

Dear Sisters and Associates,

My first contact with the DMJs was late in the 60s to 70s when my Son John started school. Sr. Mary Andrew and Sr. Mary Pauline were teachers in the Catholic Primary school in New Addington at that time.

I first met Sr. Joan in the late 80s when she came to visit me as she had heard that my husband was in hospital. When I later heard that she was ill, I called at the Convent with a plant. She rang to thank me and I told her I had just had a call from the hospital to say that my husband had taken a turn for the worse. Sr. Joan quickly arranged for someone to take me to the hospital, and so started a great friendship that lasted till her death 20 years later.

At that time Sr. Joan had started a 'soup run' to Queen's Gardens in Croydon. She soon had me with her on that and, with a few friends, we started making sandwiches in my kitchen. When later the Sandwich-making moved to the Convent in Montacute Road, Sr. Mary Andrew would cook the eggs and grate cheese and have everything ready for us each Thursday.... nor will I forget Sr. Mary Andrews trips to the Charity Shop at least once a day buying little bits and pieces for next to nothing, which she would then insist on selling to us at double the price, so that by Christmas she would have saved enough money to buy socks, gloves and scarves for the men and of course she always did! She was wonderful, and so amusing!



Helping Sr. Joan over the years we would have many a laugh, and often cry too, and have endless stories to recount. We often worked well into the late evenings, delivering furniture, sometimes pushing great big chairs up three flights of stairs!

From the start we were inspired by her compassion and drive. With more people wanting to help, this in time led to our taking soup and sandwiches, blankets and clothes each Thursday to 'Cardboard City in Waterloo. I will never forget that first encounter when I saw cardboard boxes begin to move. I thought it must be boxes left over from market day, till I saw people emerging from them - from that moment I knew that I wanted to help even more.

Christmas was coming and the cold winter months, and we were offered the use of an old warehouse in Croydon, so with the help of David Carroll, a local Anglican, Sister and myself got to work and soon had the warehouse in good shape. We were given 28 beds from the Army Barracks and I can confirm that making up 28 beds was a back-breaking exercise! As news of our work spread, people began offering help. M & S would give us food, and the Government offered us financial help for every person we took in. When the temperature dropped below freezing, then the work really began. Sr. Ettie made pots of stew, Noreen O'Sullivan made soup, which She carried on doing for the next 27 years. I cooked the Christmas dinner that year for about 30 people. Everybody helped and it was a very happy Christmas for all. It was during that first Christmas Day that the Bishop of Croydon came to visit us and asked Sr. Joan, who was sitting mending jeans for one young man, if that was how she always spent Christmas Day. I can't remember her answer but I know it would have been funny.

The Bishop was very interested and in what we were doing, and this led to other Croydon Churches getting involved with donations and food. We found by then that we had accumulated quite a bit of money, so we offered it back to the churches, but they said NO' and that is how we managed to buy our first minibus. The trouble then was how did we continue to fund it? At first we rattled boxes in Croydon and Bromley, but that was not a great success. So then Sister started giving talks at local schools and churches and anywhere people would listen, and somehow we managed to keep going.

I remember one trip back from the Cash & Carry, and we had just £3 of the £30 we started out with left in our kitty. We discussed our concerns as to whether, looking ahead, we were going to have enough money to continue. Sister said "If the Good Lord wants us to go on, He will show us the way". With the remaining £3 Sister then went to get some milk and just as she left the shop a lady from a nearby bakers shouted to her 'You are just the one I want to see'. She said they had had a raffle and presented her with, guess what, yes £30!! We had a good laugh over that for many years! The Lord was telling us we must carry on and we had our answer! Christmas was always a busy time for us. We would wrap about 250 parcels and Sister would dress up as Father Christmas and Sr. Ettie would make us a great big cake, which went down a treat.

One day Sister rang me and said that a man had called her asking if she would meet him in a hotel in London. So off we went, not knowing where or who we were about to meet. As it turned out we met a very charming man called Michael Kennelly, a business man from Kerry. He told us how he had lost a brother on the streets of London and he wanted to do something in his memory. So he came up with the idea of taking some men to Ireland for a holiday, and he would arrange for us to have a coach at our disposal, and also a nurse. So the next Thursday night Sister went to Waterloo ready with pen and paper and before we knew it we had over forty people wanting to go. Then came all the necessary work organising this! We had to find 40 suits, shirts, pairs of socks, underwear and toiletries, and 40 suitcases! The night before we went about 20 of them came to the Convent for a meal and shower. Michael was in charge of the showers and I had the job of cutting toe nails and hair, whilst Sr. Mary Andrew and Sr. Cathleen cooked them bacon and cabbage. The following morning off we went, the men looking like Bank Managers!

We took them to a Centre in Ballybunion in Kerry where Michael had a group of people waiting to help. A full English breakfast was cooked for them every morning, as well as lunch and dinner, followed by evening entertainment with beer and dancing. In the daytime cars were arranged to take them anywhere they wanted to go. One young man, Dermot, wanted to go to see his mother So Michael said he would take him. We gave him some money to buy a gift for his Mum but, Sadly on arrival at the house, they saw her body just being removed for burial. That was particularly sad, yet Dermot was so grateful to be there because if he had not gone he would not even have known of her death. There were lots of stories like that.

It was whilst we were in Ireland that I got to know Desmond well and chatting with him one day I asked him why he was on the streets. He told me it was 'the devils water'. He had gone out one night and had too much to drink and was too afraid to go home again, and had lost touch with his family. I felt sorry for him and decided when I returned to London I would try and do something about finding his family. I wrote to six parishes in Yorkshire, where

Desmond said he had grown up: as he was the father of seven children, I guessed someone somewhere would have known him! And they did! - Eventually we tracked down one of his sons who still lived in Yorkshire and he sent me some photos of his Dad and family. On Easter Monday Mary Fury and I went up to London and found Desmond in a doorway in Kingsway. When he saw the photos of his family I will never forget the look on his face. He sat bolt upright and asked "Wherever did you get these"? I told him I had been in touch with his son and if he came home with me that night. I would take him up to Yorkshire the next day. On arriving at the son's house, his 13th grandchild had just been born, and, as well, his own wife was there. We returned South without him as his family found a place for him to live nearby. This is one of my happiest memories from our work with the homeless over 26 years.

Sadly, due to illness and also exhaustion from all the preparations, Sr. Joan had been unable to come with us to Ireland. This was a great disappointment to her, and to us, as she would have so enjoyed being with the men she knew so well and had worked so hard for. Needless to say we couldn't wait to get back to tell her about it - So many stories, some funny, and others Sad.

During her last illness Sister asked us, if we could, to continue the work when she was no longer with us and, of course, we agreed. Thankfully, with Sr. Sheila Barrett's interest and support, what Sr. Joan started is continuing, and in fact is from strength to strength. Many local churches continue to support us, so that the work now has an ecumenical dimension. With the closure of the Convent in Montacute Road, a local Anglican church offered us the use of their hall to prepare the sandwiches each week, and to park the minibus there.

I was feeling at a very low ebb after my husband died, and will always be grateful to the DMJs, and especially to Sr. Joan, for encouraging me to become involved in such worthwhile work.

With lasting gratitude,  
Cathy Joyce (Associate)



Anna, Elizabeth and Cathy ready for the soup run.