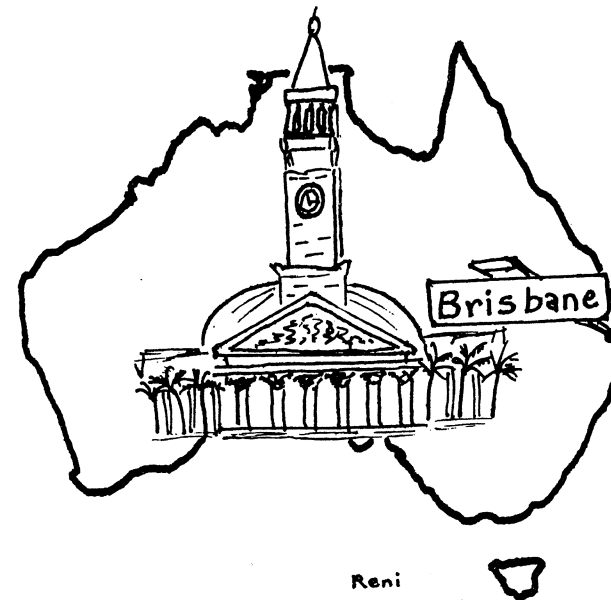


# A Potent Mixture Of Faith, Humour And Courage

*Quiet love don't burn  
It just keeps smouldering forever  
Quiet love deep down  
Hidden in the heart like buried treasure  
. . . Quiet love.*

Graeme Connors  
*Quiet Love*



**LAST STOP BRISBANE.**

We end our journey in a humble little presbytery where the heartbeat of Brisbane's West End community sets the pace of people living and working together. Father Dethlefs knows his community as well as anybody. Here is his story.

**WALLY DETHLEFS**

It is only fair that one should be forewarned about Father Wally Dethlefs. His quiet, unassuming manner masks an unremitting sense of humour, and nothing pleases him more than an unsuspecting victim caught in his verbal trap. Wally makes ridiculous statements with such guileless sincerity that it takes most of us a few seconds to realise he is having us on. That's his playful side, and the twinkle seldom leaves his eye. His humour is without bite, and he appears to enjoy as much the joke turned on him.

The serious side of Wally Dethlefs is a different business altogether. He is, first and foremost, a devout Christian. His values and his vision have led him, quite literally, to live with the poor and the powerless, and to act on their behalf. His focus has been most notably on disadvantaged and homeless youth. This would seem an appropriate avenue of work for a priest with a social conscience. There can be little controversy surrounding the fundamental welfare of children! Yet, Father Dethlefs has managed to incur the wrath, with fear and trembling, of the highest authorities in the Catholic Church and the Queensland State Government.

Wally's story sort of unfolds. He did not set out initially to become a change agent for young people. At no time did he make a conscious decision to become a social activist, to challenge the institutional structures of government. Rather, he saw himself as a man with a steadfast commitment to gospel values whose objectives were twofold: to ease the suffering he saw around him if he could, and to take affirmative action against injustice when he saw it.

The second one, that's the catch. Wally remembers always feeling an inordinate sense of outrage when he encountered injustice in any form. We asked Wally to recall when he first experienced such an outrage. He answered without hesitation.

"I was four years old," Wally replied, and he was not having us on this time. "My father didn't come home from work one day. We learned that he had been arrested. A few days later he was incarcerated in a concentration camp in Victoria as an undesirable alien."

The senior Mr. Dethlefs, a naturalised British citizen born in Germany, worked on the docks in Brisbane. He became the victim of the paranoia surrounding all things German during World War II. As a stevedore, he had been involved in union activities, and this smacked of communism. He was clearly a dangerous risk.

"I remember this period only vaguely," explained Wally. "I certainly did not understand the details of what was going on, but I knew that it was wrong."

While Wally's father was acquitted of all charges nine months later, the experience of his imprisonment had a lasting impact on the Dethlefs family. Wally recalls his mother's fight for his father's release.

"We had no money and no income, but my mother had faith in God and in the power of prayer, and she took on the government of the day to have her husband returned to his rightful place at home." Wally credits his mother's example of active faith as significantly influencing his own spiritual development.

We can only speculate on the degree to which this event planted the seeds of the social conscience which was to dominate Wally's life. In any case, action became Wally's standard response strategy when conditions are unfair. Additionally, from his early childhood years, Wally found the inconsistencies in adult standards of equity to be grossly unacceptable.

When he began school, for example, he felt puzzlement at the importance which was placed on examination results. "I pondered over the fact that the person who came top of the class was in some inexplicable way a better person than the rest."

Then, in fourth year, one of the teachers was a particularly severe disciplinarian who systematically used the strap. During the final class period, the teacher asked any student who had not received the strap from him to stand up. Several boys stood up, and were immediately brought forward for

“four of the best”. The teacher explained, with a malicious tone, that obviously these boys must have done **something** which the teacher had not seen.

Wally's outrage at such episodes became an early problem, and he periodically erupted in fits of violent temper. A wise priest helped him learn to deal with his anger. “It is a great gift,” the priest told him, “as it means that you have lots of energy at your disposal. If you can learn to harness that energy, you can channel it into positive things such as patience, kindness, perseverance ...” The young Wally began to work on that.

Wally recalled many discussions at home about stop-work meetings and strike action. Working conditions for the stevedores were harsh in the 1950s, and the senior Mr. Dethlefs was active in the Waterside Workers Union. The strikes were about wages and conditions, but also about social issues, such as Australia's involvement in the Korean War. The waterside workers refused to load ships bound for Korea, yet the local priest became an Army Chaplain and embarked for South Korea, hailed as a hero.

The media gave prominence to the point that Communists were active in the Union, and that the strikes were Communist led. “I couldn't puzzle these things out,” Wally admits. “I knew that my Dad was a good man, that Father Shine was a good priest, that Communists were all bad, that there were Communists in my dad's Union, that the Communists in North Korea were fighting against Father Shine in the South, but how all this could be reconciled was beyond me.”

A summer job in a factory when he was sixteen brought new awareness of the nature of working life. Wally's own experiences had been narrowly focused within the Catholic community of parish, school and family. Conditions in the factory were in stark contrast. There the floors were filthy and dangerously slippery. As a young temporary worker, Wally was made to do the dirtiest work, and was punched out a few times by the older workers. “I became conscious of the conditions many people have to put up with. With no education, they had no choice, and this made me conscious of the education I had received. My opportunities were broader and my values were different. I knew I never wanted

to be into the exploitation and oppression of others, and I wanted to do something to stop such oppression wherever I could.”

As Wally matured, his thoughts turned to the priesthood, where he would be in a position to do good for people and to effect change in the ruling systems which promoted exploitation and hypocrisy. He would be in a position to protect the powerless who could not defend themselves. Confused as he might be about ethical inconsistencies in the world around him, his devotion to the gospel message of helping the helpless was crystal clear. Wally entered a seminary at age seventeen.

“I learned quickly,” Wally recalls, “that the seminary is a very unChristian place.” He began breaking rules from the start, when the seminary rules contradicted those set out in the Bible. For example, a classmate became ill and was confined to the dormitory where he was allowed no visitors. On the pretext of needing something from his own locker, Wally was able to slip in and visit his friend's bedside where he lay too weak to eat the meal which had been left beside him. Wally fed him the meal, and promised to come back at next mealtime. When recalling such incidents, Wally emanates indignation, not piety. “It's a personal insult when I see people treated this way.”

The seminary, overall, created a distance from people, increased the disparity between Christian ideology and the behaviour of those who espoused it. Wally found the intellectual emphasis of his classical education to be irrelevant, the content of the religious training to be purely theoretical. He found solace and liberation in the writings of Joseph Cardijn.

Cardijn, founder of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) organisation, argued against training for pastoral ministry in a four-walled situation. “The seminary,” Cardijn wrote, “must find its fulfilment in everyday reality; not in a room, but outside, in the open air, through permanent contact with LIFE!” And faith, declared Cardijn, was to go hand in hand with action. This, Wally decided, was more like it!

Wally was ordained in 1963, and assigned to a parish in Brisbane as an assistant priest. Imagine his despair to find that he did not fit in! Indeed, it would be several years, and a

series of assignments, before Wally would settle in. "Attending the duties of the office of priest was important, but it wasn't enough. I had to unlearn the habits acquired in the seminary and get back in touch with people, in a parish with a parish priest whose vision and action matched those of the Gospel Jesus."

As a teacher, Wally strove to make religious instruction relevant, and as chaplain of the Young Christian Student (YCS) groups he focused on moving the discussions from theory to social issues, then from discussion to action. Wally was strongly motivated to do something.

An opportunity for action came in 1971 when the new Radford System of Education was introduced in the secondary school system. Whether or not the new system was a good one was not the issue. The issue was that the Radford System dramatically changed the examination process, and this was a great worry to the students. They were angry about the changes, and about the fact that they had in no way been consulted.

The Diocesan Executive decided to have a closer look at the Radford system by conducting its own inquiry through the YCS groups. With enthusiastic relish, Wally helped to draft a questionnaire for distribution to the students, and a report of the results was objectively prepared. The students' responses seemed both thoughtful and fair, but the report fell on deaf ears. Wally was dismayed, not because the Executive did not accept the students' criticisms, but because it hadn't even considered them.

Wally tried again the following year, this time in league with the Queensland Parents and Citizens Association, who also expressed concern about the new system. A second inquiry was conducted, this time State-wide, and the results replicated the earlier report. The P&C Association felt the students had expressed legitimate concerns. Further, they argued, as receivers and consumers of the education system, the students should be consulted. This report, as with the first, was never made public.

The final attempt to organise a balanced debate about the controversial Radford plan brought Wally into a meeting with a radical left-wing group where the plan was up for discussion. When this group's discussion deteriorated into a

heated argument, Wally called for action. He got it. The group decided to DO something. The ultimate outcome included the establishment of an alternative learning centre in an inner suburb and a students' rights group with support from local solicitors.

For Wally personally, the outcome was not as satisfying. Father Dethlefs was becoming a downright nuisance to the school administrators and the Department of Education. He was dismissed as a radical, a subversive. "I took the latter term as a compliment," Wally declared with a wry smile, "as it means working with people at the bottom, working for change from below."

However, the schools began tightening their control over student activities. The Young Christian Student groups were banned from a number of schools. Wally was accused of "disturbing the peace of the school". No support was forthcoming from the bishop. Wally was further alienated from priests of the archdiocese, and from some of his friends.

Subversion carries a high price.

Wally wondered at that point if he might be wrong. He studied the position statements circulated by the Church with regard to education. He examined his own conscience. "I decided the students were right, and I was prepared to continue taking a stand even at the risk of being wrong." Wally was learning to be a community change agent, and the worst was yet to come.

Wally had a kindred spirit in Father Pat Tynan, who was the Archdiocesan Chaplain for the Young Christian Workers. Thus both men were associated with Christian Youth groups, and both were attuned to an active ministry rather than a passive one. Early in 1973 the two men moved into Kedron Lodge, a vacant nineteen-room house, which they earmarked for a YCS-YCW training centre. The house would provide more than adequate space for the youth group meetings, and for their own private reflection and study. They could continue in their 'political' activities, which included the "Freeway Abolition and Compensation Group" and amnesty for YCW political prisoners in South Vietnam. None of these activities were approved by the Church authorities.

In August of that year a phone call to the Lodge resulted in setting a new focus for Wally's energies. The call was from a

woman who was seeking a Catholic priest to visit her fourteen-year-old niece who had been placed in Wilson Youth Hospital. It turned out that a priest hadn't visited Wilson for some six months, so Pat and Wally formally applied to share a chaplaincy there. An arrangement was granted for them to visit 'when required'.

Wally was shocked at conditions in this 'treatment centre', which amounted to little more than a juvenile prison. Most of the inmates, girls between the ages of eight and seventeen, boys between eight and fifteen, were 'sentenced' from the Children's Courts. Many were there on non-criminal offences, called status offences, and including running away from home, being uncontrollable, or living in moral danger. Frequently the children were victims of physical and sexual abuse at home. Some were indeed guilty of offences like shoplifting, and a few of more serious crimes. By and large, however, it is fair to say that a majority of the Wilson youth were victims rather than perpetrators of criminal offences.

Conditions at Wilson Youth Hospital were notoriously bad if even half the stories about it were true. There were no teachers, consequently no continuation of study. Psychiatric drugs were administered for behaviour control. Rumours were rife about physical and psychological abuse, and there was no line of advocacy to which the child could turn.

A major concern for all the children was that placement at Wilson was mostly by way of a Care and Control Order, which meant an indeterminate sentence as a ward of the Court until the child reached the age of eighteen. Administrative control at Wilson was shared by the Department of Children's Services and the Department of Health. This arrangement created an autocracy that was virtually impenetrable.

Wally and Pat regularly attended Wilson for a half-day per week, seeing young people in a one-to-one situation. They also conducted a church service each Sunday. When they were nearing a release date, Wally or Pat would give them the address and phone number of the Lodge in case they needed it. Many of them did. Kedron Lodge became a housing option for ex-Wilson youth. Others among the homeless population took to dropping in. Word got around, and young people who were troubled for whatever reason came to Kedron for solace

and help. Kedron Lodge became a significant resource for young people in the community sector.

As a dedicated priest cum youth advocate, Wally was still periodically assailed with doubts about the suitability of his activities within the Christian ideology. Attendance at the International YCS Conference in Holland in 1974 reassured him. While these meetings were organised on behalf of the Young Christian Students, it may as aptly have been termed Community Development. Wally described a workshop during which a global analysis of society reached a number of affirming conclusions, including the following: The world is dominated by the capitalist system, whose aim is only the increase of profit, and **not** the upliftment of the conditions of life of the whole of society, especially the lot of the poorest.

In direct response to Wally's search for spiritual truth was this question from Gustavo Gutierrez, the "Father of Liberation Theology": Is it possible to be a Christian and not be involved with the oppressed and the marginalised people of the world?

Wally returned from the Conference revitalised and full of hope. But not for long. Pat was no longer at Kedron Lodge. He had been transferred to a country parish, where he could no longer engage in political activities, nor continue to work with the YCW. He had not been replaced in his Brisbane work. The natural consequence of this move on the part of the Church was the erosion of the impact of the YCW, and Wally foresaw the same fate for the YCS. In his words, he and Pat had been on a collision course with both school and church authorities, and the end of the road was near. Where to go from here?

Wally was haunted by the conditions which prevailed at Wilson. Reluctantly he continued his contact there, now without Pat's help. A number of homeless youth were resident at the Lodge by that time, and as young people from Wilson continued to drop in, a new energy began to mobilise. Kedron youth were alarmed and angry at the reports of the Wilson youth. They insisted that something be done.

Several tertiary social work students, who had been following up on individual young persons released from Wilson, also demanded action. Together with Wally, they formed "The Wilson Protest Group".

As news of this provocative crusade circulated among the authorities, Wally was made to feel less and less welcome at Wilson Youth Hospital. As an institution, it was a closed shop unless you had official permission to enter, and as a prison, its custodial staff had all the control strategies at their disposal. Even if entry by official permit were allowed, access to a particular resident or group could be easily denied. The staff, in the anonymity of following orders, consistently held the winning hand.

What to do? In desperation Wally contacted the media to express some of his most serious and well-documented concerns. That was the last straw! Wally was sacked from the chaplaincy.

"I was utterly depressed for about three weeks. I knew that I could not forget about Wilson, and I could not escape the conviction that God was compelling me to work on behalf of all these disadvantaged young people." Wally dusted himself off and prepared to have another go.

Meanwhile, his sense of utter defeat was alleviated when he heard the news of his replacement at Wilson. The new chaplain was to be none other than Father Pat Tynan! Wally was astounded. The Wilson administration was jumping from the frying pan into the fire! Working with bureaucracy, Wally concluded, is like walking backward through molasses.

Now, no longer allowed inside Wilson, what could Wally do about it from the outside? Shortly after his dismissal from Wilson, Wally was invited to meet with the Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) to discuss juvenile justice in general, and conditions at Wilson in particular. At these meetings the task of investigating the various services affecting children (welfare, police, Children's Court) were undertaken, and the group agreed to reconvene in two months' time. Wally was assigned the task of preparing a report on Wilson, which he undertook with the help of two social work students from the Wilson Protest Group.

Wally's area of concern broadened as they constructed their report. It wasn't just the treatment at Wilson, but in police and court proceedings as well, and indeed in the lack of adequate community resources for young people in trouble. The group produced an ambitious document entitled "The Juvenile Justice System, Secure Institutional Care and

Alternatives in Queensland". What to do with this document now that they had it? No further meetings were ever called by QCOSS.

Wally's community development career began in earnest then, as his small protest group adopted the name "Justice for Juveniles", and decided to promote their document as private citizens. "We typed up stencils and ran off five hundred copies of the document on our ancient Gestetner for distribution to individual people. We invited those people to submit their names and addresses so that if we were forced to conduct a public campaign, we would have a list of people to call on. The demand was so great that we ran off another five hundred, then with a small grant published a further one thousand copies.

"We invited criticism of our document and sought meetings with the Health and Welfare Ministers. The Ministers ignored us for eighteen months, but a few Department heads responded at once. The essence of their response was to lament the fact that 'Father Dethlefs was at it again', with the usual clap-trap of dismissing the message and stigmatising the so-called social activists. The Church hierarchy was little better, evading the Church's responsibility for any of the problems we raised."

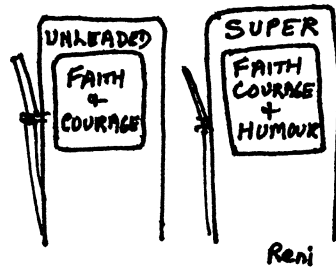
The implication seemed to be always there, that it was Wally who was the problem. It was time to launch the public campaign. Justice for Juveniles had a strong core group of eight people by then, which included Anne McMillan, a caring and crusading young lawyer.

"We held public meetings, organised seminars, sought invitations to speak to any and all groups who would have us. Young people who had been through the juvenile justice system came along and told their stories firsthand."

The campaign went on for several years, and then it was community groups and private citizens who made the first supportive responses. Eventually the paranoia surrounding Father Dethlefs appeared to lessen in both government and church sectors. Kedron Lodge was fully functioning and officially registered as a charity, and was building respectability. Justice for Juveniles was strong and active in the hands of people like Anne and the others. Wally was near

burnout. He applied to the Church for some time off, moved out of Kedron Lodge, and went overseas.

Wally returned to Australia the following year, spiritually revitalised and charged with energy about a new plan. "I had formulated in my mind the kind of Centre I thought we needed in Brisbane, and the goals I wanted that Centre to achieve." The proposed centre, now called the Youth Advocacy Centre (YAC), would be all inclusive, combining legal and welfare services with continuing education, research, and community development.



Wally and Anne now retraced the familiar steps of soliciting support and funding, while combatting the resistance thrown up defensively by the existing agencies. Neither the Church nor the Department of Family Services could see their way clear to fund the YAC, but the Queensland Legal Aid Commission came to the rescue. The Youth Advocacy Centre opened its doors in downtown Brisbane in June 1981, with an administrative assistant, a seconded lawyer from the Legal Aid Office and part-time volunteers. It was, of course, not as easy as it sounds, but the Centre was destined to thrive with Anne as its solicitor, and Wally on staff as administrator and community worker. Although both these people left the Centre some time ago, it is still alive and well in a Brisbane suburb.

Wally took to the community. "I was constantly on the lookout for suitable accommodation for young people. I have never been homeless, but I know something about it from living with homeless people and hearing their stories. I began visiting local communities and talking about the needs of homeless youth in their areas, and about what they could themselves do about the problem."

"When the Wynnum Catholic Youth Group invited me to speak, I already knew a fair bit about the Wynnum area. I knew they were a proud community, and eager to provide their own adequate resources. I knew also that an average of two young people were forcibly detained in Brisbane each month because of no suitable accommodation in the Wynnum area.

"At our first meeting I suggested that, for a start, a boarding program could cater for these two young people who were being sent away each month. The boarding program was a model based on local families volunteering to board adolescents for no longer than three months. During this time, intensive work would be done with local professionals in the hope that the problems could be resolved, and the youngsters returned home.

"Eventually a half-dozen households made a twelve-month commitment to give the boarding program a go. I worked closely with the families initially, but by the end of the first year, they were ready to assume full responsibility for their group. They adopted the name 'Bayside Adolescent Boarding Inc.' (BABI), and the group flourished very well on its own."

Other community support projects included a boarding program specifically for young people on remand for minor offences, and a young women's information and referral centre known as Zig-Zag. Wally never stopped. These are but some highlights. For his own recreation he made his annual spiritual retreat, and took time for study and writing. Then he went to prison.

Wally agreed to take on the part-time duties of Prison Chaplain shortly before the position was made a full-time one. The assignment quickly became all-consuming, as anyone who has ever worked in prisons knows. Wally continued with his developmental approach in his work there.

"Prison, too, is a community, albeit a vile and dehumanising one. As a community worker, my approach was to bring men together inside to support each other. In every group of prisoners there are the key agents, and I made it a practice to resource those men. Through them, the common interests of a group could be identified, and then developed in the meetings they had with me."

"For example, Ted Watson. He's an exceptional bloke, an Aboriginal, a lifer. He came and talked to me briefly about programs we might start. Then he came back in a couple days with the proposals he had worked out with his mates. They had three suggestions: that all the Aboriginals be placed in one yard, that Aboriginal culture studies be introduced, and that an Aboriginal Arts and Crafts class be started. We achieved all these things, and there were no black deaths in custody during the time Ted's group was active."

There was a limited sports program allowed in the main Brisbane prison at that time, and Ted got up an Aboriginal football team. Somehow he managed to get sponsorship for jerseys, and when the blackfellas ran out on to the playing field, dressed in uniform, the white prisoners complained of their having a concession. Ted told them, "We organised and worked for these, and you can, too, but you have to work together."

Ted said this of Wally Dethlefs: "Wally is unique. He supported the natural leadership that was in there. He's a liberationist priest. That's good. He showed us that individuals have to stand up for their rights, and gave us the support we needed from the outside."

Wally is currently what one might term a freelance community worker. He acts as a liaison for those in need and the appropriate community resource, and is on call for numerous community organisations. He continues to study both community work and gospel principles, in search of solutions. He recently negotiated with the Church Personnel Board for some time to study, to think, and to write. Wally has his own little cottage, so would not require presbytery accommodation, but offered to help out in parishes as required as part of his proposed plan.

The priest at the Personnel Board seemed confused. He said, "Well, sure, alright, but that means that you'll be working by yourself and not accountable to anybody. So I will have to ask you to put in a monthly report of what you're doing."

Wally replied, "Marvellous! I'll be happy to do that. I keep an account of what I'm doing for my own purposes, so that will be easy for me to make that available to yourself and your committee. The only thing is I think this accountability

thing should be mutual so I would be wanting an account from you and your committee on what you're doing as well."

Wally didn't hear from him again.

Wally spoke with some regret at what he called wrecked relationships. "My fellow priests have most frequently seen me as a subversive and a revolutionary. Not living in a presbytery, I'm seen to be lazy. I'm a social worker rather than a priest. As for the Bishops and the Institutional Church, I guess the best one can say is that I've always been a thorn in their side."

Then the benign and guileless smile spread across his face, and the momentary sadness in his eyes gave way to a determined optimism. Wally continues to attack institutional structures both from without and from within, pushing them towards equity and accountability. His unshakeable faith is threefold, in the gospel ideology which gives him strength, in his love for other people which gives him compassion, and in his belief in people working together, which gives hope to all of us for a safer and saner society.