



MERCY COLLEGE ALUMNI

Where are they now?

Introducing:

Rosalba Houghton nee Smarrelli
Class of 1976 Form 4

Dear Rosalba,

Thank you for sharing your story.

Family, friends, and an insight into
the role of a personal carer.



How did you come to be in this role?



When I left College, I took up a position at Maurice Blackburn Lawyers in Carlton working as a Girl Friday and later progressing to Secretary, or PA, Personal Assistant, as it is known these days. I worked for over 10 years in this position until my husband Michael and I, welcomed into the world, our daughter Louise in 1990 (pictured on the right) and daughter Loretta in 1993.

I recall coming across a CO.AS.IT. (Italcare Home Support Services) job advertisement in September 1997 in the Darebin Leader Newspaper. It stated, "need to speak Italian and have a valid driver's licence." I was interested to know more, so I phoned and arranged an interview time. It was only then that I found out the role entailed caring for elderly Italians in their homes to provide services such as shopping, cleaning and personal care. The role allowed flexibility with working hours, so that ticked another box as it allowed me to work around caring for my young family.



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I felt fortunate and honoured to be offered the role as an Aged Carer and in addition, it felt good to be working again and earning an income after a period of home duties. When I started in the health services industry formal qualifications weren't mandatory. It was in 2003 that qualifications were introduced as a requirement to work in specific industries. Today, qualifications such as Certificate IV in Community Services (Aged Care), First Aid (CPR), Dementia Awareness and Food Handling training are a requirement to take on a role in my capacity.

I love my work because I'm giving back to the elderly Italian community. It's my way of acknowledging their courage to migrate to Australia with little more than their suitcases and a hope to work for a better life in which to raise their families. This connection is a tie to my Italian heritage as a first generation Australian/Italian of parents who embarked on a ship on the long 4-week journey from Italy to Australia in the 1950s.

What individual qualities or characteristics are needed to perform duties in caring for the elderly?

Working with the elderly isn't for everyone because there is a lot of responsibility. It is like looking after your own elderly parents but with an added duty of care; you are working in their home, which you need to respect.

Patience and demonstrating respect are foremost in this role. A great majority of the elderly can have health issues such as Dementia or Alzheimer's which inhibits their ability to communicate. These health conditions can affect their mood and behaviours. Therefore, it is paramount to maintain a high level of patience and understanding to administer the appropriate care.

Compassion and a willingness to help others are strong characteristics that would determine the quality of care and a personal satisfaction in the knowledge that you are assisting the elderly to remain in their homes to keep their independence for as long as possible. Providing personal care; such as showering and dressing, cooking meals and providing social interaction, shopping and running errands becomes a bond of upholding their dignity and pride of place and home.

Given your clientele are elderly, what have been the challenges over the years?

One of the most difficult aspects to deal with is when clients pass away or move into nursing homes. This can be hard emotionally as you build strong, caring relationships both with the client and often their families. My role is to uphold a balance of being sensitive and caring in these delicate situations while maintaining a professional demeanour. My outlet is to seek counsel from my close network of co-workers and friends.

Another challenge was caring for a young man who had Cerebral Palsy as well as caring for his elderly mother. Over 10 years, myself and 5 other carers maintained a roster to care for him until he moved into a nursing home. While the man couldn't speak, had mobility limitations and was wheelchair bound, he found his own way of communicating with his carers. We knew when he was happy, sad or simply needed a hug. He was always smiling and happy to see us. It was extremely hard to adjust when he moved into the home after such a long time caring for both him and his mother.



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We are all affected by the Coronavirus pandemic with the high risk to health and the major impact to our economy. Your role is considered to be an essential service. How has this changed the way in which you interact with your clients to maintain their safety as well as your own?

The Coronavirus Pandemic has certainly changed the way I work with my elderly clients. Social distancing means I can no longer greet my clients with a hug, kiss or shake hands, which is hard as it's a part of the Italian culture.

I now walk into the homes confronting them with the required PPE; face mask, gloves and a disposal apron. At first, most of my clients were quite frightened with the sight of the PPE, but now they understand that it is protecting both them and me. As well as it being awkward and tiresome wearing the PPE to perform my duties, sitting 1.5m away from clients at the kitchen table is difficult especially when some of them have hearing impairments.



Home care has been classified as an essential service. While, I'm most willing to continue working during the pandemic, at the same time I do have my concerns. In particular, during this time of social isolation, I'm worried about both the risk of catching the virus from a client or potentially unknowingly spreading the virus to them.

I have been very careful following hygiene, social isolation and lockdown rules, but at the back of my mind, I have been concerned about opening up the 'isolation bubble' to my clients, as you do not know who has been in their homes or where they have been. I don't want to put my family or my clients at risk. At the end of the day, we are all doing our best to adjust to the 'new normal.'

What are your special memories of College days?

I have many fond memories of my college days.

I would travel to school each morning, on a packed school bus full of young, loud girls. I recall walking up the long footpath to the college gates and quickly checking that I was wearing my hat, gloves and blazer as there was always a figure of authority at the gate waiting to check your uniform. I never wanted to risk being issued with a detention.

I used to enjoy sitting on the school court with my friends at lunchtimes and also enjoyed the ballroom dancing classes, where we learnt traditional dance steps teamed up with the boys from St Joseph's Pascoe Vale and St Joseph's Marist Brothers North Fitzroy. However, I must say I didn't enjoy the school sport's days activities that involved swimming and athletics carnivals. I would always try to find an excuse to get out of attending.

I wasn't the most confident student academically, but I pushed myself to learn, keep up and do my best. The teachers and nuns at the time were there to provide discipline, teach and instill our College values. The values that were taught at Mercy College prepared us for life beyond the school gates and inspired students with the belief that the "the world is your oyster".



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What is it like attending the College reunions?

The Mercy College reunions have allowed my class to reunite and rekindle our friendships. There is a large group of us that connect regularly via Facebook as well as at lunch meetups.

I was nervous attending my first Mercy College reunion. It was nice though, to discover what everyone had been doing post College. We have all grown up and gone down various paths and chosen different careers and it is lovely to know that at this stage of our lives there is a community of friendships and a support network of women in our lives. I feel lucky, as I'm sure others are too, to have this connection as we grow older.

Have you maintained friendships since school days?



I consider myself to be very lucky to have a group of five very special friends (from left - Gianna, Rosalba, Carmel, Maria A, Maria B, Diane) who I've known since Grade 2 in 1968. We each bring different qualities and personalities to our friendship, which makes our friendship very special and unique. The six of us share a very special bond.

I'm extremely proud of my friends. We have experienced life's up and downs and have overcome the various challenges and hurdles thrown at us and celebrated many good times.

We have supported each other through life's stages; careers, marriage, raising children, loss and the many special milestones. I have enjoyed all of our adventures along the way. Our friendships have been filled with so much joy, laughter, tears, wining and dining, travelling and shopping! I look forward to making many more special memories.



On a more personal note, I want to say thank you to two of my friends, Diane and Carmel. They were by my side, during the period my mother's health declined with Dementia.

They were my support when my mother moved into my home for care and were there when she moved into a nursing home and eventually passed away. It was an extremely tough and difficult few years and I could not have done it without the support of my friends and my family.





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I keep a quote in my diary that was in The Messenger of Saint Anthony, Ed January 2016, that our Priest at Holy Name Catholic Church in Reservoir had given me. It was written by John Wesley:

Serve Others:

*Do all the good you can
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can
As long as ever you can.*

Rosalba, your girls, Loretta and Louise have a Mother's Day message for you -

Mum,

You have always been the most selfless person in the world. You have a quiet, caring, yet determined nature that never falters and you have been a constant source of comfort for us.

We grew up knowing we could pursue anything because we have parents who encourage and support us relentlessly.

Your mantra when offering us advice was to ask ourselves if we are happy – this is your compass in life, showing us how to appreciate the small things and to be grateful for what we are blessed to possess.

Your commitment to your work in this time of uncertainty is not a surprise to our family. You have always put the needs of others before your own and we know you are determined to help wherever and however you can.

If we feel down, you support us with that infallible ability you have to pick us up and set us on the right track.

We love how you remind us that there is much to be grateful and happy for in our lives.

We are full of pride and love for you mum!

*Loretta and Louise xo
Mother's Day May 10th 2020*

