

*a centenary of canberra's catholics*

# A fiery champion of the battlers

Life in comparatively affluent Canberra can be particularly difficult for those people "doing it tough". Such battlers had a true champion in Ethel McGuire. A social worker by profession, Ethel reached into almost every aspect of the life of Canberra as she stood up for the rights and the human dignity of her clients.

In a brilliant piece in The Canberra Times just after her death in March 2011, Jack Waterford colourfully recorded Ethel McGuire's approach to her profession. "Ethel once commented to me that it had yet to be demonstrated that the average social worker contributed more to the community than the average dry cleaner. She thought most modern social workers ineffably middle-class. That did not quite mean that they were beyond redemption – because Ethel, a fervent if tactless Catholic, did not believe anyone beyond redemption. But she thought many all too smug and comfortable. She did not necessarily trust their instincts, as she trusted her own. Ethel was of the Irish-Catholic working class and didn't apologise for it."

Well, not quite. Ethel's niece, Sister of Mercy Mary Wickham, giving the eulogy at her aunt's funeral spoke of her as "the eldest surviving child of Jane and Thomas Cannon of Sunshine, Victoria. The genetic mix was a potent one of Irish Catholic and Scots Presbyterian... Ethel made regular visits to Melbourne during my childhood and beyond, and the ensuing conversations and heated arguments around the table about politics, religion, trade unions, the public service and family matters echo in all our heads. Ethel was a formidable debater, a scathing opponent and an intellectual virago."

Archbishops, commissioners of police, magistrates, departmental heads and other senior bureaucrats in Canberra would recognise what Mary Wickham was talking about.

**In the 22nd in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power tells of a Canberran who played a significant role in the Archdiocese's response to supporting people in need.**

Ethel was no respecter of persons when it came to standing up against any form of unfairness, especially toward those who found it hard to stand up for themselves.

Losing her father when she was only 11, Ethel as the oldest in the family helped her mother with the raising of the younger siblings. She took on part-time jobs to help out in the family and won a scholarship to secondary school and always had a great appreciation of education, especially of the gift of reading. A scholarship to the University of Melbourne enabled her to pursue an arts degree and undertake studies in social science while caring for homeless women through the Legion of Mary.

Mary Wickham traces the continuing story. Out of this university experience "a formidable social worker was born. One of her first jobs as a social worker was in Perth, where she met her complement, the mild-mannered Kevin McGuire. If Ethel was fire, Kevin was surely as solid and reliable as the earth."

Kevin and Ethel were married in Melbourne at Newman College Chapel in 1953 and moved to Canberra in 1955 with Kevin's public service career. The McGuires spent a short period in Hotel Acton before moving to their Yarralumla home where they would spend the next 50 years.

Ethel McGuire managed to live out her vocation as wife, mother, welfare officer, advocate, friend and much more without any loss of integrity. Indeed, her whole life was one of integrity.

She pioneered social welfare in Canberra, was a Justice of the Peace and a life member of



ABOVE: Ethel McGuire (second from left) with Good Samaritan Sr Placid Tait, daughter Jane Stanton and husband Kevin at Jane's graduation in 1983 at the then Signadou College.

LEFT: With Kevin and grandchildren Michael and Bridget Stanton. BELOW: Ethel and Kevin.



the ACT Council of Social Services. Appreciating her own hard-won educational opportunities, she impressed the importance of education on her own children and those she looked after in the community.

That is not to say that life was without its tensions. Ethel's daughter, Jane, recalls many occasions when the evening meal was interrupted by a knock on the door from the police, resulting in her mother going off to attend to an emergency. Yet, the positive side of all that was that all five children inherited from both their parents a strong sense of justice and a care for those less fortunate.

Neither Jack Waterford nor I would want to give the impression that Ethel was always at loggerheads with other professionals. She worked closely with magistrates Clarrie Hermes and Ron Cahill and her good friend,

psychiatrist Maxine Tennant, and many others who wanted what was best for children and families at risk. Ethel seemed to know everyone in Canberra and those wide contacts were beneficial to all concerned.

In the homily at her funeral Mass, I acknowledged the influence which this valiant woman had on the Catholic Church's social apostolate in Canberra.

"Ethel McGuire played a significant part in leading the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn in its response to supporting people in need.

"She guided the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary as they set up Marymead in Narrabundah and continued as a member of the board to collaborate with those responsible for care and development after the Sisters were no longer able to be present.

"She had a key role in the formation of Catholic Social Services in Canberra with its early beginnings in marriage guidance and counselling.

"She was part of a formidable team with people like Prof Pat Pentony, Fathers Barney Lynch and Kevin Barry-Cotter, Kath Durie, Bryan Docherty and Fr Tommy Wright. They were all strong characters and there were many robust discussions.

"Ethel was a great help to me as a young priest in the late 1960s. I was often in her office in Green Square in Kingston getting some advice on our clients of common concern in Causeway.

"Neil Harrigan, the current director of CatholicCare has the greatest admiration for Ethel, even though he says with a smile that Ethel was a bit suspicious of him because his background is as a psychologist, not as a social worker."

As Canberra prepares to celebrate its 100th birthday, it can do so with pride, but Ethel McGuire would be warning us to make it a happy birthday for all our citizens, especially those in danger of missing out.



Building the Church