



The Santa Maria College Podcast

Episode 1: Catherine Kolomyjec (Burgess, Class of 1986)

Jake: Welcome to The Santa Maria College Podcast, where once a month we sit down with members of our community who are creating, innovating, leading, and contributing to making the world a better place. From the College's history to social justice to entrepreneurship and innovation, we tap into a wide range of topics that affect our girls who are the leaders of tomorrow.

So come along with us for the ride as we pick the brains of those who have been pivotal in Santa Maria's growth and celebrate those who continue to be change makers.

You've probably heard the name Catherine Kolomyjec before, and if you haven't, you've certainly come to the right place. With 40 plus years of community work under her belt, it's hard to know where to even begin. Perhaps let's start with Soul Gestures, a charity co-founded by Catherine, which inspires youth of all abilities to engage in acts of kindness that bring positivity to their community.

One of our workshops titled The Kindness Challenge was recently run here at the College. The challenge was the first ever of its kind specifically tailored to parents and guardians of the SMC community as opposed to students. It gave parents and guardians an opportunity to discuss the impact of kindness on teens and the issues teens raise during their workshops at Soul Gesture.

Catherine brings with her a wealth of knowledge having completed her Bachelor's degree in Social Work at Curtin University. Aside from this, she's also engaged with refugee survivors of torture and trauma, helping them to rebuild their lives. Not to mention she's also been the Director of Community Relations at some pretty renowned Perth Catholic schools.

She also happens to be an old girl of the college having graduated in 1986 and was a recipient of the 2021 Project of Mercy Grant. Catherine, welcome. Thank you for coming in to chat with us. I mean, you've had such a close relationship with the school over the years. So, you know, this one's pretty exciting.

How are you?

Catherine: Yeah, no, this is fantastic and I'm excited to come back here and sort of to delve a little deeper I guess into my relationship with the College over all the years. Because it shaped a lot of who I am. So, yeah. Thanks for having me.

Jake: No, thank you for coming on board. So, I'd like to jump straight in and talk a little bit about your charity Soul Gestures. So, the work, I mean, you're doing over Perth is pretty phenomenal. I've looked at your socials and, you know, there seems to be a lot of positive feedback and a lot of really great engagement. So to start off, could you maybe explain a little bit about the overall aim of your charity?

Catherine: Yeah, look, I mean, we're just a very small charity here in Perth. The whole aim is to inspire young people to shine. So, we work with young people at all different levels to find ways to engage them in

the community, to give them leadership skills, to bring groups who are marginalized to the forefront in the community, and to build skills so that we have compassionate leaders for the future.

Jake: And I guess that sort of leads into my next question. What was the initial inspiration behind starting Soul Gestures.

Catherine: Yeah, look, it all started when we were actually in Singapore. Hubby and I with the kids, heading out to the night zoo on the bus. And we saw someone who had tacked up on the side of a bus stop, a little sign just saying, Amy Tan has been cutting hair in our nursing home for 25 years. Her generosity enriches our community, and hubby and I were separated on this really crowded bus, and we both just went wow, isn't that amazing that someone has actually acknowledged what someone's doing in their community, and we sat up all night going, wouldn't it be nice if we could do the same? Those hidden people who were doing really amazing things at a very small level in the community.

So, we started working, believe it or not, with AD Shell, the people who do the bus stops. Um, and every time they had a vacancy on their bus stops, we were able to put posters up, thanking the quiet heroes in the community. So that's actually where it all started. Okay. And out of that evolved that we started, um, becoming a go-to, I guess placed for creating positive community projects, addressing some of the issues, whether it is, was around the refugee experience at the time.

I ran a program with Maori boys learning their traditional leadership, as a way of, um, learning discipline. So they learn how to carve their own taha, their spirits. The spiritual meaning of the haka. And we did a program with African young people where they were able to write down their stories of their refugee camp experience and go and talk in schools, so that people could understand that their dreams were exactly the same as everybody else's. So, there's been a lot of different programs, but all of them have the key aim of building positive communities, through young people.

Jake: That's awesome. So, you talked a little bit about those sort of past projects Where is Soul Gestures at today?

Catherine: Yeah. No, look, there's, um, the last couple of years have been, as you've probably gathered from looking at the socials, it's been completely frantic. It's been amazing. And look, we, a couple of years ago, we set up a project with young people, 18 to 25., where once a week they were going to do a kind gesture in the community. Um, and we gave them \$50, and they had to come up with something that they were going to do. Um, to help build their own community and just the first week when we started Covid Struck. And suddenly we were an organization that was ready to go.

So our young people started to address those needs. So, they started to deliver dinners to cancer patients who couldn't go in for treatment. They looked where there was isolation. They dropped coffees off to some of the very overworked nurses on the night shifts. They just went looking for where they were suffering. And I guess that was a really powerful thing that a lot of organizations couldn't have pivoted like we did because we're small and we were ready to go. Obviously one of the most well-known little things that happened out of that was our postcard project, where the caterers for that cruise ship that was just down the road in the port with all the quarantine crew, the caterers contacted us and asked, could we buy 400 postcards? Because the crew were isolated in their rooms with over 200 of them not even having a window. And they hadn't seen Perth and said, could we buy some postcards so that they could put them on their dinner plates, and they could see Perth? Anyway, we got the young people of Perth, um, to write on the postcards in three days.

It was hectic. Um, and they were on their, put on their dinner plates and, it was the Thursday night they got them for dinner and on the Saturday the ship was due to leave port. Unbeknown to us, about an hour

before they got dinner, one of the crew members died of Covid, so the crew members sitting in their rooms by themselves were just distraught and frightened.

And knowing that the community didn't want them here. Mm and they were so frightened. And some of them were probably your age, Jake, um, far from home. Um, anyway, they opened the doors to get their dinner and got these postcards from young people and just suddenly they, there was this outpouring of love because they felt suddenly there was someone who cared, that the young people cared, that there were messages of hope for them. Safe Journeys home, dad jokes. Um, and so for 48 hours I was just getting messages from the crew to say thank you. Um, and I guess that was what this last couple of years has been about. And so we've had The Kindness Challenge, which I think we're going to talk a little bit more about.

And we also set up a film crew of young people with disabilities during this period, and they've taken off as well. Showing that people with disabilities don't have to just be the subject of stories. They can actually be the makers of stories themselves. So, they've been learning the skills at filming, interviewing, editing, telling the stories they want to tell.

They've, um, been so successful. They've got, they've done contracts with Rugby WA, the Eagles, carers WA, that they're now in the process, through Impact Seed, um, of becoming their own actual business, social enterprise business. So that's a really good example of what Soul Gestures does, is give the space for young people to soar.

Jake: Yeah. It's awesome. You were a recipient of the 2021 Project of Mercy Grant, from the Santa Maria Old Girls' Association. What did you do with that? Was that put towards the film crew?

Catherine: Yeah, it was. So, we're actually, we're just in the process of filming it. So we've been through a whole process. So young, um, Maddy, one of our crew members is directing and telling her own story. Um, and so she's gone through, um, with the support of ECU and the screen academy and the film school at ECU, um, has learned how to write a storyboard, draw the images, um, what she needs of setting, um, cast, casting location, and she's going to be telling the most extraordinary story of inclusion, of what it actually feels like to be Maddy, who is this powerful young woman, um, living with cerebral palsy. Wow. I can't wait.

So, yeah. Very, very grateful to the Old Girls Association for seeing the need to tell stories and seeing the power of a young woman being able to be the maker of her own stories. And it's really amazing because I think, um, I think it really epitomizes what, um, what Santa Maria is all about.

Jake: So, I interned at the college back in about 2018, and I just started here again this year and I think I've really noticed a shift in the way the school's telling stories and you know, the people they're telling stories about. So, you know, I think it's really nice that you made that point about Old Girls Association feeling a need to tell those kinds of stories, and I think it sort of raises that awareness in the community that, you know, this is people's lives. Like this is what people have to go through. And, you know, we're all very privileged here, so it's, it's good to raise awareness and sort of, um, you know...

Catherine: Highlight different ways of viewing. Yeah. And I think that's the whole, you know, and you would know this yourself, the beauty of storytelling is that, you get to see and walk in the shoes of another person. Um, and you know, in everything that we do mm-hmm, , whether it's kindness challenge, or whether it's the Periscope crew, our film crew, or the Maori boys, it's an importance in telling the story. There's an importance of allowing somebody inside. Um, and understanding the values and understanding that, um, these things, you know, the importance of being seen. Um, and I think, you know, Santa Maria's always been really good at creating, um, opportunities for women to tell stories. And women to be strong in how they tell stories, and I think that's really important. The world needs that.

Jake: Mm-hmm. So, a couple of months ago you ran The Kindness Challenge here at Santa Maria for parents or guardians, and for those listening who are unaware, this was one of the new initiatives we implemented in relation to the College's strategic pillar of community activation. So Catherine, for those who missed out, can you explain specifically what The Kindness Challenge is?

Catherine: Yeah, look. Um, so Margo Basto here at the College got in contact with me, um, based on the work I did with the Year 5s at Santa last year. Um, and she said a lot of parents were not being able to come to normal parent events this year because of all of the Covid lockdowns. Um, and she wanted to see if it was possible to do something that would engage parents, um, in a different way, maybe by Zoom. Um, in that period while they weren't able to connect. And she said, look, you know, do you think it's possible to do the kindness challenge? And I went, Wow.

Okay. Um, it, you know, I, I only work with young people generally, so this was, this is outside my comfort zone, But yeah. Let's, let's have a go. Um, so we basically set up a four week Zoom challenge every Wednesday night that parents could then log into. The reason we did four weeks is because one of the things I had taught the Year 5s is if you can do a kindness habit every day for four weeks, it can actually permanently change your brain and create positive neuron, it releases the endorphins. So to be able to create that habit for four weeks with parents was really exciting opportunity. Um, and so we just ran through, um, for four weeks. We got online with this incredible bunch of parents. Um, not just in Perth, but all over the state. Um, and that was something that I will forever treasure. Connecting with parents on farms all over and boarding parents.

We looked at four different, I guess, themes. So, the first one was, um, looking at what is compassion, and why human beings are kind. So, we looked at the, you know, a lot of the evolution of human beings and, um, some of the myths around humans and survival of the fittest and what makes humans kind and particularly kind in times of crisis.

The second week we looked at the neuroscience, so, um, very much what I do with the students, so the year five, so, you know, we look at what happens to the brain and how several different areas of the brain get activated when your kind and what it does to your body and so the benefits to you physically and psychologically of being kind.

And then the third week we looked at some of the triggers. You know when it's hard to be kind. Sometimes, you know, and that was a really important one with parents because a lot of the Year 5s had said, one of the hard things is we see that our parents are stressed. We see our parents are time poor. Um, and so having a chance for the parents to talk about things that make it hard to be kind.

And then the final week we looked at, um, self-compassion. So actually, looking after the parents. Um, so a big part of compassion is also being compassionate to yourself. One of the things I want everybody to learn, whether it's a year five or a parent or a grandparent, is that compassion is a deliberate decision to lean into another person's suffering, and that can be yourself.

One of the important things we do with parents is we set them a challenge each week. They actually had to try doing different types of, um, kindness and that was amazing.

Jake: And what was the feedback like? What sort of feedback did you receive?

Catherine: Um, firstly I just say what an amazing bunch of parents. Um, so prepared to put themselves outside their comfort zone and to be vulnerable. I was just getting email after email from parents saying, I tried this, and it made me aware of this. So, for a lot of people, you know, they are kind in their everyday

life. But it's learning to be able to be aware of that kindness and what it's doing to their body and how it makes them feel. And you know, I had one beautiful couple say they made it the theme of their marriage. So, they're now talking about something kind they've done for each other every day around the dinner table at night.

Another beautiful mum talked about how she was in Fremantle and saw an older lady who looked lost, and because of the kindness challenge, she decided to stop and smile at her and say hello. And this woman smiled back, and she was able to actually connect and see what she needed. And she said it was just that being aware to stop and to lean in. Um, it just made her feel so good.

And so, I was getting these emails. Yeah, continual emails. Um, and then, they filled out a survey at the end and 100% of them said it'd improved their own wellbeing.

Jake: I mean, you can't get any better than that really, can you?

Catherine: No. And they all want to continue.

Jake: It's just amazing how much, you know, over four sessions, how much of an impact you can have.

Catherine: Yeah. And it was such a simple thing, and you know, I'm not an academic, I'm a community worker. Um, so, and I'm studying at Stanford at the moment, at the Centre for Applied Compassion, so it was really nice to be able to share with parents some of the stuff I'm learning and have chats about that and, they just engaged with that. So I was able to send them book lists of ideas, for those who wanted to read. And you know, one of the dads said, you know, do you have stuff on, you know, compassion in the workplace? Um, and he started cooking a roast meal for his employees, as his act of kindness. It was just really special. I can't even, it's, you know, just the bravery of parents to put themselves out there and it went right through to, on the last day, we turned up in our pyjamas.

We did have a little bit of a dance because one of the most, you know, I guess it's something I've had every bit of work and every project I've done is there needs to be joy and there needs to be fun and you need to be able to be silly, you know, to um, to be courageous enough, to, let your guard down and be vulnerable is one of the most beautiful things you can do. And we're all imperfect, and I really wanted them to understand that you don't have to be perfect. There's no right way to do these things.

And every single person got up and was having a dance and laughing. And some of them got their kids in and some were dancing with their dogs. Yeah. And um, oh my gosh, they're amazing. It was fun. And you know, it's actually one of those things, Catherine McAuley, and I remember reading once that she loved to dance. And the, one of the things about the Mercy Sisters was that in whatever you do, there should be joy.

Um, and so I always called her, and called this with the Year 5s and I still called her, that with the parents is everything you do needs to have a bit of fairy dust. You know, if you can create a little bit of magic by doing things slightly different, um, people engage at a very human level. And it doesn't take very much.

Jake: And I wanted to ask, you obviously do a lot of work with teens. How did it differ working with, you know, parents as opposed to students is like, is there something you learn or something you took away from that?

Catherine: Yeah. Look, I think, at first parents or adults a little bit more reserved, and, um, just want to listen. Whereas teens would generally jump in quite quickly. What I really loved about adults, was that

ability to reflect that they took. Often, they would go away, um, particularly our introverted parents, um, and they would have a think about what they'd learnt, and then they would write to me and ask questions, and say, you know, what do you think about, you know, this or, you know, whether it was gratitude or forgiveness or the humbleness, humility of being kind. Um, which obviously a lot of the younger kids don't do that. They're much more into the action.

Um, but the thing they all have in common, and it's gone from Year 2 through to Year 12 through to parents now, is if you can take people through the journey of compassion so that they feel it at a sensory level, they think it and they take that pause, you know, finds their pause so that little micro moment where they can actually feel it, it changes everything. And it really is. And you know, whether it's a parent or year five, I have feedback from every single group that it makes them feel better. And so it's maybe that little magical key that might help as a preventative mental health issues.

You know, anxiety, you know, teens today, you know, one in three are going through mental health issues, and if this is one of those things, we can so that they build resilience, so they look after themselves, that's a pretty powerful thing. And it's a really powerful thing if you can do it for their parents as well, because what I was finding is parents were saying, they were talking about this stuff around the table with their kids. Can you imagine if every parent was able to talk about that little pause with their kids and show that they were taking that moment.

I just think we, I know this stuff from, you know, all these years working with trauma survivors, but watching parents say that it was changing their families, changing their everyday life is pretty unreal. And look, my mentor at Stanford said she believes it's a world first.

She said, I don't know of a compassion project like this where parents are actually learning.

Jake: So, is it something you do moving forward?

Catherine: Yeah, I'm not sure. I'm only one person, so I can't get to every young person. But if parents are learning skills that make their lives happier and their family lives happier and little tools that they can, um, use with the young people and their children, then we are changing lives. The impact is so big that I think there is a, definitely a place to continue.

Jake: Awesome. So now I would like to go back in time to the start of your career. It's the early nineties. You've just finished your bachelor's in social work. You've moved to Norway. And you're working as a refugee coordinator, I believe.

Catherine: For the Norwegian government. Yeah.

Jake: Can you set the scene for us? You know, what was going through your mind? What was society like?

Catherine: Yeah, look. It was, it was really crazy. Yeah. Like I finished my last exam as a social worker and we had a party for the graduating group, and that night I went straight to the airport. So, I had a job waiting for me. Um, there was a massive shortage of social workers in Norway at the time. Um, it was the former Yugoslavia was in war. Um, and most of Europe had shut down their doors to refugees, but Norway, you know, home of the Nobel Peace Prize, the doors were still open.

Um, so it was pretty special to be there at that particular time. But I remember clearly arriving in Norway and I bought a little second-hand car, and I was driving eight hours across the country to my job. And all I had to my possessions was this car key and backpack. Not even a house key.

Like, it was just this moment of just going, Wow. It was an adventure, and it was, you know, Norway was one of the most beautiful places in the world. And so, I was living in this little village. Under the biggest glacier in Norway. I had a moose that used to put its head in my door.

Friends who would go fly fishing and leave, you know, salmon on my dining room table. It was just the most beautiful place to live and yet we were working with people getting, coming straight out of war zones. So, people who had been in concentration camps, separated from their families.

Jake: That would've been very confronting.

Catherine: Yeah. And look, you know, I look back now and think I was so inadequately prepared. I was a new grad, um, organizing, you know, my role was to coordinate all their practical. So, I'd find their houses, furniture, schools for their kids, language classes.

Yeah, and doing it in Norwegian. Um, and working through interpreters from Norwegian. After I finished at Santa, I had basic Norwegian. But this was a different level. Yeah, and, and Norway has two national languages, so I was actually working in the other language.

But it was a special time because in that place and time, the whole community got behind these Bosnian families arriving. And so, we were able to do some pretty amazing, um, things like we had a folk weekend, where the Norwegians shared their culture and arts with the Bosnians and taught them their dancing and their, um, food.

And, and we had it in this old hall in this old Barney, um, which is the same place the Royal Shakespeare Company practiced their place. It's like an arts community. But they also, the Bosnians then shared their culture. Their food and their dance, and it was just this most beautiful sharing and, people were open to sharing, um, and wanting to get to know their neighbours and wanting to make people feel safe.

I feel incredibly privileged to have been there at that time, um, particularly I guess when the world soon after that changed quite dramatically. To being quite, um, a closed door world towards refugees.

Jake: And what do you think was one of the biggest benefits in taking your career overseas?

Catherine: Yeah. Good question. I mean, for me, I grew up, um, my dad was a pilot. I grew up traveling. So, for me it was not something unusual. I never considered that to be something strange if that make sense. I was exchange student when I was 17 and went to Norway.

When the opportunity came up, it was grab it. You know how amazing a, chance to do something completely different and to be in the middle of human rights in a country that's famous for human rights. Um, and to have the freedom to do things. You know, that's a pretty major job to get to do as a new grad, and I would recommend grabbing those opportunities. I think, you know, I've had three kids who are now grown up and I'm so glad I did those things. You know, there's the no regrets, if that makes sense. Um, I learnt so much and I've got a second home. Where my kids can go to visit and I've got, still got friends there.

I've got people who are as good as family over there. And if you take your career overseas, you just, you get a broader picture.

Jake: So, after that you came back to Perth. Working in a similar sort of role?

Catherine: Look, I, um, I was actually offered a role. I came back, my sister was getting married. Um, and decided to come home. I, you know, it was the right time. And, um, the ASeTTS, which is the torture and trauma service in Perth, offered me a job on arrival home. They knew that I'd been doing that sort of work overseas. So, I came with, um, I guess a good level of experience.

So, I was their first on arrival case coordinator. It was a pretty brand-new service at the time. I think they're 30 years old now. My job was to be that safe person. When refugees first arrived here in Perth.

Jake: What situations were you dealing with?

Catherine: Yeah, look. I've seen the worst and the best of humanity. Um, obviously a lot more different countries of background than I had had when I was working in Norway. Yeah. So working with people from the Middle East, um, and Afghanistan and people who had been through the unspeakable.

So, my job was to basically do their on arrival assessments, what their psychological needs were and to let them know that, the responses they were having at a body level and psychological level were completely normal given what they'd been through.

Jake: I just can't even imagine.

Catherine: I've heard stories that no person should have heard and people who've been through things that nobody should have to go through, but what an incredible privilege to be there at that first point where they're starting to rebuild their identity again.

Jake: How did it change your perspective?

Catherine: I think it made me a lot humbler. People who have survived torture and trauma, um, are just the most courageous people. To actually be a survivor of a war environment or a persecution environment, you have to be a very strong human being. Um, so the people who have been arriving here in Perth and Australia, they're just the most amazing human beings.

So, one of the things that I learned was also that you need to make the most of every time you have contact with refugees, um, that you make the most of every interaction. And I think I've taken that into every area of my career since.

I was running the trauma team, um, just down the road from Santa when they brought the East Timor refugees, literally straight out of climbing the wall into the Australian embassy to escape violence. And also with the cost of our refugees. And all of them were here in Australia just on a temporary status. We made a really important point was we didn't know if the next day they would be sent back to the war zones.

So, we wanted to make sure every day counted, every interaction was something meaningful that would allow them to heal and allow them to prepare for potential trauma again. And the East Timor women approached me and asked, could we learn how to make some western food? Because most of them, their husbands had been murdered. Um, if we can know how to do Western food, we can feed the soldiers,

Australian soldiers up in East Timor. We can create an income. So I actually contacted Santa, um, and we came to the home ec room. Um, and the home ec teachers here at Santa actually taught them how to make pizzas and hamburgers.

So, it was a beautiful way that Santa could actually, you know, was able to support. Making the most of that one moment. You know, we had such a short amount of time, we had to give them things that would allow them to go home and survive and potentially thrive. I think that's a really important school to take into any job or career. That's not just for the work I was doing. I think make everyday count.

Jake: Federal government data shows job vacancies for social workers have almost doubled since the start of the pandemic, while the Australian Association of Social Workers says the sector will need to grow by 15% in the next three years to meet demand. Why do you think there is such a shortage of social workers?

Catherine: Yeah. Look, I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I think, you know, part of it is social workers, by their very nature are quite humble. And so, I don't think it's seen in the same light as other maybe human service professions, whether it's doctors or psychologists, as with the same status. Um, I also think there's been a lot of a, you know, push publicly towards STEM careers, um, and away from the humanities careers, um, which is at a great cost.

I think there is, you know, at a time there is more need than ever. Um, and social workers have such a powerful place in, um, healing, in mental health issues, in social policy. There's a lot less students going through and, and there's definitely been a move away from the humanities.

Jake: Do you think maybe there's any misconceptions about a career in social work?

Catherine: Possibly. You know, I remember when I chose social work, um, a lot of people thought, oh, you're just gonna be working with the baddies of society, you know, that it was, um, child protection work. You're gonna take children away from their parents. All of those sorts of things. And social work's so much broader than that.

It's a job where you both see the small picture and the individual, you know, whether it's counselling or individually working with a person in need, right through to seeing the very biggest pictures and helping create better society through social policies. And I think it's one of those rare careers where you actually are trained in both to see big picture stuff and small picture stuff.

Social workers end up in a whole range of fields, um, from health to humanities to schools, to um, working in international development to human rights. It's a career that you can travel with. It's a career that you can adapt to a whole range of things because the whole point of social work is to help resolve social issues. So, you are part of solutions. I do think there is a misconception about what it is and, and a narrowing of what it is when it, in fact, it's a very, you know, it's an amazing career and actually both my husband and I are both social workers and very, very proud of what that career's given both of us.

Jake: So, for, you know, our SMC girls or you know, perhaps even parents or other members of our community who are, you know, considering a career in social work, like what would your biggest piece of advice be?

Catherine: I think if you're passionate about social impact, it's a fantastic career to go into.

I think, you know, I talked to the Year 8s here at Santa last year and one of the girls said to me, oh, you know, what would you advise around Korea? And I said to her is, grab every opportunity because people aren't going to remember you for your name or who you are. They're going to remember you for the impact you've had.

So, you feel passionate, whether it's about women's rights, or the environment or, the refugee experience. If you are wanting to have an impact on society, social work's a fantastic career to go into. Um, and I would recommend it. Um, I would recommend studying humanity subjects, um, while you're at high school.

I think, you know, I learned history at high school here at Santa, and we learned modern Chinese and modern Russian history. Now, could there be two more important things to study with the current world? Um, and I did economics in Years 11 and 12 and understanding how policy is developed around money. So, the subjects you choose, you know, give you a great foundation for what social work is. You know, looks at the whole spectrum of society and helps make the world a better place.

Jake: So, I just wanted to talk a little bit about your time at Santa as a student. I think people always find it fascinating, you know, to hear about past student experiences. And I think it also allows, you know, us an opportunity to reflect on how far the school has come as well. Am I allowed to say what year you graduated? 1986.

Catherine: I have no issue around my age. I'm all good with that.

Jake: So, you graduated in 86. You attended the school from Years 8 to 12. Yep. You were a day student. What was the experience like for you?

Catherine: Great. I loved Santa. Um, we had fun. Um, I grew up in Rossmoyne, so I used to have to ride my bike to someone's house and lock it up and get on a bus to get here. Um, and so as the trips on the school bus was social, we used to sit in Years 11 or 12 out on the lawn and out the front here.

On the figure eight. Gosh, that's a term I haven't heard in a long time. Um, there couldn't be a prettier place to go to school. You know, watching people sailing the river, you know, from your classroom. I loved the subjects I learned and, the teachers were really supportive and really, um, believed in us as young women. Um, but the most important thing was obviously the friendships. And I don't think it's until the last few years I've really realized just how important, um, the friendships were from Santa and, you know, um, my daughter got sick in her Year 12 with a brain condition, and it was interesting how many of the old Santa girls came out offering help and support and wrapping around us during that time. I know for every person from my year who is going through vulnerable times and including a few at the moment, the warm hug of that Santa Maria year group is there. It's always there. And that's a very powerful thing.

I feel really lucky to have been in that year group and at this school. And I think, um, I think I've said it before, but Santa teachers taught then and teaches now women to be strong. Strong and caring leaders and I, I don't think that's changed. I think it was what it was when I went through.

Jake: So, you've noticed when you come back that that's, you know, something that sort of has been apparent, and it's something I guess that separates Santa from...

Catherine: It's without a doubt the thing I'm most proud about being a Santa girl, is that the social justice was there when I was at school and, you know, I had a teacher, um, my English teacher, she introduced me and a whole pile of students to Amnesty International. Mm-hmm. So, we were writing letters, trying to help prisoners, um, get released. And we actually saw success. And I think, you know, I have many times

credited her for getting me into human rights. It came from, a teacher here at Santa saying, you know, you can change the world with something as simple as writing a letter.

So, when I watched the young girls in Year 5, you know, coming up with projects they were doing in the community through our kindness challenge, I saw myself again in what they were doing. And, um, you know, if I've inspired one of them to continue that career of social justice when they grow up, then you know, my work is done. Um, so yeah, I think it's pretty amazing. Santa has a reputation in social justice. You know, I love reading about what's happening at Santa. You know, I follow Santa on social media as well because you feel the authenticity.

And also, that people are really dedicated to making water a better place. Whatever their professions are. And you know, I do one little bit in the in the world, but you know, there are amazing Santa girls out there in the world doing incredible things. And I can see that again in the students.

You know, I've talked to different year groups here at Santa over the last few years. I feel that same strength and I feel that I think one of the things that's so beautiful is that Santa creates a place where through programs like The Kindness Challenge, you know, where students can be vulnerable as well.

Jake: So, do you have any funny stories?

Catherine: Oh gosh, I've got a couple. Jake, I'm sort of a bit embarrassing. Is that okay? All right. So, Year 11. I sat in class and now teacher walked in. Um, who shall not be named, and he was wearing two different colour shoes. A brown shoe and a black shoe.

And I just started laughing. I was pissing myself. I could not stop it, and I wasn't laughing at him. I was just laughing at the absurdity of it. You know when you start laughing and you cannot control it, you're trying to hold it in.

Anyway, I got sent to the principal to Sister Sheila for disrupting the class, um, which wasn't, you know, I was a pretty good girl anyway. So, I told Sister Sheila, you know, I had to tell why I could not stop laughing, anyway, she thought it was funny too. So, she was really good about it, but it was really, it was really embarrassing.

Probably the only other more embarrassing story was that I fainted during graduation. So, we all had to stand up on the stage. So, all the parents are there, um, the whole of the Year 12 standing up on stage. Um, our head Girl, Claire, doing her speech.

I was right at the front because I'm a shortie. And bam, the long day of it being the last day of school, I fell off the stage for fainting. And I remember Mrs Plao, one of my friend Lisa's mum quickly jumping up and with all, you know, beautiful motherly, you think making sure my skirt, which had gone up over my neck was pulled down to cover my undies, just making sure that I looked respectable.

I have one fond memory of um, I think it must have been Year 8 or 9. So our Drama teacher was Anne Conti, who was the Channel Nine weather lady at the time. Um, and she got, it was only about five of us. Um, we got invited to be, the people who, the kids to try out the rides for the opening of Adventure World.

So, Channel Nine, were making a documentary about the opening of Adventure World. We had to learn the song, we're off to see adventure, um, still can remember it. Um, and we got to try out all the rides before anyone else because they were filming us for a documentary. It was very cool.

And we all got a season pass to the first year of Adventure World. That's pretty amazing looking back on now to have had that opportunity to something that, you know, is still around now. So that was a, that was a really cool thing to have happened in high school.

Jake: I'm just imagining like Madonna, Michael Jackson, like was that all the rage?

Catherine: Oh yeah. Big hair. The shoulder pads.

Jake: What were the teachers like?

Catherine: There were a couple of very cool teachers who had the really bright jumpers but with shoulder pads and full-on makeup. And, um, we had V Capri, um, perform at our Year 12 ball, so that was Todd Johnson. Um, that was pretty cool. Yeah, that was pretty amazing at the time. We all wore a lot of, you know, apricot and um, drop waists and leggings with stirrups and, um, pretty lucky to grow up and have teenage years

We had great music and I think there was a lot of freedom. I think that was one thing, you know, I've thought about is, and probably one of those things that has changed. You know, we could make mistakes like, you know, fainting off the stage during graduation and no one's capturing that on the phone and uploading it.

Um, we could make terrible fashion choices and make up choices and um, and it was okay. It's pretty amazing because my mum actually went to Santa as well. Um, so she grew up in Kalgoorlie and when her dad went to war, um, in Papua New Guinea, they moved to the family to Perth to get family support.

And so her sister was starting like year one here at Santa. They were just in Alfred Cove. Mum was only four when she started at Santa. Um, and she would get the bus with her sister, for what was called Kinder. Um, so she was here for a couple of years before they moved back to Kalgoorlie.

And she was telling me how they were really frightened of the Japanese coming down the river outside Santa. So they actually would have training and actually go and have drills in the halls where we are sitting right now. Um, and they would be watching an old black and white Alice in Wonderland movie sitting in the hall because they had to sit there basically to hide from the invasion.

Um, so it was pretty amazing, and she remembers going and eating in the boarding house, dining room. So the borders go back to all that time so it's pretty amazing now that I'm having contact with boarding parents, thinking that my mom goes back as a country girl coming down here during the war.

As a four-year-old, she said she remembers the big kids carrying her down to the river and they'd go swimming in the river and they'd all burn their feet on the gravel in the heat. And she'd be the only one with her feet not burnt because she was so little. She'd been getting picked up.

I can't even imagine what it would've been like to have come to school that young during a wartime. Um, and rations. But she, um, she loved the learning at Santa even then she said.

Jake: I think to finish off, what would you say to current students to ensure they get the most out of their SMC experience?

Catherine: Grab every opportunity. Santa has so many opportunities to get involved in stuff and, you know, Catherine McAuley says something, you know, make sure you do extraordinary with the ordinary. And I think that's, you know, if you make the most of your opportunities, and try to create, you know, that fairy dust we were talking about earlier, pretty magical things will happen.

You know, Sister Sheila was an amazing Principal when we were here. Um, and our class often joke about her saying that she used to say, and I think it's the saying, every Santa girl should still have, and it was, "if it is to be, it is up to me". So, the impact you have in your life, depends on what you're prepared to put into it.

Jake: Well, that brings us to the end of this episode. Thank you so much for coming in and chatting. It's been an absolute honour.

Catherine: Thanks for having me, and thanks for, um, what an incredible amount of research. I feel like it's like one of these, you know, this is your life. You've, you've gone deep.

You've gone deep in my life. It was actually really nice to actually go back and think through. Um, that's one of those rare things you don't get to do very often in life. So thank you.

Jake: You're welcome. I think you really, you know, to sum things up, embody what it means to be a woman in mercy. And you set such a great example, you know, for our girls and also show parents, you know what, great people come through Santa Maria. I think faith through service is something we're so big on and you really live this out in everything you do, so that's just awesome.

Thank you everyone for tuning in and listening. We really appreciate your support. So, if you head to our website at www.santamaria.wa.edu.au/podcast, you'll be able to find more information on Catherine's charity, Soul Gestures, and The Kindness Challenge, which she ran here at the College. You'll also find the full video interview and transcript to you is episode.

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