

A WORD FROM THE CEO/PRINCIPAL

Dear Friends

I hope this latest edition of Mater Dei Matters finds you healthy and enjoying another wonderful year. This year is a very special year in our history as Mater Dei celebrates 50 years as a special school. The Good Sams are also celebrating a special birthday in 2007 as this year is the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Good Samaritan Order and so a year of celebration is currently underway. While our 50th birthday is an important milestone in the life of our community, we would also like to make our fifty year celebrations a significant memory for our students. It is for this reason that we are planning a Mater Dei birthday party, to be held in September, to coincide with our feast day and provide a truly memorable experience for our students. Throughout this very special year we are also hoping to celebrate the work and the wonderful contribution of all of those who have been a part of the Mater Dei community over the past fifty years.

The Sisters of the Good Samaritan began their ministry on the Mater Dei property in 1910, with the relocation of their Sydney orphanage to the much healthier country environment of Camden. This was a tremendously insightful move on the part of the Sisters as it not only provided a very valuable service to people in genuine need but it also provided children with the opportunity to enjoy the many benefits of a healthy country life. In 1956, the then Bishop of Wollongong, Thomas McCabe, approached the Sisters to consider a change of ministry on the Mater Dei property. Bishop McCabe asked the Sisters to begin a school for handicapped girls as the Catholic Bishops recognized this as a huge area of need. The Sisters graciously agreed to the Bishop's request and Mater Dei Special School was established in 1957.

The process of transitioning Mater Dei from an orphanage to a special school must have been a very painful time for the Sisters as they saw the children they had cared for and loved moved to different institutions around the state. At the same time, the Order needed to build capacity in the care of young girls with intellectual disability and the relatively new area of special education. The Good Sams dealt with this new challenge in the same way that they have dealt with the many challenges they have faced in their ministry to the poor and marginalized. They worked with

compassion, professionalism and great dedication in the education and care of the children entrusted to their care. The Sisters provided 24 hour a day care, 7 days a week for most of the year, with many students only returning home during the Christmas holidays. The Sisters would certainly have needed a holiday themselves at the end of the school year.

On my arrival as CEO/Principal at Mater Dei in 2001, I had the privilege and opportunity of spending some time talking to Sr Mary Gregory. Sr Mary was the first principal appointed to Mater Dei Special School. A part of Sr Mary's brief was the relocation of the orphans to institutions around the state and the enrolment of girls with intellectual disability. One can only imagine the trepidation the Sisters must have felt with the arrival of girls with intellectual disability and the stress experienced as they

new initiative has grown an excellent residential care program, consisting of four cottages in the community. The Family Resource & Residential Program, as it is now known, provides excellent education, care and a warm environment that nurtures the development of each of the students enrolled in the program.

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The success and reputation of Mater Dei continued to grow and, in response to overwhelming demand, the Sisters accepted the first boys into the school program in 1979. This was another great innovation and one that has seen Mater Dei grow in both student numbers and capacity. The establishment of the Bethany Early Intervention Service in 1993, under the leadership of Mrs Sue Dixon, Mater Dei's first lay principal, further extended the services of the organization. Bethany provides therapy, education and support to families with babies and young children who have been diagnosed with developmental delay.

Since 1957 Mater Dei has grown from a community of 5 staff and approximately 60 students to 68 staff members who educate 158 students and young children throughout its programs.

Mater Dei today is a place of great joy and happiness with current staff remaining faithful to the original vision of the Good Sams who established this wonderful facility. For me the proof of the pudding is the smiles on the faces of our students as they strive to be the best people that they can be and the gratitude of the parents whom we try to support and who support us so warmly. Mater Dei is a special place and one that continues to provide a valuable service to the education community in general. More importantly, Mater Dei is a positive agent of change in building a more inclusive world and that is the reason the Mater Dei story continues.

I wish you and your families every blessing in this very special year in the life of the Good Samaritan Sisters and in the life of Mater Dei.



Frank Pitt and Sr Mary Gregory, Foundation Principal of Mater Dei Special School, with some of the Mater Dei students who are looking forward to the Mater Dei birthday party to be held in September.

were asked to work in areas that they had neither experience nor expertise. As we look back on the achievements of the Sisters we can only be filled with great admiration at the spirit, the tenacity and the faith shown in the face of great hardship and very little funding. This truly is a case of humble beginnings and great things being achieved.

The Good Sams were not content to rest on their laurels in the provision of excellent special education. With the changing culture in the area of disability, largely as a response to the Normalization Movement of the 1960's, the Sisters recognized that they needed to move away from an institutional model of care and they established their first residential cottage in 1972. This was quite a radical step and one that again caused great hardship and upheaval for the school, the families and the Sisters. However from this

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