



Catholic  
Homes

*We care for life through  
active ageing*

# ORDINARY PEOPLE: A REMARKABLE STORY

## THE STORY OF CATHOLIC HOMES



*"it's no great trouble to do so, so why not?"*

*Vic Burns*

## THE STORY OF CATHOLIC HOMES

In 2002, after the death of some of the foundation Board Members of Catholic Homes, it was decided to record the history. Malian writer and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Bâ said that:

*“we need more front porch storytelling...because every time an old person dies, it’s like a library burned down.”<sup>1</sup>*

And indeed some of our libraries were ‘burning down’.

Once we lose this treasure, it is lost forever.

### THE STORY

In the early 1950’s, seeing homeless people all around, Dame Pattie Menzies, the wife of Prime Minister Bob Menzies persuaded her husband to legislate to provide housing for the aged. This became known as the Aged Persons Act 1954.

The funds that were allocated became available to build housing controlled by churches, religious organisations, local government, not-for-profit organisations and benevolent societies. The basis of the funding contribution was for every one pound contributed by the organisation, the government would contribute two pounds.

Enter into this scenario four ordinary men. Four normal human beings like you and I. Not saints. Not theologians. Not priests. But four men who had a social conscience and a deep concern

for the growing number of homeless they saw around them. People who in addition to their own full-time work and family commitments created Catholic Homes. They were:

**Neville Stanley Finn, Victor Edward Burns, Amadic Stanley L’Huillier and Raymond Frederick Shepherdson.**

Vic Burns and Neville Finn came to know each other through working together in a combined business in 1951. After that they went their separate ways and continued the friendship by phone and on occasion, would have lunch together.

### THE CALL

Driving to work one morning, Neville Finn heard the news that the Menzies Government had passed the Aged Persons Act and that funding for housing elderly people would become available.

<sup>1</sup> Hampâté B, Amadou â. (2008) ‘A Spirit of Tolerance.’ World Wisdom, Indiana.



*“Could we somehow start an organisation to build independent living units for elderly people?”*

*Vic Burns*

After mulling over the news, Neville rang his good friend Vic and told him all about it. Vic said to Neville, “I reckon we can do something with this.”

So, Neville and Vic got together to discuss the proposal and agreed that it might be a good idea to build housing for the elderly. They both knew of Ray Shepherdson who was doing some work with Neville and that Ray had a brother-in-law (or a close relative, by marriage) named Amadic L’Huillier who was a builder. Neville and Vic got together with Ray and Amadic and discussed how they could we somehow start an organisation to build independent living units for elderly people.

*It was at that moment that these four ordinary people began their remarkable story.*

Neville and Vic went to talk to the government. They made an

appointment and met with the woman in charge of the department in Victoria. They explained that they had heard of the government funding and would like to be able to build homes for homeless elderly people.

The woman asked them: “Whom do you represent?”. We said, “Well there’s just three or four of us, you know, that’s all”. We just said “this will be good”.

Neville added, “Vic can fit it in with his work”. The lady said, “I’m sorry, but you have to be an organisation in perpetuity, like the Red Cross or the War Veterans or a church or something like that”.

We said “Well ,thank you. We’ll come back if we decide on something like that.”

So Neville and Vic left the government offices and started to think about how

## ABOUT CATHOLIC HOMES

We are a Catholic organisation under the auspices of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne.

At our Catholic core is the call, the Gospel imperative to live and share our charisma and to be open to all people, regardless of religion, culture or socio-economic background.

they could acquire the funding. The inspiration then arrived and Vic recalls:

“I thought, well, I’m a Catholic. And then of course Neville’s a Catholic. Ray. Ray’s a Catholic, yes and his brother-in-law would be Catholic I assume”. So I said, “If we’re all Catholic, we could do it through the Catholic Church.”

*From this point the initial name for Catholic Homes was born - The Catholic Housing Guild for the Elderly.*

The name ‘Catholic Homes for the Elderly’ was adopted when the organisation became incorporated on the 14th July 1989.

The first recorded meeting of the ‘Catholic Housing Fund for the Elderly’ was held at 406 Albert Street, East Melbourne on the 29th November 1960. In attendance was Neville Finn, Victor Burns, Ray Shepherdson and Amadic L’Huillier. The fifth member of this initial

group was Ken Mitchell, the Diocesan Property Officer who was appointed as the Archbishop’s representative. At this first meeting Neville was elected Chairman and Victor was appointed Secretary. At the next meeting the name of the organisation was changed to ‘Catholic Housing Guild for the Elderly’.

“All the land we bought was in the name of the Archdiocese. So if we all dropped dead on the same day, the Archdiocese could just appoint someone to carry on and that would be it. So we were purposeful in not wanting to be anybody that was on top of the tree anywhere. You know, of importance. We just wanted to get accommodation for elderly people.”

Scrupulous from the beginning, Amadic built the first three projects in Mentone, Brighton and Surrey Hills. Bernard Gaynor, the organisation’s solicitor advised that it was improper that



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Amadic and Ray were Board members and contractors, so to ensure that no impropriety was perceived, both parties retired from the Board. Ray rejoined the board again in 1964 when he was no longer working in the building industry.

The Archdiocese then invited Pat Gill to join the Board in 1962. Pat worked tirelessly for Catholic Homes from 1962 to 2002 and was the Board Chair for over twenty years from 1974 to 1997.<sup>2</sup>

Pat Gill recalls: “I was approached by the then Chairman of the Catholic Housing Guild for the Elderly, Mr Ken Mitchell, who was also the property officer for the Archdiocese. He asked me would I be prepared to serve on the Board. I was delighted to accept the offer. At the time there wasn’t a great deal of funds available and we were operating within the legislation of the Aged

Persons Homes Act, which of course was a very beneficial act insofar as it made a lot of Commonwealth grants available for elderly folk. We tried to set out a few parameters within which we might sensibly operate. Everybody on the Board was expected to use what expertise they had and what knowledge they had with regard to what property might be available to put small units or flats on at that time.”

## THE GOAL

The Board of Catholic Homes continued on in their ‘day jobs’ and progressed building homes for the elderly. Their purpose as Neville said, “was to provide housing for people who would otherwise not be in a house.”

<sup>2</sup> Subsequent Directors: John Thomas Cleary 1963 – 1971, Stanley D’Altera 1964-65, Frank Sampson 1964–65, Francis O’Grady 1966–68, James Rees Thomas 1968, Frank W O’Shannassy 1971–73, Peter Graeme Cleary 1985, James Alan D’Arcy 1992, Barry D O’Callaghan 1992–96, David W Bristow 1992.

## WHO IS IT FOR?

Needless to say, that with a name like Catholic Homes, there may have been an assumption that the accommodation was intended for Catholic people only. However, we were very clear from the outset that this was not to be the case.

“We were very emphatic that it wasn’t just for the Catholics - it was for anybody, any elderly person.” Vic Burns.

Vic recalled, “I didn’t have a long range project, other than that there’s so many elderly people out there and if we can help them and it’s no great trouble to do so, why not? It had nothing to do with me building my business or anything. I wasn’t concerned with that. It was just something I found I could add on.”

## THE PLAN EVOLVES

### Twofold Aim

Catholic Homes at this stage in its history had to make some decisions about how they could care for as many poor people as possible. Pat Gill shared quite openly that they adopted the Robin Hood principle.

“So we stumbled between one goal and the other and came up with the Robin Hood principle. We weren’t going to rob the rich; we only wanted a fair share from them which would boost up the other side.”

The Board’s first aim was to provide housing for those in need.

“Many people had nowhere to live because of their financial circumstances. We learned very quickly that we had to attract a cross-section of people because we needed money. It worked out at about 60/40, Vic said.

“60 people could not have afforded any other accommodation. These people were struggling and then there were people who did not have any financial worries - taking them in was a necessity. The end justifies the means, in the sense that you have to have people with money to keep the Guild going”.

Housing for people with little money was our primary concern. Our solicitor drew up a new constitution when Catholic Homes came into existence.



*“Our constitution suggested our prime purpose was to house and care for people in need”.*

*Neville Finn*

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“Our second aim was to get people near the church, near transport and near shops, so the thrust was in that specific direction. We could have got cheaper land for our units, but instead they are in the best real estate in the particular suburbs where they are built. Cheaper land would have been isolated.”

Pat Gill adds: “We were always trying to resolve the obvious difficulty that exists as to who ought to be our prime target for accommodation”.

### **WHO GETS PRIORITY?**

We must not prioritise some people over others and we should not ask them for more money than we need.

“In a lot of instances over the years, a priest would ring you and say, “my housekeeper wants to retire”. Then you had to help them out. We would agree to that with housekeepers. But with other people, no, they never got much of a show”.

“Then we used to help girls from the Abbotsford Convent or girls that came from the courts, 60 or 70 years ago. We had about 8 or 10 of them. They came from Father Bill Brown. He was a Jesuit. He brought the first one to us and she was a housekeeper from Xavier College. Others came from St Vincent’s Hospital and Mercy Hospital where they had worked as house maids or ward maids”.

Vic adds, “I recall a Bishop ringing me and saying “Vic, my aunt is eligible for a unit because of her age. Could you help her out?”. Of course we could, but

## ALWAYS THINKING AHEAD

In the late 80's and the early 90's the Board was increasingly concerned for those residents living in the Independent Living Units who were no longer able to care for themselves. Vic Burns raised the question: "What about these people when they need attention? Could we ever build a hostel?"

I advised that she would have to go on a waiting list. "Will she?", said the Bishop and I said "Yes". And the reply was "But my aunt...?". It wasn't rude or anything, it was very polite, but he just wondered if I might be able to do a favour for her. I said, "No, we'll put her on a waiting list. There might be 50 or 100 ahead of her, but that's the best we can do."

Ray Shepherdson remembers one particular heartbreaking case where the need of the individual outweighed the queue policy.

"The only other thing about which I am very, very conscious of is providing for those people with severe personal need. For instance, I got a phone call from one dear lady living in Thornbury. I knocked on the door of the house of the lady, and someone said, "She doesn't live here. She rents the place

behind.". When I went to the place behind, it was a tin shed. There was an old lady living there on a hot summer's day with a little louver window. She was only one of many. We gave her a flat out of turn, because she was desperately in need and we were helping people in need. That was not an isolated case. It was the worst one by far, but it wasn't isolated."

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*Our vision is to continue the healing ministry of Jesus through the provision of first class aged care and retirement living services.*

Left: Vic & Betty Burns

In 1995, each of those involved since the beginning said that their proudest moment was when St Joseph's Hostel in Hawthorn was opened. They believed that they could house homeless elderly people and when they could no longer care for themselves they could continue to be cared for by Catholic Homes so that they too could experience the dignity and compassion they were entitled to.

Ray Shepherdson said, "Actually the most exciting event I suppose, and this is a pretty personal thing, was the day we got the notice we were getting funding from the government to build a hostel. I'd been aiming at that for many, many years and I couldn't get any support. It was a terrible plight in those days. People would get ill and couldn't cope in their units. They had nowhere to go."



Willowbrooke resident Nora Phillips enjoying crafts with volunteer Pip Roe.

## OUR PRIORITIES

- Embracing our Catholic Identity and Mission;
- Developing our services to meet community needs;
- Extending organisational capacity through property development;
- Increasing community awareness about our services and
- Supporting our workforce so they can provide the very best care.

Since 1995, Catholic Homes has thrived. The organisation now operates 10 aged care facilities, four retirement villages, and various community and respite care services, in particular for the residents living in affordable housing accommodation.

The generosity, vision and compassion of the early founders is the bedrock of Catholic Homes today and we continue to aim to achieve the founders' goal as a proudly Catholic organisation providing housing for all people, of all faiths and cultures from independent living through to care in our facilities.

### So why do we tell this story?

There is a Norwegian proverb that states the importance of storytelling and retelling:

*"It is the duty of the present to convey the voices of the past to the ears of the future."*

We have a great story and it is one to inspire, encourage and guide us in the future.

This story is not to brag, as this would offend our Foundation members. However we do need to consciously recognise those who have gone before us and to continue to contribute to the living out of their baptismal call. It is their legacy and our touchstone.

***Catholic Homes - 'we care for life through active ageing'.***



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*From L to R: Maria Egan, Director of Catholic Identity, Mission & Pastoral Care, Vic Burns, Betty Burns, Greg Pullen, Chief Executive Officer, Geraldine Webster, General Manager Residential Services.*

## OUR VISION, MISSION AND VALUES

Catholic Homes has a proud history of delivering quality care and accommodation services on behalf of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne. Catholic Homes aspires to a philosophy of 'care for life', offering security of care to people as their needs change.

### Our Vision

To continue the healing ministry of Jesus through the provision of first class aged care and retirement living services.

### Our Mission

To offer consumers the security of 'care for life' as needs change.

### Our Values

We celebrate the life of individuals and their communities as expressed in their physical, social and spiritual wellbeing.

As a Catholic organisation we faithfully observe the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church by committing to the values of:

#### Dignity

The rights of each person are grounded in the unique dignity each possesses.

#### Compassion

When we truly care we are always open to the needs of others.

#### Integrity

We are honest in our dealings and accountable for our actions.

#### Collaboration

Working together empowers people and produces better outcomes.