

LAUNCH THE *FRIENDS OF ST GILES*
MRS FRANCES UNDERWOOD
WIFE OF HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR
MAWSON PAVILION CONSTITUTION DOCK HOBART
TUESDAY 12 NOVEMBER 2013

Everyone needs a friend and perhaps none more so than the vulnerable in our community. A few months ago I was honoured to receive an invitation to be the Patron of the Friends of St Giles. Until then if you had asked me “What is St Giles?” I’m ashamed to say I would have said, “I think it was a hostel or school for children with disabilities.”

Before taking on a new patronage I always like to research the organisation and then decide whether I think I can make a genuinely useful contribution. Being a patron, like being a friend, means knowing as much as you can about the organisation and the people involved in it. It means identifying the organisation’s history, its goals, and its effectiveness. It means understanding who are the people involved in the organisation; what they do and how they do it. It means personally believing in the value of the work that is done and it means privately and publically supporting and promoting the organisation’s endeavours. And - as is the case with every friendship, it means caring and keeping in touch.

So, since being invited to be patron of The Friends of St Giles I have learned a great deal about St Giles and I am more than satisfied that this is a people centered, highly efficient organization with a long

and impressive history of meeting the needs of children with disabilities and their families and always ready and willing to reinvent itself over and over again to better achieve that aim. To survive, any organization, including the office of Governor, must adapt effectively to changing social climates. It is also imperative to keep abreast of current research and thinking. We know so much more about the brain in 2013 than we did a century ago. We now know that early intervention and quality experiences in early childhood can bring not only personal benefits, but also, social and economic benefits to our community. We now, hopefully, have a much more inclusive attitude to those with disabilities realising that we are all on differing levels of the same continuum. Maybe it is this knowledge that keeps many of us wary of involvement.

As I said before, I was ashamed to admit that I knew very little about St Giles, especially in view of the fact that an uncle by marriage opened St Giles in 1939. The front-page headline of the Examiner newspaper for 8 March 1939 read:

Where little cripples live, laugh - and learn;...

And the following story began:

“THIS afternoon the Premier of Tasmania (Mr. A. G. Ogilvie, K.C.) will officially open the St. Giles Home for Crippled Children, Amy Road, which was purchased by the Society for the Care of Crippled Children from funds subscribed by public sympathisers for the victims of the recent poliomyelitis epidemic. The total cost of the home including alterations and furnishings was £5363. The total amount subscribed to the fund was £12,750.”

Albert Ogilvie was a man before his time in terms of his passion for education and health reform. He toured the world just before the war to look at successful public programs and was a great supporter of St Giles. Clearly Tasmanians have always been generous in their support for those in difficulty like St Giles himself, whose monastery, in the 7th Century, became a stopping point for those seeking spiritual healing in the Holy Land. People prayed to him, especially on his feast day, the 1 September, for recovery from disease. He became the patron saint of the disabled.

Out of little things big things grow. Originally a Launceston based response to the rehabilitation of the victims of the polio epidemic; St Giles is now a statewide operation with a centre in Hobart as well as Launceston. Although polio has not been entirely eradicated throughout the world, thanks to vaccination it is no longer the threat that it used to be. So today, the organisation that grew out of polio is Tasmania's major provider of pediatric multidisciplinary allied health services supporting children with a disability and their families to ensure families stay together in their own homes. With allied health campuses in Hobart and Launceston, adult group homes in the North, South and North-West and centre and in-home respite, St Giles is now a provider of multiple services for adults and children with disabilities.

The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme has changed the nature of service delivery in this sector. As the St Giles current 10-year plan states, the sustainability of St Giles

depends on many things including “funding, competition, growing and changing needs, understanding and respecting [St Giles’] core business, organizational size, leadership, contemporary knowledge and systems, partnerships and work force issues.”

As its history has demonstrated St Giles has no intention of resting on its laurels. Supported by its philanthropy partners, its aim is to grow its services in collaboration with other pediatric health allied services to ensure sustainability and attract skilled clinical practitioners to the state. The vision is to become the acknowledged leader in the area of childhood and adult disability in the state and nationally, and to be recognized as such by the community.

As an educator, when I visited St Giles last week, I was impressed, not only by the cutting edge knowledge and practice, the innovative programs, and the clever technology solutions both for communicating and teaching, but also by the passionate, motivated and professional staff, driven by the needs of the clients to find a solution, the very best outcome. I was impressed that staff regularly engages in, and leads professional development, keeping up to date with the latest research. And above all I was impressed by the fundamental value of the intrinsic worth of each person that underpinned the attitudes, attributes and dispositions at the heart of the social interactions; respect, compassion, warmth, encouragement, and a family friendly environment; I was inspired.

In order for St Giles to fulfill its aims as spelled out in the strategic plan it has to have a presence in the community. It has to be

owned by the community and for its work to be fully understood by the community. For that to happen there is a need to build public awareness of the core business of St Giles. There can be no understanding without knowledge. In a word, St Giles needs friends; friends - as I said at the beginning - who will understand the work of St Giles and the people involved in that work; people who will personally believe in the value of that work and who will privately and publically support and promote St Giles. And be - people who care and who keep in touch. Ladies and Gentlemen a toast to ***Friends of St Giles***.