

## A creative writing course. A miraculous meeting. An unlikely match. The rest is volunteering history.

By Jessie Byrne

### THE MIRACLE

It was the early 1980s and Mavis Reynolds was new to Adelaide. She knew no-one and was no longer teaching.

A creative writing course at Panorama TAFE offered the chance to meet people and do something meaningful. When the lecturer asked her to write about setting up an organisation, she penned her ideas for a volunteer centre. The piece spurred her to action.

'I went into the Citizens' Advice Bureau in Adelaide and asked, 'What do you do for volunteers here?''

Mavis was sent to the back room to update a volunteering book which listed organisations and what they wanted volunteers to do.

'I was doing that and then I heard a voice out in reception ask, "What do you do for volunteers here?"

'This was Joy Noble. And she came in and we met for the first time. She was the same age as me and just retired. We exchanged papers. She had an account of how she would set up a volunteer centre and I gave her mine, and they were practically the same! That was the miracle of it.'

'It just happened that the two of us were talking about it at exactly the same time. So we thought, let's go!' said Joy.

On 23 August 1982, Joy Noble and Mavis Reynolds opened the South Australian Volunteer Centre, with the support of the South Australian Council for Social Service (SACOSS). The centre was the second of its kind in Australia.

'The reason I thought about starting the volunteer centre was because a friend of mine was an accountant and retired and he'd joined an organisation as a volunteer but they didn't use his skills,' said Joy.

'I thought, there needs to be some organisation that will match a person's skills with the requirements of the organisation.'

### AN UNLIKELY MATCH

Joy and Mavis were in so many an unlikely match.

Joy had retired from social work in the South Australian Department of Community Welfare. She had local knowledge and contacts. Mavis had left teaching in Sydney and was the new girl on the block.

'Mavis was the promoter, the out-there woman. Joy was the thinker and clarifier on what was needed to make volunteering effective,' said Marjon Martin, the centre's first executive officer.

Mavis agreed. 'Joy and I were different in that Joy documented everything, planned and argued the merits of each point. I was creative, maybe impulsive and it worked out well enough as we liked and respected each other.'

While Mavis delivered outrageous takes on the people they came across – the 'pains in the neck', 'the pompous git', the person 'who wanted to be the centre of the universe' – Joy steered the focus towards the more serious end of business.

Yet the two were compatible and delighted in working together.

'There were no differences,' said Mavis. 'Well, there might have been on a point of the constitution where Joy would always argue for this or that to go in, and that's not my field at all, and I would think, fusspot!'

Mavis admitted she was also more likely to make less-considered decisions, like signing up for the office in Franklin Street.

'I've been feeling guilty all my life about this,' she confessed. 'I walked down Franklin Street and there was this old building, 150 years old, and it had 'To Let' on it. And I thought, ooh, gee, that's close to the post office and close to transport.'

Mavis rang the person listed on the sign and suggested a rent arrangement that might have tax benefits for the owner. Pleased with herself, she mentioned her brainwave to SACOSS's Lange Powell.

'He nearly swallowed his tonsils and said, "You can't do that, that's illegal!" But then he got to work and he had us claimed as a charity. And so we went back to the man as a legal charity. And that's how we got the building.'

## HAPPY EARLY DAYS

The Franklin Street office was made up of two tiny rooms. Potential volunteers were interviewed in the corridor and on the stairs. The furniture was secondhand or loaned from a government storehouse.

There was no money to employ staff. Aptly, the volunteer centre was run by volunteers who managed the office, interviewed potential volunteers, met with volunteer managers, matched volunteers with organisations, and assisted with training. Mavis and Joy were also volunteers – each working part-time to share the executive officer role.

The money was thin, but the mood was high.

'The early years were a very happy time and everybody seemed to be really enthusiastic. At morning tea time, everybody was laughing and joking,' said Joy.

Early clients included the not-for-profit welfare sector and those involved in sport, schools, museums, galleries and libraries.

The first fulltime executive officer, Marjon Martin, was employed in 1985. Apart from a small sabbatical, Marjon stayed at the helm for 12 years until 1996. In her first year she led a team of 28 volunteers.

‘Joy and Mavis recruited friends and friends of friends. Joy was a great rememberer of people and their interests so we had a varied group,’ said Marjon.

‘The big learning for me was that all people are equally important in an organisation, and so is the way in which volunteers are treated.

‘Volunteers are not getting paid but they need job satisfaction too.’

From the start, the centre set the pace for a new way of thinking about volunteering and managing volunteers.

As Joy and Mavis saw it, volunteering wasn’t about throwing people willy-nilly at organisations. The right people had to be given the right positions in the right organisations. Volunteers had to be accorded the rights, responsibilities and recognition of paid staff.

The centre’s referral service interviewed volunteers and sought information from organisations so they could match skills, needs and aims. Organisations had to develop proper job descriptions for their volunteers.

There were also practical considerations.

‘The host organisation had to be on trial to see that volunteers were looked after, had a cup of tea and had a place to put their purse,’ said Mavis.

## THE LIMITLESS SKY

Joy and Mavis quickly saw other gaps to fill – literature and training on volunteering.

Joy and her younger sister Margaret Curtis wrote Australia’s first book on volunteering, *Volunteer management: a resource manual*, published in 1988 by the Volunteer Centre, by that time located in Pirie St in Adelaide.

‘Because it was the first in Australia, that book sold around Australia for many, many years to come. And of course, we’ve had lots of new editions since that,’ said Joy.

Joy embarked on a publishing career spanning 30 years, producing and collaborating on 14 books on volunteering, ageing and activism. In 2014 she added a children’s book to the list.

Marjon attributed the centre’s success to a can-do attitude by its founders.

‘Joy always had a new idea. She’d wave her arms in the air and say, “The sky’s the limit”,’ she said.

The centre’s first patrons were a case in point: Bob and Hazel Hawke.

‘Bob had been appointed Prime Minister and we’d always thought, let’s go to the top,’ said Joy.

Standing beneath a calico banner stretched across Rundle Mall and surrounded by 200 balloons launched from the David Jones store, Hazel launched the Australia’s first Volunteer Week in 1983.

The centre’s early achievements make a long and proud list.

In the next decade and a half, it hosted the second national volunteering conference. It established the School of Volunteer Management and developed the Diploma in Volunteer Management. It set up volunteering centres in southern and northern Adelaide. It helped set up the national volunteering body and the *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, with Joy sharing the first editorial role

with Fiona Johnston. And it influenced the South Australian government's decision to create Australia's first office for volunteers and first ministerial portfolio for volunteers.

For Marjon, the real achievement was shifting the thinking on volunteering from slotting a person into a position to conceiving volunteering as integral to community and individual wellbeing.

She attributed much of this new thinking to Joy who was very clear that volunteering was something someone did without pay and of their own free will.

'Volunteers make Australia a more democratic, vibrant, caring and cohesive society,' said Joy.

'The picture of the typical volunteer as the well-off woman dispensing charity and baking cakes is a far cry from the reality.

'Volunteering encompasses people irrespective of race, age, gender, background, skill level, or physical or intellectual capacity.'

For Mavis, it was a lot more personal. Volunteering helped her find friends and purpose in a new place – and it changed her.

'I got the greatest pleasure out of volunteering and it made me a nicer person when I'd been a school teacher laying down the law. I had to calm down and listen and try to match people carefully to the job that was needed,' she said.

'We were members of a team and I am very humble about how much help we received.'