

SR CAROLE McDONALD

An Unconventional Life

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I grew up in Geelong, and after spending my entire school life at SHC with the Sisters of Mercy and a year of pre-teacher training at a local State school, I entered the Mercy Novitiate at Rosanna. I could say I've been blessed to have spent close to 58 years from my initial formation to the present time. The Mercy Sisters who taught me were an important influence on my life, both as happy fulfilled women and in their teaching of the Faith. Though I have forgotten much of what I learnt at school, I have always remembered the day that a very old Sister Mary Madeleine talked to us in Grade 6 about Catherine McAuley, her life up to and including founding the Congregation.

My life as a Sister of Mercy took the usual course of initial formation, then teacher training followed by many years as a primary school teacher and principal in several different Melbourne schools. I was also Principal of St Thomas Aquinas Norlane in the 1960's and taught one of SHC's former Principals, Jeff Burn.

I was very happy as I loved teaching and working with children, parents and teachers. However in the mid eighties, I felt called to work overseas with refugees and so began 12 years of working in refugee camps and detention centres in four different South East Asian countries. I also visited refugee camps in other countries, including Ethiopia and Uganda in Africa. I could talk for a long time about these experiences and the people I met and loved, which somehow changed my life, but I will not spend too long about this time except that the experience changed my life and my view of the world.

I want to tell you two stories which led me to become involved in the issue of trafficking of human beings, which is an issue I've been working to address for the past seven years.

During my first time overseas, I went to Pulau Bidong, a tiny island off the East coast of Malaysia in the South China Sea. It is only a speck in the ocean, but was one of the main destinations of the Vietnamese boat people and I lived there for six years. Many boats arrived each week, often two or three a day, but some were attacked by Thai fishermen-turned-pirates and others were lost in the heavy seas during the monsoon season.

For my first three years, I organised a high school for children from 12 to 18 years. Sister Joan Campbell, another Geelong person looked after the primary-aged children. Many of the students were unaccompanied minors; about 700 in the camp at any one time. In my final three years, I worked as a social worker looking after these unaccompanied children. It involved ensuring that the children were living with adults who would keep an eye out for them and make sure they ate regularly – food was scarce and poor quality, but it kept their body and soul together. I also listened to their problems and tried to sort out their difficulties, and helped to prepare them for interviews with immigration and the United Nations (UN).

One day I was sitting in my office with an interpreter with other helpers present when a woman walked in looking very disoriented. I asked my interpreter to find out how I could be of help and subsequently the story unfolded. On her way by boat to Pulau Bidong with her husband and four children, their boat had been stopped by Thai pirates who boarded, took her two daughters aged 13 and 14 onto their boat and then threatened to slit the throat of her four year old son if she didn't also go with them. Eventually the other Vietnamese prevailed on the pirates to show mercy and she, her sons and husband were left to continue the journey. Although the UN people tried to find the young girls in Thailand, they have never been seen since, and were presumed to have been sold to work in a brothel somewhere. This woman was deeply traumatised and said she never slept and was just wandering around the island aimlessly. Soon after this meeting, the UN arranged for the family to be resettled in the US. I've often wondered over the past twenty years or so what happened to her and her family.

Another story with a different ending and on a different boat was when a 9 or 10 year old girl was among those taken by the pirates to a brothel in Bangkok. This time the UN found her and brought her to the island. Unfortunately the shock had been so horrific for the little girl she was not able to speak. Before long the US Government

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removed her from the camp and one hopes the child received the psychological help she needed to recover.

I do not know how many more people were sold into brothels in Thailand, but I do know that many of the young beautiful girls were coerced into prostitution in the camps by the local guards and police. It was a form of trafficking in that the children had no possibility of refusing. Often left carrying a child, they were then rejected and left to fend for themselves.

On my return to Australia, I was shocked in 2005 to discover that trafficking was a global crime and that particularly in Europe and the US, children and women were the main people being trafficked. Although now we have become much more aware of what is happening in Australia, where young women brought from Asia to work in our brothels or as trafficked labour to work in restaurants, on farms, building sites and even nail parlours.