

Special Religious Education

A Ministry of Good News and Hope

by Alison Newell, Diocesan Coordinator, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine

Religious faith groups play an important and fundamental role in the fabric of society in Australia. Faith as a source of spiritual well-being provides nourishment and growth at an individual level and at a school and community level.

The NSW Government recognises the value of religious education in the public school system. Enshrined in the NSW Education Act 1990, Special Religious Education (SRE) supports freedom of religion and conscience in the NSW public school system and has done so for over 140 years.

Catholic parents or carers voluntarily enrol their children into Catholic SRE classes. This is an act of faith and a request from the families to the parishes for support in the faith education of their children. Many of these families also present to the parish for Sacramental programs which provides a further opportunity for parish engagement with parishioners whose children attend public schools.

Michael and Ashlee Donnelly, a Catholic family from the Northern Beaches have three children enrolled

in Catholic SRE at their local public school and have this to say about Catholic SRE:

"The benefits of Special Religious Education in our state schools ensures families like us who for whatever reason selected a state primary school, are not disadvantaged when it comes to learning the foundations and values of the Catholic faith," they said.

"As parents we are grateful for these weekly lessons as we believe they provide age-appropriate extensions of what is taught in the local parish and what is reflected and discussed in the home environment.

"It also enables our children to come together once a week with a different group of peers that they can relate, engage and share valuable lessons with."

Michael and Ashlee applaud the choice they are given to provide their children with religious education in the public school system:

"As a family, we feel strongly about being given a choice for our children to further their understanding of 'specialised' education like religion and ethics within the school environment. The delivery of lessons is always engaged by passionate



The Donnelly kids attend a public school.

volunteers who genuinely care about being the best version of themselves and positively project these universal life values and lessons onto our children.

Having this opportunity to learn to be a 'good human' from a young age, plants quality seeds within our children which can grow to be life changing in the future."

SRE is a free service to families of faith whose children attend public schools. One hundred Providers of SRE of all religious faiths authorise and train volunteers to go into schools and teach children in the faith of their families. The SRE program enhances the spiritual tapestry of our nation and contributes greatly towards a culture of tolerance, respect, harmony, and an understanding that, in Australia, we are free to choose, to be educated and to practice our faith. It also provides students with a safe environment to explore questions of identity and faith.

Enquiries about the Ministry of SRE can be made with Alison Newell, CCD Diocesan Coordinator on 02 8379 1637.

Every year, Pastoral Works Broken Bay (PWBB) supports CCD on their efforts to train catechists to provide religious education in State Schools.

Please keep the CCD team in your prayers and give generously to our PWBB May Appeal.



The Donnelly family says SRE is important for their family.

Being the face of God in the unknown

“The Catholic Chaplaincy team became our spiritual family,” says Eleanor, who accompanied her husband, Jonathan in the final months and weeks of his life at Royal North Shore Hospital. “When you have a loved one who is very unwell, the outside world keeps moving but inside the hospital it feels like a different world, and it’s not a place you want to be ... but the Pastoral Care team would come and uplift us. The comfort they brought was beautiful. At the end of every visit they would say, ‘God bless you’ and we really felt it.”

Various members of the Catholic Chaplaincy team would visit Jonathan and Eleanor during their time at Royal North Shore Hospital, including priests, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and Pastoral Care Practitioner, Louise. “Louise was an important part of our spiritual journey,” says Eleanor.

Jonathan was first diagnosed in 2019 and when they filled out the hospital paperwork, Eleanor recalls having the option of being visited by the Pastoral Care team. “I grew up Catholic and my husband was baptised Mormon, but he went to the Catholic Church when he moved to Australia, so it made sense to receive pastoral care from the Catholic Church.”

Eleanor says that at a basic level, the pastoral care visits meant that they weren’t just staring at four walls. “It meant a lot to have someone who wasn’t directly in our circle to come in,” says Eleanor. “Every time they left, we experienced a good, uplifting feeling. It was as if we had a new lease of life to get back on the saddle. They were patient, kind, empathetic and compassionate.”

It was a condition of the hospital that children could not enter the haematology ward where Jonathan

was receiving care. “With three children under the age of 12, that was really hard,” says Eleanor.

Without Jonathan’s immediate family by his side, Eleanor describes clinging to their ‘hospital family’ that was made up of doctors, nurses and other patients, and the Pastoral Care team that formed their ‘spiritual family.’

Louise says that she would always come away from a visit with Jonathan and Eleanor feeling enriched by their faith and their witness. “They were a beacon to us of what family life is, of what faith is and what hope is,” says Louise. “They were a couple very much in love. You’d walk in and they’d be radiating this joy and peace. I understand the role that we became in being a spiritual family to them, but equally they ministered to us by being who and how they are.”

Louise describes her work with patients and their families as a ministry of the unknown. “On a daily basis, a patient’s condition can change. Depending on how the patient is that day, they may or may not be in a position to want to talk. You’re entering a sacred space, a space where someone is very, very unwell and no one knows what the outcome is.”

Louise says that she relies on the patient to lead how her time with them will flow. “If a patient is comfortable with you, then you find that they share with you what is going on for them, not only physically but in their home life and spiritually. We take a very holistic approach.”

During her visits with Jonathan and Eleanor, Louise says that much of the time was spent sitting, listening and reflecting on what was going on for them. “I’d ask what they would like prayers for, and they liked it when I prayed,” says Louise. “I went in to serve and to wait on them. This is a



Jonathan, Eleanor and family.

ministry of being the servant. In *Dead Man Walking*, Sr Helen Prejean said, ‘I will be the face of God for you,’ and that is how I see my role.”

For Eleanor and Jonathan, pastoral care helped them spiritually, emotionally and mentally, and Eleanor describes it as the push they needed to go forward.

“My husband would always say that when he gets better, he would like to provide pastoral care for others. Unfortunately, he didn’t make it and passed away in July 2022. He was 39 years old.”

Eleanor has since completed the Diocesan Pastoral Care Course and has plans to volunteer at Royal North Shore and Mona Vale Hospitals in the future. “I would like to pay forward that feeling of hope,” says Eleanor. “I know the struggles, but I also know the joy and the hope that comes with receiving this support.”

For more information about this program please call 1800 324 924, email info@catholiccaresdbb.org.au or visit www.catholiccaresdbb.org.au.

Pastoral Works Broken Bay, the pastoral charity of our Catholic community supports CatholicCare’s Hospital Chaplaincy & Pastoral Care program detailed in this article. We are extremely grateful for your ongoing support.