

## People Stories

By Nicola Kalmar

### Sr Patricia Rhatigan AO SSJG

For Sr Pat Rhatigan SSJG, the long and spiritual road of sisterhood has led to a journey of faith, sacrifice and self discovery. Newly celebrating her golden jubilee as a Sister of St John of God, Sr Pat is relishing her current mission to help others search for answers in their own lives.

Since humbly making her vows in Derby at the tender age of 16, Sr Pat reflects on her fifty years of service, acknowledging her anniversary as a "privilege".

"It's startling to have come this far, but it's because of lots of support from friends who have been an influence throughout my journey," she says.

Born and raised in the Kimberley, Sr Pat spent much of her childhood moving to different towns, including Derby and Beagle Bay. But her spiritual story began in Broome where she was introduced to the Sisters of St John of God, and became involved with their work at the local convent.

"I was attracted to the idea of working with Aboriginal people, and in an apostolate of service."

Having left school, aged 14, Sr Pat enrolled in business college and confirmed her decision to join the Sisters. As part of her formation, Sr Pat assisted with teaching pupils at St Mary's school. It was there that she discovered her passion for education.

"It was wonderful to teach the children. My role was to inspire and encourage them," she says.

Despite her youth, Sr Pat had faith in her vocation.

"I entered at 16 but I was mature for my age," she recalls.

After three years of training, Sr Pat made her vows aged 19. She compares her vocation to the precious sacraments of marriage or priesthood, and the significance of re-committal.

"You make your vows for life, and renew them throughout the different stages," she says.

Sr Pat continued along the path of education, and earned degrees in primary and secondary teaching. Her range of educational roles led her to become the foundation Regional Officer for the Catholic Education Office in Broome. In 2006, she completed her study for her doctorate at the University of Notre Dame.

Two years later, Sr Pat was "thrilled" to receive the award of Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia, signifying her continuous involvement in Aboriginal education.

Currently, Sr Pat's focus is at the SSJG Heritage Centre, immersing herself in the quest to reunite local Kimberley people with their past.



Photo: CAS

"We have a wonderful new archive building that allows the preservation of archives and storytelling," she says.

Sifting through a myriad of photographs and documents dating from as far back as the 1920's, Sr Pat and her team of volunteers dedicate their time to researching, scanning and filing in the hope of unearthing much sought after answers for Kimberley families regarding their history.

"The old convent, and its exhibition, tells a story highlighting the relationship between the Sisters and the Kimberley community." Through this cleverly designed Relationships Exhibition the story will be told for generations to come.

"With permission, we have the opportunity to record and update files of individuals and invite families to view these photographs. It's about filling in the gaps."

"Kimberley people have spread far and wide and when they are able to visit the Heritage Centre there is a chance for them to find their story and their identity," she says. "If you lose the story, you lose the lesson of the future. We must honour and learn from the past and proudly walk into the future."

Sr Pat believes the support in offering families the opportunity to hear their story is an important part of the reconciliation process.