

a centenary of canberra's catholics

For six decades Mick brought a spark to the city

In the seventh in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, 2009 Canberra Citizen of the Year Bishop Pat Power remembers one of the city's great characters Mick Gallagher.

It is not altogether clear how Augustine Albert Gallagher was transformed into Mick Gallagher, one of Canberra's great characters who contributed mightily to our city for 62 years of the centenary we are about to celebrate.

Leading up to his time in Canberra, there were many transformations in Mick's life from a childhood in a family of 10 children in Toogoolawah and Cooroy (Queensland) faced with the Great Depression, enlisting in the RAAF in World War II, there plying his trade as an electrician and giving expression to his prowess as an athlete.

At Mick's funeral in 2008 his son, Michael, related how these events shaped Mick's life. "From his father he acquired a deep sense of social justice, the collective power of the common man and the values of a democratic society. From his (converted Protestant) mother he learnt family values, Catholicism and religious and racial tolerance.

"In his working life he carried these values and represented the union in the interest of his

fellow workers, particularly in his early days as an electrician.

"He maintained an undiluted allegiance to the Australian Labor Party and its ideals and aspirations for a free egalitarian society. He maintained his allegiance to the Catholic Church and became a tireless worker for the advancement of Catholic schools in Canberra."

I first knew Mick Gallagher while he was working in the Department of Customs and Excise. I recall at one point during a power struggle in the Public Service Union, both the contending parties were vying to have Mick on their ticket because everyone saw him as a man of great integrity and beyond reproach.

Mick Gallagher and Gwen Raftery were married in Sydney in 1943 and at the end of World War II, first Mick, then Gwen and their sons, began life in Canberra in a pre-fab government house in 3rd Street, Narrabundah. Alan Foskett's recent book highlights the significance of this part of Canberra's history and social fabric.

Eventually, their much-loved home became too small for a family which had grown to six children with Margaret, Eileen and their four brothers. So the Gallaghers moved to their new home in Telopea Park, Barton in 1954. Ten years later, the family witnessed nearby a milestone in Canberra's history with the filling of Lake Burley Griffin.

Mick's contribution to Church and community was very much "hands on". In fact he had very little patience for people who were "all talk and no action".

His skills as an electrician saw him much in demand in an honorary capacity. Son Michael recalls, "Mick was volunteering his services to string the lights along the running tracks (at Manuka Oval) for the St Patrick's Day Sports Carnival – a large event on the professional athletic circuit and a major fund-raiser for the Church and its schools. Little as we were, both under 10, Brian and I were seconded as apprentices in clicking the light bulbs into the bayonet sockets."

The year the Gallaghers moved from Narrabundah to Barton was also the year that St Edmund's College opened. Michael Gallagher was a foundation student and until youngest son, David, graduated in 1970 there was never a year without at least one Gallagher at the college.

There is a splendid photo on the cover of the 1979 St Edmund's Annual with Mick and a group of other proud hard-working fathers striding across the main oval. St Edmund's was hailing the contribution they had made to the life of the college in its first 25 years.

As Mick's boys began taking an interest in Australian Rules football, their good father from a rugby league background volunteered his services as a coach for the Manuka club. In

preparing boys for an interschool carnival, Mick was impressed by a young lad who kicked the ball over Mick's head. Mick asked "And what's your name?" The response was "Alex". He is now best known by his surname, Jesaulenko.

Mick's two youngest sons, Terry and David, rewarded their father's coaching deeds by becoming outstanding first grade players for Manuka. It is generally agreed that Terry, who kicked 11 goals in a game on three occasions, would have risen to greater heights if he had accepted offers to play in Melbourne rather than pursue his university studies in Canberra.

One of Mick's many acts of kindness was to take Wally Wright to Australian Rules



Mick Gallagher and wife Gwen.

games. Wally, father of Fr Tommy Wright, had been a goal umpire in his day, but was by then stricken with blindness.

Mick used to give Wally a running commentary on the game and was amazed how at the post-mortem at the Manuka Club, Wally was able to describe the highlights. It was ironic that Mick was to lose his sight in his last years.

In October 1993, I had the joy of celebrating Mass in St Christopher's for Mick, Gwen and their family marking their 50th wedding anniversary. It was not long afterwards that Mick lost his sight. Gwen's devotion to Mick was total until she developed cancer which led to her untimely death.

Mick spent his last years in Villaggio Sant'Antonio in Page. Always interested in current affairs, he was then constantly up-to-date with the radio as his constant companion. His neighbour just across the corridor was his old friend, Bishop Alo Morgan. After the evening meal and the news, they recited the Rosary and had a whisky together.

God called Bishop Alo to his eternal reward in May 2008 and Mick the following September. Within a few months, Canberra had lost two of its most loved and admired citizens.

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