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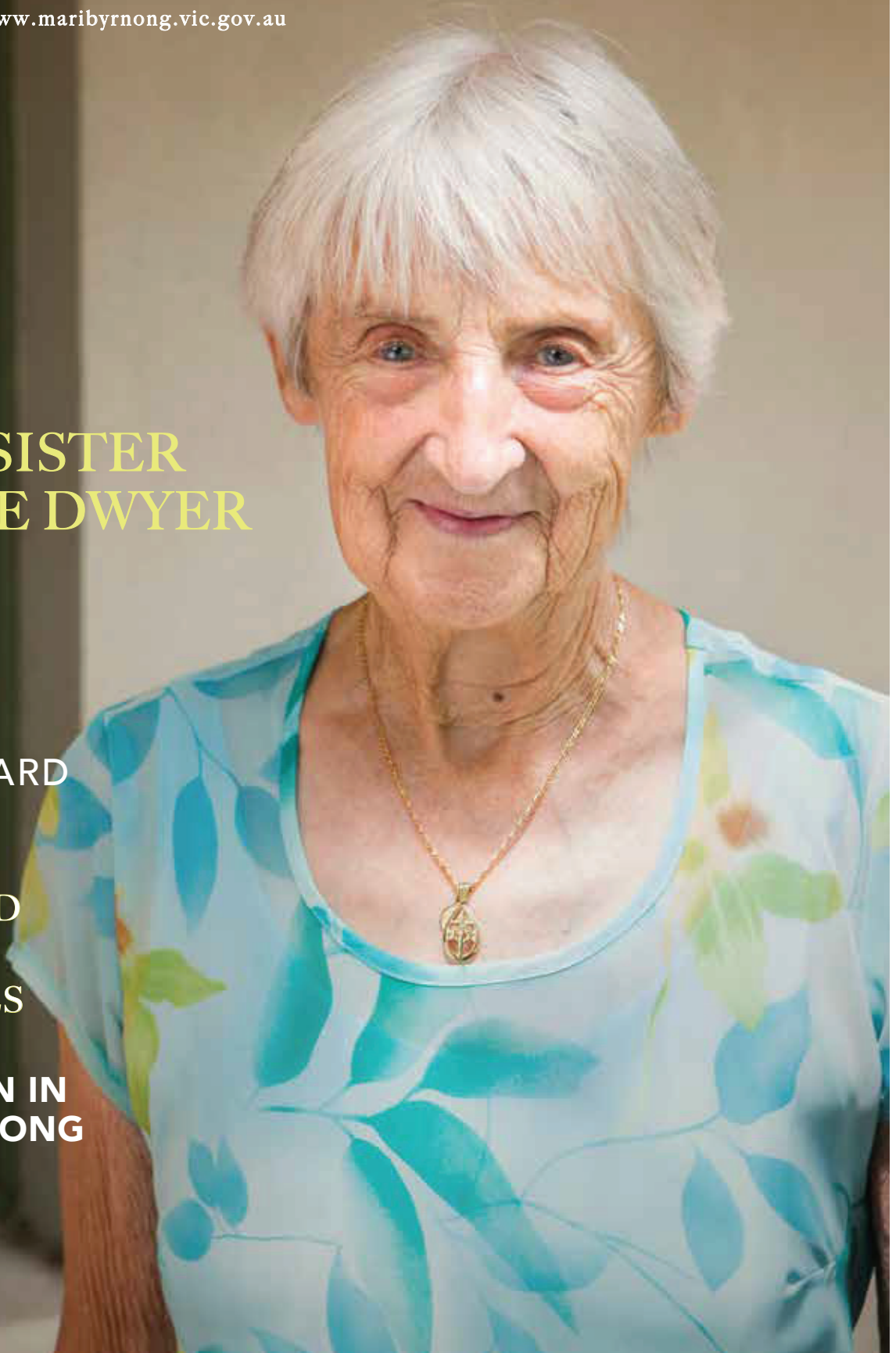
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MEET SISTER JEANNE DWYER

OUR 2018
CIVIC AWARD
WINNERS

FOOD AND
COMEDY
FESTIVALS

WHAT'S ON IN
MARIBYRNONG



TENDING THE WESTERN FIELDS



Small of frame but big of heart, Sr Jeanne Dwyer offers comfort and counselling to families affected by drug abuse in the west through Joseph's Corner, a charitable organisation that operates in Yarraville, Hoppers Crossing and Laverton.

Sr Jeanne Dwyer first made friends in the West in the 1960s, when she knocked on doors to welcome newly arrived Italian and Maltese families to Australia.

She was there when these families rolled up their sleeves and dug the foundations of churches like St Mary's in Altona North, connecting to the community through their churches.

“I always knew the richness of the people here, I think they really contributed to the development of the whole area of the western suburbs,” Sr Jeanne says with respect.

It was during this time that she shared the lives of Catholics and non-Catholics alike, visiting high schools and technical schools as a representative of the Catholic Education Office, promoting catechism.

She recognised the families of the west as battlers and weighed in to give them a fighting chance when drug abuse became a high profile problem in Footscray about 18 years ago.

“I went to this meeting, it was just on drugs and they were all saying this and that and I said ‘well, what can we do about it?’” Sr Jeanne remembers.

The suggestion at the time was to provide a space, one day a week, to provide counselling for family members who were affected by drug abuse of someone close to them. Sr Jeanne was nominated to run the program but wasn't given any further financial support.

She called on friends and family to clean up and fix the roof of the space that had been a former metal shop class for high school students at St Augustine's in Yarraville.

To fund the time of a counsellor, Sr Jeanne raffled a stolen bike.

“There was a person I knew who had found this bike and it was a stolen so we took it to the police. They kept it for a certain time and they said: no one has come to claim it, do you want it?”

“It was a push bike, an old push bike so I advertised it as being a stolen bike and put it up for raffle – people were very good and they bought tickets and bit by bit we got

the money to pay for a counsellor.”

Sr Jeanne has relied on similar co-incidences – or shall we call them ‘God-incidences’ – to establish further counselling sites in Hoppers Crossing and Laverton.

The Laverton site offered to Sr Jeanne was an ‘awful’ army shelter that was in a state of disrepair.

“I thought, I am not going and then a fellow from the Commonwealth Bank rang me and asked if I had any voluntary jobs for them, I said: I do, but I don't think you'll want it.

“He came down and had a look and said: Yes, this is just what we are looking for and they spent months and months with their wives and friends fixing the place up.”

“So that's the way I have survived, by the grace of God,” she smiles.

The assistance she receives is voluntary. At present she's looking for a secretary, a permanent room where a family can stay for a weekend to escape violence, someone to offer a cup of tea once a week to those who need a chat and help with the rental of the Joseph's Corner shop.

She is driven in her tireless fund raising by the relief she brings to families.

“If you think about it for yourself, if there's someone you come home to every night who is saying you

are no good, that you are not pleasing this person, if there's verbal abuse or physical abuse, people get very desperate and they feel very alone.

“They don't talk a lot because they feel they don't want to talk about their families that way. But then they get so down that they have got to do something and that is quite often where we meet them.”

She grew up on a farm in Port Fairy, Victoria and was one of seven children. She decided to join the Sisters of St Joseph at the age of 20. She had studied teaching before this and as part of her work with the order she travelled rural Victoria meeting families that were isolated. It was during this time that she promised that if ever anyone offered a cup of tea, she would sit down and spend time with that person.

Her compassion and willingness to listen is a reflection of her order that was founded by Australia's first Saint Mary McKillop. Over time her focus shifted from visiting families isolated in rural Victoria to those newly arrived to the western suburbs of Melbourne when she joined the Catholic Education Office and has worked in the west ever since.

Sr Jeanne Dwyer is Maribyrnong City Council's Citizen of the Year 2018.