A fiery champion of the battlers

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

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.

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 Canbaway.

"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.

Life in comparatively affluent Canberra can be particularly difficult for those people. "doing it tough". Such battlers 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 smart 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.