



Maria Virgona, Foundation Student- 1965-1969 (years 7-10)

Maria was interviewed by her great niece, Carla Di Benedetto, who is a current year 12 student at Mercy College, in 2021.

What was it like being at Mercy as the only year level?

I remember the college being a bit daunting as I came from a very small Catholic primary school. I also remember how all of the girls were scattered into different schools as Mercy wasn't fully built yet and I remember being with around 50 other girls at St Ambrose's primary, in Brunswick.

When the college was built, I remember thinking wow, this is such a big building and how nice and modern it looked for a school in that era. It was run by nuns, which I always found a bit intimidating and remember the Principle, Sister Thecla, who had the ability to be compassionate, but also strict at the same time. To this day, I admire her leadership qualities.

What are some special memories that you have from your Mercy College days?

One memory that makes me still laugh today is, on my first day in the new building, the teachers told us to take our shoes off in the store room, and made us wear slippers inside the building, because of the new floors. I still remember the girls and I being shocked that we had to buy our own slippers for school.

I have one more very important memory from attending Mercy College, how the teachers at the time were the only ones I had ever had, that actually showed me that I could be intelligent and have a career that I wanted. Before going to Mercy I just thought that I would have to work in a job that I hated to earn an income.

I remember having English class and I loved it, it was my favourite. I thank Mercy for giving me the love I have for English literature and the English language. At home, we mainly spoke Italian so I wasn't introduced to it before attending.



How has the college changed from then to now?

When I started, the school was more like an institution, setup for a large group of children. It was also more intimidating back then.

Today, I see it as a welcoming place where teachers help children individually to pursue the career they wish. Today students are offered more support compared to when I was there, and caters for personal and academic needs. It really is amazing.

Did you set out with a career plan?

I didn't have a career plan and was very unsure of what I wanted to do. Once I left school after year 10, I did a 12 month hairdressing course at a private college. I worked as a hairdresser for 4 years and after that I realised that I wasn't suited to it. So I then applied to be a typist which was with the Australian Federal Government and then later on with the Victorian State Government. As the years went on I ended up becoming a personal assistant for managers in Government departments and worked there for 25 years. I'm grateful that I worked there because I have met many Ministers, health officials and Chief Commissioners.

After working with the public service I retired from the workforce for 15 years to look after my mother. I then recommenced work with a not for profit organisation called Kildonan Uniting Care, which assists people who are disadvantaged.

I am now retired and love spending more time with my family and friends.

What has it been like to see your 5 nieces attend Mercy?

It has been the most rewarding experience to see the girls enter college life and absorb the knowledge and the emphasis that mercy gives to justice, compassion, hospitality and excellence. It is amazing to see how all of the different generations grown and embraced all that life has to offer good or bad. I have seen them enter successfully into the workforce and be independent and assertive young women. Everything that I didn't have the opportunity to do. I am proud of all of them and all that they have achieved.

What advice would you give to current students?

I would like to say to current students that they need to embrace their experience at Mercy, because when they look back on their years at the College, they will realise that it was the best of years. Mercy allows the students to see the world in ways that they never thought of and there is so much opportunity. School doesn't teach you everything, but it allows and encourages you to have a proper education which will allow you to follow your career path. Good education will allow you to be the best person you can be as it opens our eyes to the world beyond the bubble we live in.

Good luck to you all and remember that these are the best days, don't take it for granted.