



Be brave about change

by Kerie Hull

“I had taken on a motto from one of the Sisters years earlier, ‘God helps those who help themselves’, which has always motivated me to work hard, set goals, and to achieve.”

— Kate Birrell



Catherine (Kate) Birrell OAM after receiving the Sr Maria Cunningham Award 2018 for Lifetime Contribution.



Kate (Catherine) Birrell was just 12 years old when she decided her life's work would be caring for others in the healing tradition of the Catholic Church. After 54 years of extraordinary dedication to nursing, and no signs of slowing down, she shares insights into her journey.

Raised in a farming hamlet near Geelong, and educated by Sisters of Mercy she describes as 'strong, and very encouraging', Kate joined the St Vincent's health community and embarked on a lifelong mission to care for others and be a guide in the craft of caring with compassion.

More than 50 years on, after touching the lives of thousands of people and gathering a notable clutch of higher education achievements along the way, Kate is still going strong, sustained by her faith and unwavering vision and purpose to enhance patient care.

The last three decades she added nursing education and clinical and leadership development to her focus – and for the last few years has dedicated her expertise to Timor-Leste, imparting her exemplary experience and knowledge to build capacity and improve standards of care in disadvantaged communities.

Looking back on her life, Kate Birrell emphasises that she was only as good as the opportunities provided particularly by the Sisters; that the teams she led were bigger than the individual; and her strength as a nursing leader was nurtured by the unique camaraderie and friendship that binds nurses.

"I was very young, about 12, when I observed that nurses were always happy, and had good stories," she says, "and my father would say that you get to travel the world as a nurse. I didn't think about career or that it could take you places, it was the attitude I was drawn to, it was clear that they enjoyed their work."

She says the Mercy Sisters, education and humanitarian activists, and strenuous workers, 'provided subtle, wise mentorship' encouraging the girls at Sacred Heart College to 'go on to greater things'.

"It was a natural progression to train at St Vincent's in Melbourne, it was never a question, where else would I go."

My elder sister Anne was at St Vincent's training two years ahead of me, but I always say that she followed in my footsteps because I had reserved nursing first!"

"When you come through that education system, you have a foundation for God's love, for human kind and to carry on his work – working in the Catholic health environment allows you to live more fully who you are."

Kate has nothing but praise for all the Sisters who have touched her life. "The mentorship has been invaluable, although at times I thought they kind of picked on me to be honest." But their gentle nudging into leadership and further training enkindled profound learning and motivation.

"A life-changing, ah-ha moment came when at a leadership training program one of the Sisters asked us to write our own eulogy. I thought about what I wanted people to say about me, something good, not frivolous things. If this is what I want them to say, how do I now do it?"

This was a defining moment when Kate set a plan in place to make her mark.

"I had taken on a motto from one of the Sisters years earlier, 'God helps those who help themselves', which has always motivated me to work hard, set goals, and to achieve."

During her long career she became the first group-wide Chief Nursing Officer for St John of God Health Care, Clinical Associate Professor of Nursing at the Australian Catholic University, a member of the Barwon Health Ethics Committee,

"Never forget to make that special human interaction with patients."

– Kate Birrell

awarded an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in 2015, and provides consulting services as a Nursing Development Program Advisor to the Social Outreach International Health team.

She was instrumental in initiating the CHA Nurse Unit Manager Scholarship Program, the CHA Nursing and Midwifery Symposium, the CHA Nursing Awards, has been a member of the Australian College of Nursing since 2012 and before that the Royal College of Nursing Australia.

Her strongest advice to those starting out is 'never forget to make that special human interaction with patients'.

"You can get so busy, but should never lose that personal touch with patients and their family."

"Technology can take over so it's important to make sure you are not too focused on machinery."

"Also love your work. You need to be able to love it, find joy at work, because when you love it, oh how easy it is to do a good job."

While there have been a great many profound experiences along Kate's half-century journey, none are more precious than the moments shared with a patient at the end of their life.

"Being with a person at the time of their death is a sacred privilege. Religious or not, this time calls into question your own humanity. The feeling and profound impact doesn't change. The first death is confronting, and it feels the same each time years later. Even when my mother died, I was overwhelmed with the same feeling I have with my patients."

"At the time of death you are very still in the moment, you pause, and reflect. There's life and there's death. In between these two, you only have time, so must use it wisely."

And Kate has certainly done that... touching the lives of so many patients and families at their most vulnerable and leaving a lasting impression on colleagues and all who encounter her compassion, energy, intellect and readiness for fun and laughter.

There doesn't appear to be any sign of Kate slowing down. Kate is a Trustee Board Member of Calvary Ministries, on the Mercy Health Board Quality Committee, Nursing Advisor to the St John of God International Health Nursing Development Program in East Timor, which she was instrumental in establishing, and Barwon Health Geelong (public hospital) Human Research Ethics Committee member.



Catherine (Kate) Birrell OAM receiving the Sr Maria Cunningham Award 2018 for Lifetime Contribution.

"It's not easy to change overnight but we must be prepared to change..."

— Kate Birrell

"It's an exciting time in the Church, with more laity involved in the development of the ministry, and I want to be a thoughtful contributor. I want to respect and understand the past and plan for the future of patients."

So what kept Kate ticking along, achieving and influencing the lives of so many health practitioners and families, while raising three 'great' sons?

A very supportive and cooperative husband named Les she says, also 'a love and passion for learning and educating', and an unflinching spirit for 'raising the bar on patient care'.

"It is an exciting time in health care, research in particular with advances in so many areas of health," Kate says.

"Our work must continue to make reference to the poor and needy and looking after those less advantaged. Through my work with SJOG in Timor, mentoring Dilli hospital's Director of Nursing, I hope to be a part of that change."

"They are so hungry to learn, it's fantastic," she says, "seeing them and their standards of care grow is very satisfying."

"With technology and pharmacology rapidly changing, we must innovate how we provide care in the community and in their homes. "We need to engage with our academic organisations to ensure preparation of practitioners fits the need we will be encountering."

"It's not easy to change overnight but we must be prepared to change and not stay cemented in a model that may not be in step with patient need and expectation."

"We need to be brave about change."

