



# St Ignatius Parish

## TOOWONG



### Sheila Corcoran's Vignettes

#### *NURTURING THE NURTURERS*

**WOMEN'S NIGHT OF SPIRITUALITY**

**7PM, TUESDAY 25<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2023**

**ST IGNATIUS CHURCH, TOOWONG**

***“Give those you love wings to fly, roots to come back to and reasons to stay.”*** Dalai Lama

#### **My eldest brother**

My eldest brother, shortly after celebrating his twenty-first birthday, left the nurturing security of his home for the Solomon Islands with two companion P.M.G. Department technicians<sup>1</sup>. The task was installing lines of communication between the islands and mainland Australia. The year was 1942, the predicted completion time, six months. Such a brief could, through the eyes of these young men, fulfil the dream of travel to exotic places, but Australia was about to be plunged into the deep-sea waters of the skirmish following the disaster of Pearl Harbour. The naval battle of the Coral Sea was at our doorstep. We, his family of three sisters and one remaining brother waved cheerful goodbye to him. My parents had given him ‘wings to fly’ from the loving nurturing family embrace, secure in the promise that he’d soon return.

History records these men were returned to Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, to repair damaged communication lines, following softening up raids prior to the Japanese invasion of Rabaul. The force of the Japanese bombardment simultaneously from air and sea, overwhelmed the painfully inadequate land force and pitiful air defence of this tropical island paradise. Despite the courageous resistance efforts, the devastation was complete, and it became every-man-for-himself rule. After months of attempting to find some means of escape, and on foot, subjected to the hardest of life in the jungle, many were captured and became prisoners of war in the hands of the Japanese. Sadly, their fate was sealed, as they were herded aboard the Monte Video Maru, Japanese Prisoner of War vessel. The ship was torpedoed off Luzon Island, Philippines on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1942 by United States battleship “SS Sturgeon”, which was unaware of the Australian human cargo. The remains of the Japanese vessel were discovered at the bottom of the South China Sea eighty-one years later. The agonising reality of this saga was that my parents were informed of their

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<sup>1</sup> The Postmaster-General's Department (PMG) was a department of the Australian federal government, established at Federation in 1901, whose responsibilities included the provision of postal and telegraphic services throughout Australia.

beloved son's death in 1945 after peace had been declared. During those years of waiting for news, any news, the family clung confidently to the belief that their prayerful, spiritual faith would bring Tom home. I now, am the only surviving link to this story, and the pain of loss is a wound beyond healing. Nurturing in vain!!

### **Home life**

Our home industry was a dairy farm of jersey cows supplying cream to Kingston Butter Factory. The separated milk fed the poddy calves and pigs grunting and snorting happily in the pigsty. The precious cream was sent by steam powered train to the factory. My first memory of nurturing is of my mother sitting on the back stairs, hand beating a large basin full of clotted cream into butter, the week's supply for cooking and sandwich making to nurture her growing family. We children had no idea of the tedium of this task as we sat around her, our legs dangling through an empty space between the stairs. Meanwhile the weekly family wash was held firmly to the clothesline with dolly pegs flapped dry in a billowing wind, the whites glistening in the afternoon sun. Woman's hard work nurturing in so many forms ...her job!!

### **Home with Tom and the Children in Toowong**

'Twas a cottage in the wooded foothills of Mt. Coot-tha that Tom and I chose as our home. One by one a family of six came, then with wings to fly, left. Tom still close by in Toowong cemetery, and after sixty-five years, I too left No 12. So many milestone events surrounding the six, crowd my memory as they tumble down those years. A single moment in time and monument as it were, the growth and height of the children ceremoniously recorded every year on their birthday, on a post in the kitchen never to be painted over. So, the transition from being nurtured to becoming the nurturer, was being played out here in our little corner of the world, with each child brought home wrapped then in swaddling clothes. My devotion to Our Lady was real and comforting, a spiritual connection to her and the son born and cradled in a manger.

### **Tom and the War**

Following the outbreak of World War II Tom joined the RAAF, trained in Canada then shipped overseas where he was seconded to the RAF Bomber Commander as an Observer/Navigator, crewing Halifax Bombers flying out of several bases in the UK. Following discharge, a tight group of fellow aircrew men of rank, kept in touch, many of whom resided in the western suburbs of Brisbane. The bond of friendship aided their return to civilian life and brought courage of a different brand as they resumed normal life. Post war in those early days of mastering the responsibility of matrimony, I was introduced to those comrades and the girls they married. These still young men had been robbed of their youth and no amount of nurturing would erase the horror of war and banish the frequent dreams that haunted their rest. Tom's recurring nightmare was that his navigational skills would not guide their plane "Randy Roger" safely home to base following a bombing raid over enemy territory, and low on fuel they would be forced to ditch in the North Sea, and he couldn't swim. All I could do was hold him close till the spasm had passed and hope that with nurturing and the unwavering spiritual belief in the power of prayer, a calm logic would surface and the bliss of uninterrupted slumber follow. And so, I learned to nurture a husband long before the family that followed. Tom endured the pain, anguish, suspense and utter despair of knowing that his older brother Michael, a Bomb Aimer, on the same 640 Squadron, had not returned from the much documented 'Nuremburg Raid.' His plane, one of the many not to return from that ill-fated mission, with the cryptic account, "missing in action presumed dead." Tom's morbid task to telegram his family at home

with the news, and at the same time with a thread of hope that Michael may have parachuted out of the crippled plane as it plummeted to earth and was being held prisoner of war. A form of nurturing his family with hope, as he pictured his parents and sister kneeling together offering the nightly family rosary for Michael. The unwavering trust in God, the power of the blest miraculous and St. Christopher medals attached to the dog tag bearing his name, rank and number, and a simple spiritual faith was all they could cling to.

### **Nurturing our boy**

I have nurtured, oh! How I've nurtured. Our third child a boy, was diagnosed with the fairly obscure Perthes Disease caused through an injury where the hip joint is extended beyond the normal limit, and the head of the femur is flattened. The only gruesome treatment and remedy then was immobilising the leg in a harness and with the aid of crutches measured to his young height, walking with the injured leg tucked up at his back. Vicious treatment of a child with little understanding of why? And so began regular visits to the specialist for X rays tracking the treatment progress, but by now I had a new baby and Tom, unable to leave work to help with childcare. A dear helpful friend, knowing of my plight, and she with toddler at heel, with outstretched hands, gathered my baby into her nurse. And so, she nurtured the now hugely distracted mother and her child when we had to face those X ray sessions. We went through three different sized crutches during his treatment, and two years on, he was freed from this form of torture and grew to 6ft 4ins plus, in the old measure. Nurturing the nurturer in its purest form.

This calamity changed the family dynamic as my mothering became lopsided, geared to the disabled one. Meanwhile Tom studied for his degree after a full day's work at a fairly demanding job, and I was tasked with an almost impossible one, trying to maintain a quiet time following the evening meal.

### **BEING NURTURED**

***Where did you get the energy, inspiration, wisdom and resilience to do the nurturing work you have done?***

Into each life some rain must fall, but rainbows sometimes follow the rain. My metaphoric pot-of-gold-as-the-end-of-the-rainbow came in 1974, when invited to join a newly formed committee of local parishioners about to launch an amateur musical society. With infectious enthusiasm and initiative headed by the newly appointed parish priest, Fr. Leo Flynn S.J., *The Ignatians Musical Society* was born, and the parish hall became our rehearsal and ultimate performance space. On a wing and a prayer, we opened with 'The Gondoliers'. The quest? How to learn the challenging four-part harmony of Sullivan's music score, dance a creditable choreographed "Cachucha" and the frightfully British dialogue of the mid 1800s, satirically but cleverly written libretto. The real test comes with *full dress rehearsal* in costume, when the cast are challenged to put it all together with full orchestral accompaniment under the baton of the Musical Director who shall have the last word. Well, *by George we did It!* Here was nurturing of fellow cast members with words of encouragement, bouncing lines off one another backstage, whilst preserving a state of calm few of us felt, sustained with a nurturing guide in our founder Fr Leo.

A glorious history of over forty years of performance, The Ignatians have sung their way through the entire repertoire of Gilbert and Sullivan Operettas, and an equal number of other musical scores. To accommodate members who wished only to be part of a choir the Christmas Cantare of traditional carols and accompanying readings was arranged and performed on the altar of St Ignatius. We brought the

therapy of music to residents of Wolston House Hospital and at Lawson House Psychiatric Hospital and also, at Wacol Correctional Centre, to name a few locations beyond the parish hall.

Over the years by invitation, we assembled a choir to sing a selection of pieces chosen by bridal couples to affirm their love and enrich their wedding vows. For several years, we sang a complete Mass from the choir loft in this church celebrating the parish feast day. Probably the most challenging invitation was to sing the Vatican National Anthem celebrating the Vatican Pavilion Nation Day during Expo 88, with hastily learned but credible Italian interpretation.

This is a span of life where the gift of a voice is spiritual nurturing set to music. Through the mist of time, I recall vividly, being one among a large choir spanning pillar to pillar on each step on this altar performing *Night of Miracles* narration by the late, great, Howard Ainsworth, musical direction of the late Henry Howell. Should you have been in the congregation you too would have experienced a spiritual moment listening to the pure tenor solo *O Holy Night* floating musically in the sanctuary void above, with the full choir joining triumphantly at the close. Here on this altar all those years ago was the joyous Christmas story set to music.

### **Final Word**

Now the cycle of life with measured tread, delivers nurturing of the most comforting brand. I have become the one to be nurtured, held in fond embrace by the six, allowing the dignity and grace of living, being nurtured but with a support system firmly in place. The seventeen grandchildren and sixteen great-grandchildren are a constant joy as I track their growth from babe in arms to young adults, revelling in the story of their lives and the paths some have already plotted. Nurturing with love and kindness, I'm securely wrapped in a warming blanket of a generational sense of belonging. Here now is my spiritual dwelling. Together we are creating history, a loving family record, written indelibly in my book of memories, infused into my body and soul, my cup is filled, it doth overflow.