

PROFILE

EVERYBODY'S SISTER

Teacher, cultural champion, trusted adviser, friend... Over five decades, the Senior Australian of the Year, Sister Anne Gardiner, has become many things to the people of the Tiwi Islands, writes **Rosemarie Milsom**. Photography by Glenn Campbell.

Sister Anne Gardiner loves her footy – no matter that she's the only Sydney Swans supporter in a community of 1800, most of them diehard Essendon and Hawthorn fans. It's a predicament not lost on the Tiwi Islanders, especially when the Swans are having a bad run.

"I had a great big flag out the front of my place and it got ripped one night during a cyclone," says the 86-year-old retired teacher. "And they all joked around town, 'She's too proud, she doesn't have a big flag when her team's losing.' I sent a message back: 'Not too proud. The cyclone blew it down.'"

Out the front of Sr Anne's modest home overlooking the turquoise Apsley Strait, which separates Bathurst and Melville islands, there should, by rights, also be a sleek luxury car. Audi offered her the use of a vehicle during her tenure as 2017 Senior Australian of the Year, an honour bestowed upon her in January for her tireless work with the Tiwi people she has lived among for more than 50 years.

"The car company was very nice but I said, 'You don't know Bathurst Island roads,'" she recounts without needing to qualify just how out of place a luxury vehicle would be on the rust-coloured dirt roads that turn to mud during the

wet season. Instead, Sr Anne gratefully accepted a top-of-the-range Heartway Monarch Royale mobility scooter, the only obvious concession she has made to her age. She drives a Suzuki Jimny Sierra when she needs to travel beyond Wurrumiyanga, the largest community on Bathurst Island, 80 kilometres north of Darwin, and she lives independently in the two-storey besser-block house she once shared with five other nuns. "Now, it's just me," she says matter-of-factly.

How a young woman from Gundagai in southern NSW joined the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart order and ended up devoting her life to the Tiwi people can be traced back to an old photograph. While a teenage Anne was at boarding school in Albury, NSW, two nuns visited from the Sydney congregation that she would later join, to talk to students about their futures. "They gave us a picture of sisters from their order in a canoe," she remembers. "There was a prayer on the back and, of course, we weren't interested then but when I was close to leaving school, I looked at that picture and thought, 'Jeez, I'd like to do something with my life and commit it to God.'"

A copy of the black-and-white photo is part of the collection at the Patakijiyali Museum, founded by Sr Anne in the



NAME

Sister Anne Gardiner

AGE

86

FROM

Wurrumiyanga,
Bathurst Island, NT

OCCUPATION

Retired teacher,
nun, advocate for
the Tiwi people



Tiwi and Catholic symbols unite at Sister Anne Gardiner's Bathurst Island church

mid-'80s and just a short walk from her home. In the photo, six straight-backed nuns sit in a dugout canoe, all but their faces concealed by the same white habit that an earnest Sr Anne wore when she arrived on the Tiwi Islands to teach in 1953. How did she cope with the heat? "You just did," she says. The habit is long gone, replaced by comfortable sandals, a print skirt and a casual collared shirt.

In the early 1950s, the Indigenous community lived in humpies on the beach along the Apsley Strait before the mission

built homes away from the water's edge. Now Bathurst Island's many facilities include primary and high schools, a health centre, airport, government offices, three arts organisations and the museum. Housed in a former mission building, the museum depicts the Creation story and culture of the Tiwi Islands, and celebrates the success of top Tiwi AFL players such as Essendon great Michael Long and 1960s South Adelaide star David Kantilla, described by Sr Anne as "the greatest of all".

The Patakijiyali Museum began as Sr Anne's dream to preserve the rich culture of the Tiwi Islands and has become a symbol of self-determination. In March, she handed over the running of the museum to locals Fiona Kerinauia and Maggie Kelantumama, though she isn't completely finished with her work there. "I've got two more things to do before God calls," she jokes. "As we speak, there's a wall being made for the small office and we want to have a display about the spirits of the Tiwi. I don't have any funding but I'm talking to some builders. They've asked me what my wish list is – they asked the wrong question," she says, an impish grin and raised eyebrow hinting at her well-known doggedness.

"Anne's got a bubbly personality but she's also very determined," says John Naden, who oversees Ngaruwanajirri Inc., a cooperative of Tiwi artists in Wurrumiyanga. "She knows what she wants and she'll get visitors or politicians in a corner and speak her mind."

As well as educating generations of islanders, Sr Anne helped to establish community clubs, from mothers' groups to Little Athletics. "She's tireless," says Naden, "though we all know that at some point she'll have to slow down. It can be tough with the weather and she's here on her own. But the nuns in [the Sydney suburb of] Kensington know she would be a big loss to the community if they called her back and she'd also miss the community. There are no Tiwis who are her age and the Tiwi respect age. She can still solve problems and people talk to her – white and black."

Darwin-based Cathy McGinness, who taught on Bathurst Island when Sr Anne was the principal of Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic Primary School, describes her friend as the "counsellor general". "You'll find most people go to Anne for support," she says. "She has time for everybody."



Sr Anne barracks for the underdog; with Patakijiyali Museum staff (from left) Fiona Kerinauia, Maggie Kelantumama and Joanita Tipiloura



Upon being notified that she was a Senior Australian of the Year finalist, Sr Anne was asked to prepare a speech (the winner isn't told before the prime minister's official announcement at Parliament House in Canberra on the eve of Australia Day). In turn, Sr Anne asked the organisers if she could wear the Tiwi flag if she won. And she did. As she gave her impassioned speech, wiping away tears, the distinctive flag was draped over her left shoulder.

Sr Anne readily acknowledges that she owes the accolade to the Tiwi community. "I've made a commitment in my life not to change people but to work with them and to raise their dignity," she tells me. "I love the Tiwi people and they love me." ●