time that ACK and the Kilmore Community understood how this program was changing this family's life forever. This was the start of the "Br. Doug Bagong Barrio Education Fund", now in its 30th year of operation.

My experience in Manila opened my eyes to seek out the marginalised wherever I was. It began in Kilmore with me assisting the Society of Saint Vincent De Paul during the school day. This led to me becoming National Project Officer for St. Vincent De Paul for fifteen years, where I monitored programs for the Society in Asia and the Pacific. I also volunteered to support the soup vans in Melbourne while at ACK on my days off. This allowed me to achieve my goal of integrating my care

for the marginalised in my local environment. When I moved to Melbourne in 1996 I started looking for young people not coping with school and founded a Transition School, called The Doxa School.

6. The Doxa School? Can you share some more details regarding this school?

I would look for families having difficulties getting their children to attend or survive at schools. The ages targeted were between 11 and 15. I had a close relationship with social welfare and educational agencies. Once I won the kids confidence and they trusted me, they would come to a hall in Fitzroy where I and a group of University volunteers would give them some basic education. Kate Fogarty would remember this well. We applied to the Education Department to begin a small Transition School that would give us six months to turn these kids around and have them back in fulltime education. The Doxa Board, through Fr. Joe, clearly saw the benefit of our work. With their help we were able to finance the school and employ experts in this field to run the school, gain registration and became the Doxa School. There is still a Doxa School in Bendigo and other areas have special programs attached to their schools based on our early work.

7. You have been President of the Soup Vans for an incredible 25 years! Can you please explain how it started and describe the work being done by the Soup Vans today?

When I took over as President of the Soup Vans there were three vans operating; in Fitzroy (inner Melbourne), in Footscray (western suburbs) and in Moe (country). In my time we have increased our operations to now include vans in Collingwood, Endeavour Hills and Berwick. As the soup van program expanded, we required increased business expertise to examine our practices and make the necessary changes. Not only were there compliance issues, we also needed to ensure the safety of our volunteers. In the early days, the vans did not have fixed street stops; they tended to go wherever people requiring support were located. Our visits were not always welcomed, as the appearance of the soup van tipped off locals and police as to the location of squatters, which put our 'vannies' at risk.

Today we have five vans covering inner Melbourne, four vans in the western suburbs, two vans servicing Collingwood and one van in Moe, Endeavour Hills and Rosebud. Every night our vans go out with different teams. We have nearly 30 teams serving the poor every week of the year.

8. How would you describe your emotions when interacting with people who, for various reasons, are now relying on others for their daily substance?

The people I have worked with in the past and currently, whether in Manila or in Melbourne, fill me with joy and sadness and allow me to also share in their struggles and happiness. They teach me how to be resilient and to live life as well as I can. Their care for each other sometimes brings me to tears. I give them my friendship and they give me love in return.

9. In 2009 you were recognised with the Order of Australia. Did you allow yourself a brief moment to consider all you have achieved with and for others during your life?

My first reaction was one of surprise, as I had no idea who had written submissions regarding the volunteer work I have been involved in? I did not feel I deserved this recognition, as I felt my part was more of a mentor to the many others taking up the challenge. However, I did enjoy the moment as I realised it would promote the work of Saint Vincent De Paul and the Mission of the Marist Brothers to the marginalised.

10. If you had one piece of advice to share with the current Year 12 ACK students preparing for life after school, what would it be?

ACK has provided you with a broad education. The knowledge you have received during your time at the school has been based on the teachings of the Gospels. Use your career, in whatever field you choose, to benefit others (particularly those most in need) and your life will be enriched.

In closing Br. Doug, you met Mother Theresa in Calcutta in the 1970s. How was that experience and did she give you any advice which served you in the work you have been done throughout your life?

I was very fortunate to have spent half an hour with Mother Theresa. She was extremely focused and would only talk about her work. A humble lady, she sent me out with her "Brothers" to teach in the slums. Although it was only a short interaction, the experience has stayed with me to this day. In particular she shared two pieces of advice. Firstly, the poor will survive; don't work with them because they need you - just be with them. Secondly, she told me to go back to Australia and find the poor in my own country. These words inspired me to do what I have done in the schools where I worked and actively participate in numerous initiatives beyond teaching over recent decades.