

‘I went from a teacher to being in charge of three public hospitals’: The 100-year-old Irish nun revered in Australia.

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Sr Angela Mary Doyle, from Co Clare, went to Australia in 1947 at the age of 22 where she worked in healthcare and fought to help men affected by Aids in the 1980s.

By Hosanna Boulter

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An Irish nun who came to prominence in Australia during the 1980s Aids epidemic has been feted in the Australian media after she marked her 100th birthday. Former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd called her a “truly remarkable woman who has given so much to Queensland”.

Sr Angela Mary Doyle from Co Clare went to Australia in 1947 at the age of 22 and worked briefly as a primary schoolteacher. “After six months teaching there was a shortage of sisters in the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Brisbane and six of us were picked from the school and sent to the Mater. I was very nervous, but it turned out to be a very good change for me,” she says. “I went from being a teacher to being a nurse to being in charge of three public hospitals, two large public hospitals.”

It was Doyle’s actions during the HIV/Aids epidemic in the mid-1980s that first brought her to national attention in her adopted homeland.

“I spent a lot of time with the men who had HIV/Aids, and I came to know them. They were very wonderful men to know. And it was sad in those days. They were men were in their early 20s, and they knew that they would perhaps be dead by the age of 30,” she says.

“I began to realise that though I didn’t know much about their lifestyle, if I loved God, I would do what I could for these men.”

Then Queensland premier, Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, had mandated that no help should be given to HIV/Aids patients.

“He said that nobody should help these men because their illness was a direct punishment from God. And I wondered what God he knew,” Doyle says.

“People wouldn’t go near [patients who had HIV/AIDS]. They wouldn’t have anything to do with them, and there was an atmosphere of dislike, even hatred towards them,” she says.

“These patients had no place to stay. They knew no one. They had no money. So, there was a lot to be done to help them.”

Having become aware of the Queensland Aids Council, which was looking after men with HIV/Aids, Doyle organised for their patients to be housed in rental units and provided them with equipment and medical personnel. She even organised a secret workaround of funds when the premier refused to pass the money that the federal health department had set aside for treating HIV/Aids patients, whereby the department would pay her order, the Sisters of Mercy, directly and then they would forward money to the Queensland Aids Council. At the time the Queensland premier publicly lambasted the Sisters of Mercy as “the most altruistic of money launderers”.

“I never had fear. I just had to be careful and very cautious about keeping what we were doing quiet because of the premier,” Doyle says.

She was born Kathleen Doyle on August 19th, 1925, on her family’s farm in Six Crosses, Co Clare, the fifth of nine children. “Our farm was medium sized for those days, and we had cows and calves, pigs, hens, and chickens. The land was fertile, and we were able to sow all sorts of crops,” she says. “We grew up, knowing that we would always be cared for and never be short of money. We knew nothing about money, but we knew we would be cared for.” Her family could not afford to send her to secondary school but at 15 while working on the farm she felt compelled to join a convent and become a nun. “I wanted to give my life to God,” she says.

Her family were not convinced – she says that when she told her mother of her plans she laughed and said: “You’d never stay ... you like dancing too much.” She waited a year before bringing up the subject again and this time her father said: “Why don’t we give her a chance? And if she doesn’t like it, she can come back.”

She applied to join two convents, but she says they would not take her because of her lack of secondary education.

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"I heard about a convent in Cork where there were Sisters of Mercy nuns who had been to Australia and come back to seek young Irish girls to come to Australia with them, to Brisbane in particular, to be teachers, nurses, social workers, whatever. And so, I applied there, and they took me."

Despite taking her vows in 1942, Doyle had to wait five years to get passage on a ship to Australia because it was during the second World War. During this time, she trained as a teacher. "In 1947 we were able to get abroad a ship called Asturias. It took five weeks for us to get to Australia. It was very rough, very difficult, very unnerving, and as a result I've never been on a ship since," she says. "We were told in advance that we would never get home again, but I thought if I can help in Australia, which seems so very, very far away, I will do it." Though she was able to see her mother and siblings again, her father died before she got the chance to return to Ireland. She has continued to advocate for better healthcare for marginalised groups. Most recently she has spoken out on behalf of Taiwanese immigrants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Looking back on her life, Doyle believes that she was invested with a strong sense of service from her parents. "My mother and father weren't rich, but they weren't poverty stricken either – they were helpful to anyone that was in need. We saw that and I think once you see that, you notice people that need help, and if you're in any way capable of helping it, you can't turn away." Her secret to living to 100? "I walk. I have always walked, and I walk fast, except when I'm you know in the house or happen to come across a rich carpet. I can do four or five kilometres in a relatively short amount of time." Of the plethora of honorary doctorates, medals and other recognitions she has received in Australia, only one seems to have truly moved her. "There's now a bus in Brisbane that's named after me. So, you can't ignore that, can you? That's because I turned 100," she says. "I've never had a salary or income, and I have never had a bank account. And all those things don't add to my wealth at all. And really, I accept them. I'm grateful for them, but I go on. You know? It doesn't change my lifestyle in any shape or form."