



Fitzroy History Society Oral History Project 2015-2017

Transcript of interview with Sister Rosina and Sister Bridget of the Mary the Immaculate Academy

(Interviewed by Marion Glanville and Marijana Vanevski of the Fitzroy History Society on 11 July 2015)

Beginning in 1972, Sister Bridget and Sister Rosina of the Sisters of Mercy have taught the waves of new migrant children coming to Fitzroy. The children may not have had any English, but they wanted to learn. "They were terrific." Unlike the enclosed Sisters of old, they would visit people in their homes – with an interpreter if needed. At first they would then return to silence, but that is no longer the case. They were enriched by all the cultures and customs, and recount many happy memories of their time in Fitzroy.



START OF TRANSCRIPT

Facilitator 1: Alright, so we have Sister Rosina and Sister Bridget here from the Sisters of Mercy at the Convent at the Academy of Mary Immaculate. Okay, so maybe Sister Rosina, we'll start with you. When did you first come to Fitzroy and in what capacity?

Sister Rosina: I came to Fitzroy in 1972 as a class teacher at St George's Carlton which is now the seminary. The school's gone now, but that was the local primary school for Carlton which catered for lots of poor children from the high rise flats all around the Carlton area and parts of Fitzroy. I taught there for six years at that time, became principal after the first two and I left in '78 and came back again then in '80-something.

I'll just speak about going across there to the park from here and the difference there, in that it was just fairly rough, the Carlton Gardens, no museum there of course. Leonie and I used to go together and we would watch the poor old men who'd be sleeping on newspaper[1:11] on the seats, lots of - there were a lot of very poor people around there. As there are now, but at least they're being catered for a little bit by the charitable organisations round about.

I had a very happy time teaching those poor little children down there. Sometimes I had to go down and bring them to school because their parents would've gone to work and they'd be sitting playing under the high rise flats.

Facilitator 1: So were those kids from newly immigrated families?

Sister Rosina: Oh, yes.

Facilitator 1: From what countries? Or various.

Sister Rosina: Well there were Italians of course, they weren't newly there but there were children from Spain and there were children from South America, all nations really. The Vietnamese hadn't come at that stage, they came later. But by and large they were from South American countries, a lot of them. The Italians were right in there, but the Italian population as you know had been flourishing here long before that. But they were little vagabonds [laughs].

Facilitator 1: Yeah, and Sister Bridget? What about you?

Sister Bridget: I came here in 1980 to take charge of Sacred Heart Primary School [unclear], and...



- Facilitator 1: Oh, okay. How long were you there for? Because I went there...
- Sister Bridget: I was in charge of the school for six years.
- Facilitator 1: I think we might've crossed paths, because I was there prep and start of grade one. So I think I...
- Sister Bridget: Who taught you in prep?
- Facilitator 1: Miss Mary-Anne, don't ask me her last name. She was, I remember her, she was curly hair, little bit sort of fuller lady. She was very strict, [laughing] [unclear] she was very strict even though we were in prep. [2:49]
- Sister Bridget: No, because [Francis Comitso] had prep when I was there. ... What years were you there?
- Facilitator 1: 1985 and the start of 1986.
- Sister Bridget: Oh.
- Facilitator 1: Yeah, so we would've crossed paths.
- Sister Bridget: You were in prep then? ...Oh. Well [unclear]...
- Facilitator 1: So 1980 was when I was born and...
- Sister Bridget: Who was in prep by then.
- Facilitator 1: Yeah, that's funny isn't it? We've crossed paths.
- Sister Bridget: I've thrown out all these books. A fortnight ago I had a clean-up. ...All the school material is gone. ...Otherwise I had it all down in writing.
- Facilitator 1: So you were involved with Sacred Heart as a teacher or as...
- Sister Bridget: Well I was sort of running the school at that stage.
- Sister Rosina: She was principal.
- Sister Bridget: I had been a teaching principal over at Brunswick before I came here. When I came here the principals were supposed to be non-teaching. So but there was...

[3:43]



- Facilitator 1: Sorry, till what year?
- Sister Bridget: If there was somebody absent well you went back into the classroom.
- Facilitator 1: Oh okay. So sorry, how long were you at Sacred Heart for? 1980 until...
- Sister Bridget: Six years.
- Facilitator 1: Six years, okay, so we must've crossed paths. That's really strange, I'm sure. Yeah, and so your involvement in Fitzroy continued after that?
- Sister Bridget: No. ...I moved to the Teachers' College at Ascot Vale after that.
- Facilitator 1: Okay, and what are your memories from those six years being the principal of Sacred Heart.
- Sister Bridget: I arrived there in February 1980 and two weeks later to the high rise flats came all the Vietnamese people who'd been in Malaysia in the camps there for years. So they came to the school. Now they didn't speak English and we didn't have anybody who spoke Vietnamese, but they were children who wanted to learn. They were terrific. So they picked up English, they picked - they were clever children, and loved being at school because they had missed out on it for so long. So they were terrific children, they really were.
- We already had some Arabic speakers there and some Spanish speakers, but these ones coming in - we had teachers who could speak several of the European languages, but we didn't have anybody who could speak Vietnamese. So then the Catholic Education Office helped us there, they got some people who would come around to the schools, not just ours but others too. It was funny we'd be bowing and they'd be bowing to me, I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing. Anyway, they were a great help to us in even getting the children's names down in writing. [5:32]
- Facilitator 1: Yeah, different pronunciations and spelling and...
- Sister Bridget: Well yeah, so that they were properly written on the rolls and so on, they were a great help that way. They were also a great help in our communication with the parents because they were all new to Australia and they were all living in the high rise flats. That was different from being in camps in Malaysia. But they had to settle in there too, and they were lovely people. So then we had two Vietnamese



people as teacher aides so that when the parents came in at least there was somebody who could speak to them and understand that they were saying.

Again, it was the Catholic Education Office who made that available to us, but they were wonderful people. You see they would also, I'd go with them up to the flats to visit the families. It was no good me going by myself, I couldn't speak to them and they couldn't speak to me but if I had a Vietnamese person with me well then she would do the talking and she'd tell me what was what and what they needed or whatever.

Sister Rosina: Part of our life as Sisters of Mercy, part of our role was always to go into the homes, unlike the enclosed sisters of old, to go into the homes to the poor to communicate with them and that's what Bridget's saying and that's what we did here. A lot of us would go into the flats and visit people and they were rather deplor- - I don't want to run down the Housing Commission, but in those days it was not good. You'd go into the lifts and feel suffocated with the odours and water not coming up to the top floors.

We saw - not all the time, obviously - we saw life at its worst you'd say in those high - sometimes it might've been the fault of the people, too, that they were so dirty but they certainly didn't get the attention that they get now. I see they're updating the Atherton Gardens again now which is lovely, isn't it?

Sister Bridget: Oh yes, and also since then they have closed in the balconies, they were open.
[7:44]

Sister Rosina: And given some privacy to the Gardens, so people can't just walk through as if they owned it.

Facilitator 1: So you're involved obviously with a lot of the communities and families at the high rises.

Sister Rosina: Mm.

Facilitator 1: Yeah, and did that continue on? Or you went out of Fitzroy and then came back at a later stage? Or when was your re-entrance into Fitzroy?

Sister Rosina: Well I was here in the '70s, for most of the '70s and came back about - then I went to Mercy Hospital to work so I was out of the area a bit there. I came back about '90, I forget, about 20 years, about '90.



- Facilitator 1: Do you know, what were the most significant changes you noticed coming back to Fitzroy the second time from the first time?
- Sister Rosina: Oh, it was much better provided for, the poor were given more help from the Government I would say, just from looking. Not that I knew a lot about government works at all, but only from what I saw. There are a lot of charity places, Daughters of Charity East Melbourne and...
- Sister Bridget: The Missionaries of Charity...
- Sister Rosina: The Missionaries, all of those people were trying and we used to feed the people all the time here until we were not allowed anymore. All the poor old alcoholics when we were here in the early years would come to our gate and we would make them sandwiches and give them hot tea in a bottle. We used to do that all the time and have a big dinner for them once a year, very, very big dinner whereby they put the roast potatoes in their pockets to go home.
- At one stage I remember saying to one of these poor alcoholic men now, would you like a drink? He said, you wouldn't think of offering me orange juice, would you [laughs]. He wanted something much stronger. [9:24]
- But then we were stopped from doing that, the police told us to stop because if we did that they were spending their pension money on drink, so we couldn't do it anymore. But then the Sisters of Charity increased what they could do, so nobody - it was part of our job here if you were answering the door that you would feed the poor and needy. We did it all the time, didn't we Bridget? That's what...
- Sister Bridget: Especially Sundays.
- Facilitator 1: So when did you have to stop that?
- Sister Rosina: It was when I was here before, so it was still around about '80, 1980 or something. Saying there's services now, stop doing it because it just gives them more money and they don't spend their pension the right way, so we did stop.
- Sister Bridget: Well when I came here first we were still feeding them, especially Sundays.
- Facilitator 1: So you've both been living at the Convent how long?
- Sister Rosina: Bridget? ...This convent or any convent?
- Facilitator 1: This convent, this [specific one].



- Sister Rosina: Oh, this convent. 20 years for me all told.
- Sister Bridget: I was here what, six years?
- Sister Rosina: Six and about 10 this time are you?
- Sister Bridget: Oh yeah, this is my 11th year this time. I'm not doing anything this time.
- Sister Rosina: I could be more than that, say 25 years all told.
- Facilitator 1: Because are you involved much with the Academy or were? [10:49]
- Sister Rosina: Well, to some degree yes, we are, but we're part of - we're set in the middle of the college and we're very friendly, the staff are magnificent to us, they don't ever want us to leave because they say it's like the heart of the college... because it's on both sides of us now. I often sew up on the top balcony there, talk to everyone as they pass at the end of their...
- Facilitator 1: I remember, because I went to high school here and the top part was the art rooms and the...
- Sister Rosina: Well they're over there now but our balcony is just where the sisters are now, but we all do things out there and talk to the staff which is nice ministry really, and it's a little break for them. They're on their way to a lesson or from a lesson. So we do have a lot to do with them, really.
- Sister Bridget: The new science block, around just inside the back gate, was opened last year.
- Facilitator 1: Oh right, yeah the science block was back that way.
- Sister Bridget: It used to be up there.
- Sister Rosina: Well this is...
- Sister Bridget: Now it's a new block just with science inside...
- Sister Rosina: State of the arts my dear, you should be here in school now.
- Facilitator 1: Well that's what I - because I studied science at university, so...
- Sister Rosina: That's lovely.
- Sister Bridget: It's the full level. It's very good.



[11:55]

They seem to have differing things at each level, I'm no science person but some seems to be physics and some chemistry and some seems to be more botany biology kind of stuff. That's only from what I see going past.

Sister Rosina: We might just mention in passing the difference in living. The Sisters of Mercy in this area it was, it's a very different life we live now from what we lived in the - well I've been 63 years in religion, you've been more than that Bridget.

Sister Bridget: 70-something, is it? I entered in 1945.

Sister Rosina: Yeah, so we...

Sister Bridget: It was a long time ago.

Sister Rosina: ...lived a very strict cloistered life and then as young people, even when we went out to the flats you'd just go out there and come back into silence. It's different, we live a much more relaxed life ourselves so our, you might say conditions have improved, not that we look at it like that. We accept whatever comes at the time you are in life, like bloom where you're planted sort of thing. But that was a big difference, wasn't it?

Sister Bridget: Mm.

Sister Rosina: Like we didn't speak at meals and now it's quite, just homely living.

Facilitator 1: So did you have to take like a vow of...

Sister Rosina: Oh yeah, three vows we take.

Facilitator 1: Three vows, yep, and that's when you came into the Sisters of Mercy?

Sister Rosina: Well yes, yeah, and the three vows are poverty so that we have everything we want but we can't earn anything; we have a vow of obedience to do whatever is required of us in the congregation, not much is required now.

Sister Bridget: Well you get joy and peace in what you do.

Sister Rosina: We did, it was like that, there were...

[13:30]

Facilitator 1: So when you're sort of given, okay you were six years principal of Sacred Heart, so who decides where you...



- Sister Rosina: Oh, the leaders of the congregation.
- Sister Bridget: I've spent most of my life teaching in primary school, then I went over to the staff of the Teachers' College and then when I broke my shoulder and couldn't write on the blackboard properly myself I could hardly tell them about this. So I went down into childcare Geelong.
- Facilitator 1: Okay, and where are you both from originally? Where were you born?
- Sister Rosina: Brunswick for me.
- Sister Bridget: North Melbourne for me.
- Facilitator 1: Okay, so you're both from Melbourne.
- Sister Bridget: My parents are Irish and they settled in North Melbourne, so that's where I grew up. Went to school there.
- Facilitator 1: ... Anything else you'd like to share with us? Any memories you have of anything in particular in relation to the Convent or any particular experience you've had in Fitzroy that's enriched your life or put an impression on you in some capacity?
- Sister Bridget: I think... the different cultures here. Each generation coming in brings changes, not only to the language but also to their customs. So when the Vietnamese came they would - even the men in the staffroom before they went out on yard duty, they'd have a marble and be[14:52] down on the floor like this, shooting marbles, because they had always done it that way, and the children did it this way and they couldn't beat the children. So they'd be down on the staffroom floor with a marble.
- [Laughter]
- So that they wouldn't be beaten all the time.
- Sister Rosina: I'll tell you a little anecdote. There were lots of funny things with those sort of children from other countries. Their ways were not our ways.
- I remember little Sammy from South America and he was five years old and he would - his parents would be out, they wouldn't even know he was playing under the flats up there and I'd go and find him, because I'd know where he'd be - prep, he was. I went up this day, I said Sammy, why aren't you at school today? He said, Sister, why aren't you?



[Laughter]

They had an answer for you, they were worldly wise little children.

Sister Bridget: They were funny.

Sister Rosina: Yeah, we've had lots of happy memories of things they've said to us like that, hilarious. There was something

Sister Bridget: They were lovely, lovely children. I mean they'd been uprooted from their own country and parked here where they knew nobody and nothing and yet they were bright...

Facilitator 1: Have you ever reconnected with any of the children?

Sister Rosina: Yeah, it's too long. No you wouldn't know where they were.

Facilitator 1: Yeah, no definitely. Yeah, because it would be interesting to see what all these kids are up to. I'm not - at least some, see where they are in their life now.[16:20]

Sister Bridget: I was back at the school a bit last year because they were sort of celebrating the 150th. The school opened here in the grounds of the Academy, then 1960 when they needed all the space they had here the school was built down there in King William Street and then the junior primary school there beside it. So last year, there was nobody in the school had been at Fitzroy for very long and so I went down there a few times.

We brought some of them up here and showed them some of the classrooms there and Sister Mary Maloney, who's the principal there, she came and talked to them about the Academy and where the school had been and all of that, it was very good. Then I had to go down there as a follow up on questions and so on, this was just for the 150th to try and give them an idea of where the school started and where it was now.

Facilitator 2: Also to add onto that maybe put on the record whose house this had been when we...

[Over speaking]

Sister Rosina: ...Melbourne, yes. He - there wasn't a school here and he wanted the sisters - we had sisters come out from Ireland 10 years before and they were in the west, in Perth, and he asked them would they come across here and start a secondary



school. I don't know that he mentioned secondary, but that's what he wanted. When they came he then said to them that he'd like a school for the more well to do, but we were not concerned with that because we're Sisters of Mercy, we're founded for the poor.

Of course, if you're not educated you're poor in another way, aren't you. So the sisters insisted, Sister Ursula Frayne came out, a young woman really, and she started the Academy. It was the first Catholic secondary school in Australia. Then she built two other little schools down the side, down Palmer Street, one for the...
[18:27]

Sister Bridget: Angel Guardian.

Sister Rosina: They were the very poorest of the poor, weren't they? The Angel...

Sister Bridget: The Angel Guardian. Well, it was really prep one and two because most of the children came - they were living in tents down on the banks of the river there. They were not allowed to build brick houses, they could build wooden ones but they didn't have the money even for that.

Sister Rosina: But she had another school there too, Bridget, didn't she? There were two.

Sister Bridget: Sacred Heart.

Sister Rosina: Sacred Heart, yeah.

Sister Bridget: Which became Sacred Heart. When the school was registered it was registered as Sacred Heart School. It was the Angel Guardian which was the [kindy] and the prep.

Sister Rosina: Yeah, so she was caring for the poor which we demanded as Sisters of Mercy, but she was also answering the need of the Archbishop and she begged and borrowed but she got enough money to build that school and coming out with nothing, she was a great lady Ursula Frayne.

She's important, yeah. She's a founder of the school and she's buried in the chapel here, mm. Another thing I wanted to say to you there when you were talking, Bridget, about the different nationalities, they'd come in waves. Like there - it was nearly all - the little church is down in King William Street, by the way, tiny little church and it's a wonderful little parish, it's a great place to worship.



The Italian's were all here and then they went out to Bulleen or somewhere. Then the Vietnamese came and now they've just about all gone from the school, too, although quite a few still in the high rise flats and now it's all the Sudanese people. So when we go to [19:59] Mass on Sundays mostly Sudanese and they're absolutely delightful. It's hard to keep praying because you watch these gorgeous little children, they're just - they make you laugh and cry, really.

So now it's like a mixture of races and lots of us Anglo Saxons there and lots of religious go there because we go there and other religious from around about. About four other orders and the brothers up the street and there are people from the university. It's a very mixed group and it's one of the happiest places in all my years that I've ever been to Sunday mass. You feel you're really there with the people of God all together. For me, and I'm sure it is for you too Bridget, a great experience.

Sister Bridget: Oh yeah good, yeah.

Facilitator 1: I think that's one of the nice things about Fitzroy, all the changing cultures that have come through for years and you get to experience... different people and...

Sister Rosina: Yeah, they come and... Yeah, that's right.

Sister Bridget: They add another dimension, each group brings another.

Sister Rosina: The Sudanese girls are now coming up to the - not all of them - but they're coming up and Sister Mary, the principal there, helps them if they're financially not able to do it. So they've got quite a smattering of Sudanese girls here at the college, beautiful girls and beautiful to look at. Oh my dear, they are lovely.

I was thinking too when we were talking about visitation, how our own tastes have changed. We had very plain food, well now we love all the spicy food. When we used to go into the flats you always - although we didn't at that time eat out, we did eat or drink with them if they offered to us out of courtesy and they'd give you this little black Turkish coffee that you could - well, for me - I could[21:52] scarcely swallow it, but I had to try and put some down and then a big smile. It was part of being where they are in their culture.

But it's not like that now, we can join with any of them with the best [culinary]...

Sister Bridget: Well, also when they moved into the high rise first they had nothing.



Facilitator 1: No they wouldn't.

Sister Bridget: They didn't and it's - I know, I was down there about two weeks when this man turned up talking about school uniform, the uniform they had at Sacred Heart School was the only school in Australia he told me who had that uniform. I said look, these children have the clothes they stand up in and nothing else. I said, I'm not going to ask them to get a uniform. You're not - and I said, no way, no. Why should they have to wear a uniform?

So most of them had just said print some t-shirts, and the thongs, the thongs used to worry me because the concrete in the yard wasn't always even, they could trip on. But I wasn't going to, there was no uniform when I was there. It's come up since but then they've got different children there now, too, and they've got people who've been in Australia longer. But these ones had just arrived from Vietnam, why did they need a uniform? Bring them to school and we'll teach them.

Sister Rosina: Very different now though, Bridget, when they've got computers for all the preps.

[Laughter]

Sister Bridget: ...they have. They've even got a computer handed on out, yes.

Sister Rosina: Melbourne Symphony coming, teaching them to play instruments, cellos and whatever. [23:36]

Facilitator 1: It's a great experience that, isn't it?

Sister Rosina: It's great, and it's lovely to see. So you could imagine from this that being Sisters of Mercy we would be very sympathetic towards asylum seekers. People, we've seen people assimilate into the place and how good it is. It's not an easy question.

Sister Bridget: After the World War I was in Belmont in the late '40s, when a lot of children, people, came there and they were under the flats down in Geelong, down by the Barwon River and their children came to school, to Belmont, to us. Again, monolingual Australia I had learnt French, Italian and Latin to pass exams, but not to speak it.

Then I went to Wodonga after that and of course all the migrants there came in by bus, but they were from all nationalities. So it was different.



Facilitator 2: When you say how lovely the Sudanese are, I live near the Sisters of Charity and one time in particular I remember they'd been given some pillows and blankets and they walked past my house with all these things on their head. They have such a beautiful way of moving, it was a...

Sister Rosina: Oh lovely deportment.

Facilitator 2: ...beautiful experience just to see it.

Sister Rosina: Yeah. I see them in the yard and I automatically stand up straighter.

[Laughter]

Yes, we've been enriched by them all. So I don't know that I can add to that.

Unless there's anything specific that you... [25:13]

Facilitator 1: No, just like we said, anything that you feel is important to discuss and you'll share...

Sister Rosina: Very happy to be living in Fitzroy and hope we'll be here until we die. I don't think they'll move us around anymore, we're too old [laughs].

Sister Bridget: Unless they need the place for somebody else.

Sister Rosina: Alright then.

Facilitator 1: Thank you very much.

Sister Bridget: Thank you.

END OF TRANSCRIPT