

NANCY McDONALD

***STORIES ...
FROM A TWENTIETH
CENTURY LIFE***

Introduced and edited by Carole Hamilton Barwick



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PIRRA CHILDREN'S HOME - LARA, GEELONG

In 1968, after eighteen months as Assistant Matron at Ormond College, Melbourne University, Nancy was offered the position of Superintendent of Pirra Children's Home near Geelong – a facility for up to twenty-four seriously disturbed children aged between 3 years and 18 years, operated by the Victorian Social Welfare Department. She stayed in this position, contributing significantly to the development of the program, in every area from nutrition, education, therapy and recreation, until she retired in 1979. Nancy was the Secretary of the Geelong Branch of the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria throughout the 1980's.

In August 1968, the Master of Ormond College, where I was Assistant Matron, Davis McCaughey asked me to call in and see him. He told me, 'I realise you're 48-years-of-age and I think I should warn you that, at the last Council meeting, they were considering engaging *Nationwide* as caterers for Ormond.' That was understandable because Ormond was expanding significantly. Three new colleges were then under construction, and we already served one thousand meals a day to students and staff. It was a huge business, really. He said, 'You can have all the time you need to consider your position. Your job would not be as vast as it is at the moment, and probably would not include the luxury flat you have within the college. So you may need to think.' I walked down the steps to Ormond, pretty chuffed I must say, because it was the first time I'd really received the sack in my life. I thought, 'Blow this! I'm not going in to lunch. It can run itself.' The head waitress was a very efficient, competent person. I'll go down and have lunch at the Myer Mural Hall, which had just recently opened.

As I stepped off the tram at the post office, I bumped into Bill Hughes, who was then a senior social worker at the Social Welfare Department. He'd been a social worker for the Red Cross when I was there. 'Good heavens, I've been trying to ring you all morning to find out where you were. I knew you were back from Tasmania and I've got just the job for you; at Pirra Children's Home in Lara.' We had lunch together and he explained that it was the superintendent of the Children's Home, which occupied a lovely old house at Lara. I said, 'I know it well. I've stayed there on occasion, when the Mendelssohn's owned it; Edna Mendelssohn was a great friend of mine. My aunt tells me that my grandmother was born there.'

He arranged for me to have an interview at Head Office and I was interviewed by Bill Hughes, Pat McPherson, who had been Acting Superintendent, and Albert Booth

who was the Director of Social Welfare, a very fine man. Pat was there to explain the workings of the home. It was for twenty-four, mostly disturbed, children who needed remedial care. A great deal needed to be done and it would be a challenge. Mr Booth asked me, 'If you had a child who refused to get out of bed in the morning, how would you deal with it?' I replied, 'How many children are there?' When he said, 'Twenty-four'. I responded, 'Then there are twenty-four different ways.' At that he told me, 'You've got the job. It's yours if you want it.'

Pat explained what the term, 'emotionally disturbed child' meant. She said, 'We have orphans, we have adoption break-downs and children from foster care placements, which they are not prepared to accept, or try another foster family. Large families cannot cope, mostly financially and there's no government help.' They already had members of families of ten, fifteen and later we had one from seventeen. She outlined the story of a girl, who at fifteen years of age was the eldest in a family of eleven. She had been at school one day in three, over a period of two years. The mother had a two-year-old and a baby. It had been arranged for her to come to Pirra, in order to go to school from Monday to Friday and she could go home at the weekends. But Pat had decided that she could have one weekend in four at Pirra where she could be a child and be herself instead of looking after children.

Pat McPherson was an exceptional person. She was nearly 60, had really not worked in her life; she had gone to Pirra when there was an appeal for voluntary assistance two years before. There'd been a great upset and turmoil and staff left and they appealed for people to come out and help. She came for a day and stayed for two years. She loved the children and they loved her greatly. After the turmoil, when the superintendent left, the children said to her, 'We'll do everything we can to help and we won't run away', which was unusual and for two years, not one child had taken off even from school.

I went down to see Pirra during the holidays to make a final decision. It was at Lara on the plains, north of Geelong. There were two big old houses and a stone church that had been there for a hundred years, and some families that had been there for almost a hundred years and they were the elite. I had been there for three years and when they found that my grandmother had been born in that house, I was invited out to afternoon tea. The Brotherhood of St. Lawrence had recently built an old age settlement there also.

I drove in the front gate, which was off its hinges and propped against an ornamental rock. The driveway curved round to the back of the house. On the right hand side, there was about an acre of thick succulents and cacti. Eventually when they cleared that area, they killed about twelve snakes. The snakes weren't mentioned in the interview. Pirra had its own brand of tiger snakes! To the right of the drive there was an old tennis court, where the buffalo grass lawns were six inches high. Every bed of the four-acre garden was surrounded by a thick 'hedge', of agapanthus that had been planted eighty years before. It was really spectacular when in bloom, but a wonderful snail harbour! My heart sank. I drove around to the front of the house. It was a lovely spring day and I looked across at the You Yangs and that decided me. It was a spectacular view and a beautiful old house.

Pat made a cup of tea and we sat down in what they termed the TV room, which was the old dining room. She said, 'I know you've worked in a boarding school, and with

handicapped children in England, but you won't be prepared, I don't think you would have met the type of child that we have here. Many are malnourished when they come here, many have been greatly physically abused and some have been in up to eight to twelve placements in their lives. They've been in babies' homes, foster homes, children's homes and they've learnt not to trust anyone. There's one way through and that's loving them and letting them know that they're loved. You've got to be firm to a point that you hate yourself, but you can't say no and not mean it.'

It was very good advice. I told her, 'You've sold me the job.' I'd already made up my mind, really. As I was driving home in my little blue Mini, I pulled up at Little River for nostalgic reasons, as it was the original family-landing place. I thought to myself, 'How am I going to deal with this?' I thought to myself the first thing I'm going to have to do, is to have empathy, to put myself, with every decision I make, in the child's shoes. If I can, I'll try to look at it from their point of view; how it's going to affect them, and make the first aim and object, the welfare of the child.

I'd found previously in some places I'd worked in, that they were run for the welfare of the employees; the children just fitted in. I wanted to make life, if possible, as happy and varied for the children under my care, as the wonderfully happy home and childhood I'd had. You realise when you've had a happy childhood, how much other kids miss out. I determined that I would have to stick up for what I wanted to do. I made a resolve, to see if every child could reach its full capacity in some shape or form. Actually, Mr Booth had said to me, 'If you go there, the sky's the limit. You do what you want to do and if I don't disagree, I'll support you in every way, if I feel it's in the interest of the child. You've got a free hand to do what you want to do.' And he told me afterwards that he'd turned around to Bill Hughes and said, 'I'd like to be a fly on the wall when she sorts the staff out.'

Down I went to Pirra with my two Siamese cats, Anna and Alfred, who had to be fitted into the pattern too. That day the bus was going up to Melbourne, to collect the kids for the beginning of term, from the Spencer Street Station. I said to Pat, 'I think it would be a good idea if went up in the bus.' She swallowed hard and said afterwards that her heart had dropped. But she agreed. So up we went with Mr Driver, to Spencer Street Station in the old green bus.

The children arrived over a period of about an hour and two of them said, 'We want to go to the toilet.' They were rather spritely fourteen year-olds. And I said, 'No, you've come to the bus. You sit here.' 'But what if we wet our pants?' I said, 'That'll be unfortunate.' So we set off and the first Shell Service Station, I said to Mr Driver, 'Would you stop.' 'We have plenty of petrol.' 'No, the girls want to go to the toilet.' So we pulled up and I said, 'If you want to go to the toilet, you can go now.' Their faces fell, but they realised they had to save face. One of them said to me, some time afterwards, they had said, 'She's going to be tough but fair.'

Then I had the staff to assess. We had Mrs Rose, a superb cook who lived ten minutes up the road and looked after her own brood of five children. In all the twelve and a half years at Pirra, she did not produce anything but a first class meal. And our weekend cook, Laura Bates was her equal. She was marvellous with the children and was assisted on two days, by Flo Swanson, our laundress. Who dealt with a huge washing load in four days, plus being a wonderful considerate friend to the children, particularly the sad and the lonely, who would sit on a stool in the laundry

and chat for hours. And she also, if we had young ones, loved to have the baby of the household, crawling around in his playpen, which was a great help.

It was a commercial laundry set-up with a huge tumble drier that oozed oil at all times and there was a tray of sump oil underneath. Flo, twice a year would paint the laundry herself, white. She was meticulous. And in between times, she'd paint it with whitewash. She'd just whitewashed and was very proud of it. Malcolm, who was two got into the sump oil with his hands. And she came to me in hysterics and said, 'We've got greased art work. Come and have a look at it.' He had put his hands in the sump oil and at two-year-old height, had gone right around the laundry doing hand patterns. He was covered in sump oil from head to foot. I mistakenly took him out onto the front lawn and hosed him, it was a warm day, and it congealed. Well then I had to scrub it off him. But Flo took it all in good part, she thought that it was hilarious. 'I think we'll leave it. It's too good to wash off.' She won the confidence of the children. They loved her.

To my horror, when I first arrived the doors were locked, even in the middle of the afternoon. The first thing to do was to open the prison and make it a free place. We had a staff meeting and told them of my proposal that they were to come in to unlocked doors. I talked to Mrs Cook who agreed to produce the meal at six o'clock and have a split shift, which was a big step forward. Then, we would open the doors. The staff threw up their hands in dismay and said they'd all run away. I said, 'Well, we'll catch them, but we'll talk to the kids first.'

We drew up the programme before I launched the idea. They would come home, have an hour out to play, or do what they wanted to, have tea, do their homework, then go up and have their showers and go to bed. This wasn't going to suit the staff at all. There were also, locks on every bedroom door and as they went to bed, they were locked, in while the two staff on duty came down and had a cup of tea. So I said to them, 'We won't lock the doors at night.' 'Oh, but how will we manage? They'll run riot.' I said, 'We'll talk to them first and you can comedown singly and have your cup of tea, if a cup of tea you must have. One person will hold the fort upstairs.' I wasn't popular; but I left no compromise.

I talked to the kids and said that I couldn't bear the thought of them not having play-time after coming home from school, and that we'd no longer lock the doors. They would only be locked to keep people out, that you were very vulnerable in a house with eight outside doors. It was up to them. If they decided to take advantage of it, we'd go back to the previous method. They were all for it. Then I told them that after they went up to bed at night, there would be no locked doors; that I expected them to do their teeth and go to the toilet before they went to bed. If they had to get up, they could go singly, but if they ran into each other's rooms and caused trouble, the doors would be locked again. We didn't have any cause ever to go back to the old system.

A number of the staff complement were questionable. I realised I had to assess them all. Having seen the reaction to various proposed changes, it was clear, that they were not going to be flexible, perhaps, on the whole, because they were untrained. Five of them were living in, in the staff quarters, which meant they were isolated in a job that was stressful already. They had every meal with the children. They were also dissatisfied with having, what they called additional stress placed on them, by my new methods. I also felt that they had been over-disciplining the

children. What we decided from then on was that reward and praise was the way, and discipline would be at a minimum. As they resigned, I replaced them with local housewives who had children at school, and it worked.

The next, very important factor was that many of the children were undernourished and not performing well at school. They had a great deal of leeway to make up. Two of the girls who came to us, had eaten only fish and chips all their lives. Their mother was fourteen when the first child was born; they had lived above a fish and chip shop and they ate what was left over at the end of the day. When they were served vegetables, they said, 'What's all this stuff?' They had never had vegetables. They were spotty; the sides of their mouths were cracked, because of lack of Vitamin B.

I was already drawing up a five-week diet sheet similar to the one we'd had at Ormond and I'd asked for the largest deep freeze then that was made so that I could buy in bulk. The local butcher supplied rather inferior meat; I shopped around and found a butcher in Torquay who delivered to us and provided bulk meat. I drew up a high protein diet and it was quite incredible in a period of weeks, the alertness and the performance of the children. And I think that was a major part of our success over the years.

The five-week programme included beef, lamb, pork, and chicken. We could buy chickens locally from *Steggles Chickens*, (I used to buy the ones that were torn for \$1 each), and cracked eggs so everyone could have scrambled eggs for breakfast, or a boiled egg. Even the staff approved of the new diet. Mrs Cook had a great deal of re-thinking and re-learning to do and she was marvellous. We built on the strengths of everybody. Mrs Bates made wonderful steamed puddings and sponges. So Saturday night when she took over, it was steamed sponge night. With a menu spanning five weeks, they didn't know what they were having on the next day. I can remember one of our girls, who had been in five children's homes, when she settled in, she got her HSC with honours, said to me, 'I gave a talk at school this morning on Pirra, because they all had an idea it was a jail out in the country. I told them of the meals we have and they were all impressed and I've asked one of the girls to come to tea. I'd like to have my friend on our roast beef and horseradish sauce night. I said, 'I'm not going to change the menu, but have a look at the meals schedule in the kitchen and ask her on a roast beef night.'

We'd also involve the kids if we changed anything. We made a list of their birthdays and listed what they liked best of all. I can remember Patricia liked boiled, creamy rice so July 4th, we always had creamy rice for tea. It made kids feel special, when on their birthdays you could do this out of the blue. What we tried to do was to build, as many decisions into a child's life as possible, because the one thing that struck me, as a first impression of Pirra was that the kids were like sheep. If you'd put out a purple uniform, they'd have put it on. I wanted them to object strongly and have the right to do so without being anti-social.

For breakfast for instance, we had four types of cereal and porridge. They could have fruit if they wanted on their cereal, but they had to make the decision, it wasn't put on automatically. They could on special mornings, have a dollop of cream on their porridge. They could have tea, coffee or milk. The little ones didn't have coffee, but they didn't like it anyway. They could have an egg. We had an egg list - hard-boiled and soft. And we had a container so that the soft-boiled went in late. Why

should you have to eat a hard-boiled if you like it soft and vice versa? We had a luncheon list and they made up their mind at the beginning of each fortnight what sandwiches they wanted. They could have a series of three; you couldn't be doing individual lunches for twenty-four and changing every day.

For dinner at night we had five vegetables, always. They could have all five. We had one child who loved cauliflower - she'd never seen it. When all the cauliflower was left, she'd sit with a spoon and eat the lot. I would tell them, 'We expect you for your health's sake to have three vegetables, but you can have five'. I had calf's fry and we put it on top of the stove and grilled it very thinly. I knew that kids don't like lamb's fry or calf's fry so we grilled it with bacon at the same time, and served it to the staff, while they had sausages. And they'd say, 'I wish we could have some of that stuff that you have.' Finally, we had two-thirds of the household eating lamb or calf's fry. We conned them at times and it worked.

We used to have a day making ice-creams and chocolate coating them and putting them in the deep freeze so that if they went on a picnic - you couldn't possibly afford to buy a chocolate coated ice-cream for twenty-four, or I couldn't - they could take one of their own packets of ice-cream with them and they enjoyed the making.

By then it was becoming evident, that with our new programme, staff training was vital. We had a system of housemothers and all the children were divided into groups of five with a housemother or the group mother. I leaned towards employing married women with children. We had two trained nurses who'd chosen to go into childcare, one of them not ideally suited to the job. They were inclined to say, 'My children don't behave like that.' They were in vital need of training.

I had become of member of the Children's Welfare Association in Geelong, Sister Aiden, who was then Superintendent of the Catholic Children's Home, and I decided that there was an urgent need for training for child care staff. We went up to headquarters to Melbourne as a deputation. The response was negative and disappointing. So we decided we'd sit down and develop our own programme and we drew up a child care course of twelve lectures of approximately an hour, for which Sister Aiden offered their old school as a venue, some of the Head Office staff came down and gave lectures and Pirra staff members and some from the Catholic Home attended. It wasn't an easy thing to be able to free your staff to attend, but it paid dividends.

After a year, we had an exam, we set an exam for the end of the course and we issued them with a certificate, *Part 1 Child Care*. By that time the news had got around to other children's homes and the Department asked us if we'd let them see copies of their exam papers, so I took them up to Head Office. They were most impressed and eventually they opened Lissen Grove. This was an old house in East Melbourne that the Department bought as a training centre for the Social Welfare Department. We explained that we intended to modify the course. They used our course for the first year and then devised Part II. And by the time Pirra closed, every staff member had completed Part I and Part II of the Child Care Course.

Shortly after I was appointed, I went to Head Office for briefing as to accounting, keeping the books, petty cash, you name it. We had a superintendent's meeting once a month at Head Office, which was a must; at the second one, I stunned them

all by announcing, 'Well, I don't know about you but a third of the children in my care should not be there. They're there for financial reasons only. I see no reason why they shouldn't go home'. I realised that some had been kept, because they were easy, and because they'd lost touch with their parents.

I visited all the other Children's Homes, Illoura, Sutton Grange, Waverley, Hillside, and Ashendean. For the most part they were all closed communities; that really rocked me.

We worked on getting the parents to visit and for kids who were left out, we then started having a Saturday barbecue. They could ask their girlfriends, their boyfriends, their parents; the only condition being that they had to stay on the lawns around the tennis court. It became for some of the parents, a regular outing. One mother used to bring her seven little boys. She'd had one girl who had been kept home to look after them, who was a very stable, wonderful child. We made it open house. One father was a real estate agent; he came to Geelong on a Friday night. He said, 'I can't possibly come at the weekend because that's my selling time.' I suggested, 'Well, call in on Friday night for tea.' He became, not quite a regular every week, but at least he visited once a month.

For the children who couldn't go home, because they were country kids, we encouraged them to ring their families on a Friday night. Friday night was a good night to have a special effort. One girl from Ararat, who is still a great friend, had one alcoholic parent, the other a wool classer was always away. There were young children. They had been sent to the Ballarat Children's Home, but they hadn't taken this lass, because she was fourteen. They felt that she would be too much of a responsibility. After she'd been with us for a week, the phone rang and it was a young man from Ballarat, 'Look, I just wanted to know how 'M' is, because we're near neighbours and my mother's looked after them and I've looked after them, kept my eye on them. He was twenty-one then and working in a factory in Ararat. I invited him to come to Pirra, 'Have you got any transport?' 'Oh yes. I've got a motorbike.' 'Would you like to come down for lunch on Sunday?' He was very pleased, 'That would be wonderful.' He came for lunch every Sunday for two years, until the young lass went home. They've been married for twenty-two years.

When our first new arrivals came from Allambie, replacing the third that we had been able to send home, they each brought a case full of clothes. Some of the clothes didn't fit, because although they didn't have their size, but were issued anyway, as they had to tick off on the list. Six of the girls aged fourteen, had best dresses exactly the same, which, to say it raised my anger, was an understatement. I lined them up, took their photographs, had a print made and sent it to the Director and said, 'Would you like to send your daughters to a school social dressed like this, all alike?'

I learned that it was up to us to do our best with the clothing budget. So I arranged to have an order on Myer. After I went to see Mr O'Brien the manager in Geelong who was a very understanding man, Myer agreed to give me 20% discount, which was very generous. They agreed at Head Office to give us the funds at an estimated annual cost. There was a manufacturer's upheaval because they'd had contracts for Allambie for years. But it worked well, in many cases, it allowed us to buy materials, and the kids helped to make their own frocks.

Each girl used to go with a group mother to buy a best dress as we called it, but then we had a deputation from the kids. They didn't care what their best dresses looked like, but they did want jeans with labels. So the voucher was used to cover 'jeans with labels' first, and we faced the world with a different look on our face. Also, I must say Myer were marvellous, they rang me up one day to say, 'We've got an opportunity to buy seconds in jeans from the best manufacturer of the day.' And I said, 'I'll be in that.' I remember with horror, one of our girls who couldn't get them tight enough; she lay on the floor to ease her jeans up. But they wanted it that way, I told them, 'If they shrink and you can't use them, you're back to the old sort of jeans.'

They children had always gone to a local hairdresser and most them had the same haircut. The daughter one of the staff, had just finished the hairdressing course, and she agreed to come on a Friday night. I paid her a sum of money for a session. We had shampooing, setting, they'd set each other's, we had re-styling, you name it, and it made a very big difference. She also taught them to look after their nails, they couldn't wear nail polish to school but they could use it at the weekends.

We also changed the standard outings. The local cinema used to let the 'Home kids' in for nothing on a Saturday afternoon and they could go to the local baths, but they had very old, decrepit swimsuits. The first thing I did was to get an order once a year on a factory in Melbourne for swimsuits. But it was a pretty dull life on the whole with a lot of time to fill in. I made the decision we'd put as many things in the child's life, which they could achieve, so they'd feel good about themselves.

Soon after I went to Pirra, I discussed the ideas I had in mind for building children's confidence and feelings for themselves, with an officer, from the Psychology and Guidance Branch of the Education Department. He recommended a book by Glasser, on reality therapy that dealt with these issues. I went up to Melbourne and bought one during the next week and it put in print exactly what we wanted. So I bought three copies for the staff to read. It made a very big difference in training staff. If they saw it written by somebody else, it wasn't just that bloody superintendent who was trying to do her own thing!

We decided to emphasise the building of decisions and a wider range of sensations and experiences into a child's life. I wrote many 'begging letters'. I became a very good 'beggar' to Ford and Shell, and various places in Geelong asking for money to send these 'poor children', on a Christmas holiday. we had enough response plus the pay in trust at Head Office, to take them for their first Christmas holiday to Philip Island, which was a great success. Two staff and fourteen kids was quite a trial, but it worked.

A year or two after I took up the position, we were in the fires in Lara, which burnt all around the house. I had made a plan for fires in every dry summer, as I knew we were sitting on a tinderbox there. It was decided that we would put the kids in the bus and drive straight to the beach, which was two miles away. Luckily all the precautions we had taken around the house, with green lawns, tennis balls in the spouting, hoses and things, meant that although we were ringed by fire and all our fences were burned, the house was not.

So, I mean, it was a very traumatic, but I really had a premonition about the fire there. I had the whole place cleared; we had four acres of garden and sixteen acres around the house of fairly long grass. I hired the slasher and slashed the paddock and then I rang the fire brigade and said to them, 'It is a clear still night, if you don't send the fire brigade to burn off our paddock, I'll set alight to it and ring you and I've got twenty-four children in the house'. They burnt it off five days before the Lara fires.

We were without electricity for two weeks, when the electricity came back on, the kids had all been going to bed in the dark and we didn't have any wire windows. They'd been broken in the fires and the mosquitoes were like nothing on earth! I asked two members of staff, as the kids were watching television for the first time, 'Would you go up and spray the two big rooms upstairs, so that they'll be mosquito free.' We had a lovely little Scottish woman, and as she was spraying a tiger snake came from under the bed! I rang the local policeman as I did in all emergencies, 'Jack can you come up, we've got a tiger snake'. Another member of staff rang her husband to come too. Well the husband arrived with the biggest axe I've ever seen. Jack said, 'Keep him away, hang on to him, don't let him near your floors with that axe. Well it was a four-foot tiger snake and it had come up onto the balcony during the fires. The snakes all came under the house to get away from the fires. That was really frightening.

Then I contacted the Public Works people, as I could hear the roof making a very strange noise at night. I wanted somebody to get up and have a look. They said they had the whole team out. I told them, 'I don't care, it is something very peculiar. I lie in my room, which is on the ground floor, there are two seventeen-foot ceilings above it and I can still hear the movement.' I indicated that I wouldn't be contented until they came and had a look. Finally someone came to inspect the roof and he came down looking absolutely green. He said, 'It is just sitting there'. It was an old slate roof with lead nails and many had melted and gone under the tiles and it was just sitting there! He said, 'Just pray that we don't have a wind, until I can find someone to repair it'. These are the kind of things you don't expect.

I had inherited a horse called Spartacus. He was complete stallion of seventeen hands and had been purchased by the previous superintendent to teach the children to ride. It was rather a daunting task, especially as she was a very good horsewoman and I was not. I arranged to swap Spartacus. I told them there was a pony that needed a home; a very nice show pony and they wanted Spartacus to work on the farm. So Spartacus went off to the farm and we had the piebald show pony, which wasn't ideal. With all different kids on its back, it's not easy for a pony and finally we sold that and they went to the riding school, which was a much better idea.

We proposed to build an art centre. There was a three-room brick cottage in the grounds that had been used by the manager. It was full of junk. We cleared it and out of the blue, several fellows from the local Junior Chamber of Commerce turned up. How could they help? They'd received one of the begging letters. Twelve of them came once a month with their families. We had a combined family picnic with the kids. What twelve motor mowers did to the gardens had to be seen to be believed. They also helped with the fete. Head Office queried the legality of running our own fete. I said, 'Well please go into the legalities and write and tell me about it.'

We made cakes for weeks with government flower and eggs and raised several hundred dollars at the first fete.

Out of that came our relationship with Alcoa staff who had brought out some electrical equipment to sell at the fete. And they took us over and that started a new era. The Social Club of Alcoa, their chaplain, Don Longfield and the secretary of the union decided that a social welfare project would be highly desirable. They bought us a new barbecue, which made a big difference; they helped with establishing the cottage, as creepers and snakes had surrounded it. We had a kiln, a wheel, an enamelling kiln, the kids who were not dextrous enough to handle the pottery wheel could cope with the enamelling and they could see instant results. We had watercolours, and a weaving frame, every type of art and one girl who was very skilled with oil painting.

Then we developed a sewing centre. The Alcoa wives between them produced six electric sewing machines. I already had two pedal machines and the Department supplied a super machine. We turned over a room in staff quarters, on two nights a week, kids used to repair their own clothes and make new ones; we had some spectacular results. One child won the prize at the Geelong Show for padded jackets. It was great to see the delight and amazement of the Director when she came down to see us.

We were having so many activities by then, that we needed a younger member of staff to cope with some of the outings. Eight of the kids used to go to a country and western group, which used to bore the other members of staff; it was a night of great chore. We found a lass who was twenty-two. She'd started doing a teaching course and she was anxious to get to know young people. I tried to roster her for leisure and she got double time on Sundays. She was always quite anxious to do Sundays, which suited me. She was a gifted musician, so we bought a piano and six guitars. The little ones learned to play with the younger members. The guitarists became really very skilled and they were asked to play at several school concerts. One of them teaches the guitar to this day.

We had table tennis, we had a group who used to go to Steiglitz to collect rocks and find garnets. A local man, who was a geologist used to come and classify the stones for them. The elderly people at Avalon, which was part of the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, had a tumbler and we used to go out there, to tumble the stones.

Every year they could go to the National Gallery. We used to have many trips to the National Gallery, especially older girls and they could select one print to go in the house and have it framed. The fellow from there was marvellous in the print room. He used to frame it for nothing and bring it down and have an outing himself.

A lot of the children didn't have contact with older people at all. I realised that every child values the grandmother who'll sit down and listen. So we developed an 'adopt-a-grandmother' project with the nearby Brotherhood of St. Lawrence elderly people's cottages. On Saturday morning; they'd do shopping for them. Then when the children came home, usually the grandmothers would make cakes or scones and they'd sit down and have lunch together or afternoon tea. We use to have a concert about once a month. Sometimes we'd pick them up in the car and bring them up to the concert. Anyone who was left at the Brotherhood over Christmas came to us for

Christmas dinner. It all worked ... I recall that one of the girls, after she'd been working for two years, took the day off to go to the funeral, when her adopted grandmother, who was 90 died.

I found that we'd had a grant for books that hadn't been used for years. They used to say at Head Office, 'Don't tell Nancy anything about grants because she will use them to the full.' And we built, with Alcoa's help too, a library. They bought us world books, a marvellous reference library which we had in a locked cupboard because they were very valuable books. We put bookshelves for the full length of the TV room and there were books galore and the kids started reading. We also bought a portable record player and each month the kids nominated a record to buy. I used to get the three daily papers. If kids didn't have homework, I used to say, 'Well I want you to go through and pick out - I'd give them different subject, - we had folders for projects - it meant they had to read the whole paper. One of girls who came to us at fourteen had never been to school. The mother didn't believe in it; none of the family could read. She wrote to me the Christmas before last, 'P.S. I still get the Herald-Sun every day.' The library grew and grew, and people would bring us books.

One child used to go home for the weekend to an alcoholic and later drug-addicted father. But at least she was able to keep contact with her siblings. She used to return with pornographic books bought at Spencer Street Station. I would say to her, 'If you must read it, read it, but if you hand it around the household, you will not go home for the next weekend.' Well, I used to go into the Geelong market where there was a book exchange and exchange them for suitable material. They were a very good source of library income!

In subsequent years, Alcoa ran our fete and they raised thousands every year for us, which enabled us to take the children on marvellous holidays. We went for three weeks to Phillip Island every year, which is an ideal holiday. Apart from anything else, the kids couldn't get into much trouble because it was a small community and everyone would know where they were. I explained to them that the only thing that could happen to them is they'd drown. So I said, 'Go to the beach for short periods of time, but I'll state the time you have to be home and you have to be home by that time.'

The second year we went down there, we had two children who the staff were very concerned about, 'We'll be up against it to cope with them.' One child had been to eight primary schools and rejected at each, by the time she was ten. They took off and went to the beach. I always used to prepare a special meal for the first night. I used to buy a whole beef at the time so there were enough fillets to take away for the holiday. We had a fillet steak and all the trimmings and fruit salad and ice cream. We were about to have tea when we realised that the two girls had not returned.

They turned up at half past seven. I'd said to be home at six o'clock. I told them, 'Oh just sit on the couch there while we finish our meal.' We finished up, served all the fruit salad and ice cream. And I said to two of the kids, 'There's a bit of ice cream left. Would you like more?' When we'd finished our meal and I said, 'Now I want you to take the plates out and rinse them and leave them on the sink.' I said to them, 'Now you can go and do the washing up and when you've done the washing up, you may make yourselves some sandwiches.' And they looked at me and said, 'We're very hungry.' I said, 'Too bad.'

I went down the next morning at six o'clock, rang up Pirra, and said, 'Would you send the bus down, we've got two people to send home.' Mr Breguet turned up just before lunch and they said, 'Why's he here?' And I said, 'For you to go home of course. The only way we can run this holiday is for everybody to do the right thing.' Home they went. I said, 'If you behave at home this week, you can come back next week, but you're not staying this week.' I thought, the people at home would have hell. But they came back the next Monday and all was well. It was the only time we had to send anyone home, but it's a case of reality therapy.

We had started receiving very difficult children from homes where there was a tendency, to let them do as they pleased. The Department was then just starting to close large children's homes, and we were expected to take a percentage of very difficult children. St Catherine's were moving into Cottage Group Homes and we took three of their very difficult children. One girl originally from Broadmeadows Baby Home and with no known relatives, had been in eleven different placements in fourteen years. Sister Agatha had asked me to take her saying, 'She's not easy.' The first night we had roast beef, one of the kids' favourite meals, as she walked into the dining room, she threw her plate on the floor and said, 'I'm surely not expected to eat this muck.' There was a stony silence. I said to her, 'No, but when it's cleaned up, you can go out and make a sandwich.' And so I just went on with the meal. Afterwards I sat with her and she said, 'I've got a very bad temper.' I said, 'Yes and when you have that bad temper, you can sit on the seat in the hall and nobody will come near you, but if you lash out at anyone, you must take the consequences.'

We decided with the influx of difficult children at more or less the same time, that something had better be done to calm the household down. So we started the Tuesday night discussion groups. After dinner we all sat around and talked about anything that was a bit of a hassle, or particularly good. We had used to do this at home with my mother. Tuesday night was discussion night, so it was bit of a carry on from childhood experience.

Two of the very disturbed girls were accepted as patients at Travencore. I would take them up once a week. The girl from St Catherine's said to me one day, as she flounced out of the tram and banged the car door, 'I know I must have family. I can remember having a photograph taken with a sister either side. The psychiatrist says I couldn't possibly remember when I was eighteen months old.' I told her, 'That's rot because I can.' So I went up to Head Office during the week, got her file out, and wrote a letter to every placement she'd had. It was a very profound shock to the child, to find she had two sisters. They'd been adopted. She had been inexplicably left at Broadmeadows, even though the families would have loved to have had the baby as well.

The sisters came down for many visits and she went to them for weekends and she came to me and said, 'Can I talk to you? You know, I suppose they were lucky, they've got a good home and they've been to good schools, but they have the most boring life. Do you know what they do on Saturdays? They wash their hair and help do the garden! They're not allowed to touch the record player; it's their father's. He roared because I put a record on. I scratched it when I took it off, I didn't realise.' So I said, 'Well, perhaps we'll tone it down and they can come for your birthday.' And they still see each other.

But I realised, that I was not creating a normal family environment with so many outings. We had to strike the happy medium. We had a chores list, every child in the house did every chore. No matter ... Before that the good ones had been in the kitchen and Mrs Cook liked those girls, and I said, 'I'm sorry, but this is unfair, they've all got to learn.' They each had to make their bed in the morning before they left. So it was to try and get things onto a more normal situation. We'd got off the rails a bit.

One of the most important things I believe, we achieved at Pirra over the time I was Superintendent, was the involvement of parents in their children's lives. At the outset, I was advised by one of the staff of the Social Welfare Department, 'Don't involve the parents. They're impossible. You'll never get anywhere.' But we started, I wrote to all the parents, or rang them up and asked them if they could visit at the weekend and stay for lunch. We were supposed to charge them, but we forgot about that. We got the kids all involved on Friday nights to make cakes for the afternoon tea with the parents. If they had a good school report, I'd always have a copy made and sent home to the parents. It improved the parent's concept of the child. I would say as time went on, that about sixty per cent of the parents were involved in one degree or another. This was probably the most beneficial thing achieved for the children, in the long run.