

a centenary of canberra's catholics

A woman ahead of her times

In the sixth in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, 2009 Canberra Citizen of the Year Bishop Pat Power recalls Kath Durie.

While St Edmund's College, Canberra, is often viewed as a thoroughly male enterprise, no history of it would be complete without recognition of Kath Durie's integral part in its beginnings and its growth into being the great school which so many Canberrans admire today. But this formidable woman's achievements are not limited to St Edmund's.

Because of the Depression, Kathleen McMahon had to give up her pursuit of a degree at the University of Sydney.

Rather than return to the family farm, she decided to come to Canberra in 1933. She had attended boarding school with the Good Samaritan Sisters in Sydney and they arranged with their counterparts at St Christopher's Convent, Manuka, for Kath to have a room with them and teach senior students.

Until 1954, St Christopher's catered for girls and boys through to the Leaving Certificate. One of the boys to whom Kath taught Latin in those days was John Kelly who was to be ordained to the priesthood. At that time, a good grasp of Latin was needed in preparation for the priesthood. As inspector of (Catholic) schools and later as Mgr Kelly and Vicar for Education, he always acknowledged Kath's role in his own education.

As with many other newcomers to Canberra, the Hotel Kurrajong was home for Kath as she looked to begin a career in the public service. After moving from St Christopher's, it was there that she met her future husband, Bob Durie, in 1935. Bob and Kath were married in 1940, by which time Bob had converted to Catholicism. Bob's brother, David, later became a much loved and admired Anglican priest in Canberra.

The early part of the marriage saw a move from Canberra to Sydney, but in 1947 the family, which now included four children, returned to Canberra and the Duries made their home in Sturt Ave, Narrabundah.

Kath and Bob were very much involved in school and parish life.

No history of St Edmund's College would be complete without recognition of Kath Durie's integral part

But the commitment of this devoted married couple went even wider when they began to help young couples prepare for marriage through what were known as Pre-Cana conferences. The older Durie children remember Archbishop Eris O'Brien's personal interest in the family apostolate and his arranging to come for a meal. Known to be a little absent-



Children Peter, Robert, Ruth and Jane with Kath Durie

minded, the genial Archbishop threw everyone into a spin by arriving a day before he was expected!

While on a posting as Official Secretary at Australia House, London, in the late 1950s, Bob Durie was diagnosed with brain cancer, and in 1960 returned with his family to Canberra to die at the age of 43, leaving Kath with eight children.

Living quite near St Edmund's site, in 1953, the year before the college opened, Bob and Kath had welcomed future headmaster Br McCarthy and Provincial Br Young to their home as the Brothers planned the new college. It was to be the beginning of Kath's involvement at many levels with a college on which she was to make a huge impact.

Not only were her three sons to be students



at St Edmund's, but Kath worked there in a voluntary capacity before accepting a full-time position on the college staff in the mid-1960s. College historian Michael Moloney writes: "She taught some classes and established the first library in the room we now call Waterford... As well as fostering her deep faith, Kath read widely and

developed a knowledge and love of the fine arts, music, art, poetry and literature... To pass on her appreciation of what is good and beautiful in life to the boys gathered around her desk was one of Kath's greatest gifts and keenest pleasures."

Michael Moloney describes how after her children had grown up, she would assist Tony

O'Shea every Christmas holidays in running "Sunshine Camps" for boys who would not have had a holiday outside Canberra.

He narrates how Kath took under her wing a talented young concert pianist, Geoffrey Tozer, who had joined the college staff. "Years later, when he heard of Kath's death, he returned to Canberra to perform a concert in honour of his great friend and benefactor. The proceeds of this concert he donated to establish a Kath Durie Scholarship to help talented St Edmund's boys continue their music studies."

In many ways Kath Durie was ahead of her times in living out much of the Second Vatican Council's vision for lay involvement in the Church and the world.

She was a member of the Catholic Women's League and the St Vincent de Paul Society, guided marriage preparation and post-marriage counselling, taught as a catechist at Telopea Park High School, and later in life as a Eucharistic minister, she cared for the sick and housebound.

At times, these commitments must have come at a cost to her children, yet they were proud of her devotion to others and have grown up as people with a well-grounded social conscience.

When they gathered around Kath in their Sturt Avenue home as she courageously prepared for death on 17 August, 1993, they hailed the enormous contribution this valiant woman had made to their family and to the life of Canberra.

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