



## Brotherhood of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

In the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Brotherhood's founder, Father Tucker used film to enable people to tell their stories.

Today, in this book, we have a collection of stories of people we help, written by Father Jeff O'Hare, the Brotherhood Chaplain.

Jeff is in the unique and privileged position of fostering the spiritual dimension of the large, sprawling and complex community that is the modern Brotherhood.

The role of the chaplain is special, and his relationship with each of the people who have sat and shared their stories for this book is unconditional.

Through their experiences, we begin to understand the reality of what life can be like for many people in our community.

Jeff has a unique gift for identifying the strengths and courage of the people he meets in his work here at the Brotherhood.

So often we mistakenly see others as victims, while the truth is that we are all fellow citizens in need of help, support and companionship and with our own valuable contribution to make.

That is the universal experience.

So often we categorise people as 'other', we think of them as somehow different, we push them to the margins and imagine that they are not like us.

If you read these stories carefully you will recognise that each person who has been courageous and generous enough to share their life with us, are people just like you and me.

Through their memories of family, loss, tragedy, and triumph we see that every human life is precious, regardless of social standing, wealth or power.

We see that a little of a higher being dwells within all of us.

And we are challenged to allow that bit of the higher being in each of us to meet the bit of the higher being that dwells steadfastly within our disadvantaged neighbour.

These stories encourage us to walk in the shoes of our fellow man — and to walk humbly with our God.

Tony Nicholson  
Executive Director  
Brotherhood of St Laurence

Extract from introduction to *Brotherhood – Stories of Courage and Resilience*

# Brotherhood

Stories of Courage and Resilience

Written by

Fr Jeff O'Hare

Photography by Peter McConchie

## *We are delighted to present Brotherhood – Stories of Courage and Resilience.*

Much of our work here at the Brotherhood of St Laurence is aimed at strengthening the capacity of people who have — often through no fault of their own — reached a turning point in their lives.

Engaging with people at crucial moments in their lives can provide the opportunity for a turning point that will change their lives in a positive way by empowering them. This was certainly the case with the book's subjects.

We encourage you to take time to read about some of their amazing journeys. And remember — your purchase of the book will enable us to continue our work towards an Australia free of poverty.

*Brotherhood – Stories of Courage and Resilience*  
Published by Penguin

**\$29.95**



Bishop Philip Huggins  
Chair, Board of Directors  
Brotherhood of St Laurence

## New book reveals our common humanity

As disciples of Jesus, we want to see people as our Lord sees them, but this isn't easy. As life unfolds, we all get a little disfigured by the things that go wrong. I recently gave Holy Communion to a Senior School. I looked into the students' faces as they received Communion, saying those profound words: 'The body of Christ keep you in eternal life.'

Every now and then, an older face of staff would appear, a much more lived-in face. There is no necessary correlation between what you see in a face and the actual story. But some adult faces seem to convey more sorrow and hardship. Some are full of character — both beauty and pain — and are unique and beautiful in their own way.

The *Brotherhood* book's brilliant photos by Peter McConchie are each a meditation.

You could buy the book just for the photos. The stories elaborate the faces most vividly. They are stories of courage and resilience, sensitively told by Fr Jeff O'Hare. They remind us of an important truth: God can speak to us through any and through all. We get conditioned to listening to some more than others but that is not the Gospel way.

Recently, at the end of a long week, I was driving to an evening function, thinking to myself: "How did I agree to also do this?" Some young folk doing a kind of work for the dole program around the Church were also there. They were a contemporary version of the noble 70s order of hippies — lots of long-flowing clothes, flowers in the hair, dreamy looking, comprehensively unchurched. Afterwards, cleaning up the supper, a young woman asked for some elaboration on my role. I tried a little, she butted in. "Wow, does that mean you work full time for God?" "Well, yes ...".

***"Wow ... how fantastic is that," she enthused, as I recalled coming along the road rather reluctantly.***

The lesson one forgets, then remembers, is our need to stay open to what we can learn from others — all kinds of others. It is an ancient wisdom. Accordingly, in the Benedictine tradition, that is why "abbots are to ask counsel of the young (3:3 Benedict Rule) and to pay attention to any criticisms offered by a visitor (61:40). In both cases it may be Christ who speaks through human agents — the less overpowering they are, the more attentively we must strain to hear what they say.

The principle St Benedict enunciates is that the awe "great ones" inspire assures them of respect, but it is in listening carefully to the little people, the young, the marginalised, and the inarticulate, that Jesus is more especially honoured. God always reveals what is best, provided we are prepared to hear the divine voice in the most unlikely place.

Fr Jeff approaches each of his conversations in this spirit. Accordingly, his clear prose means these stories may change your life, renewing your way of seeing. Buy the book and see what happens. By the divine grace and our own best efforts, may we see each person as Jesus sees them.



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### Inspirational quotes from *Brotherhood – Stories of Courage and Resilience ...*

**1. Darryl Gardener** 'The boys' home, in Burwood, was called Allenby. It had different sections with different names, and I went through all the sections because they were divided by age groups, from babies up to age six. But we would get a chance to play with each other. It wasn't a bad place; I felt looked after. Then I moved to Hillside in Wheelers Hill when I was seven, because I was too old for Allenby. Some of the kids didn't have families and some didn't have a good home. My family was good because they came to visit me a lot, so I had a sense of belonging. I played a lot of pool – I was so good at it, it wasn't funny, much better than now. We went on lots of outings and I had some foster parents who were good to me. They would take me to the Eye and Ear Hospital every Thursday for speech therapy. There was little schooling for us and I really only spent time in school up to Year 7.'

**2. Maureen O'Connor** Maureen has involved herself in the *Unsung Heroes* program at the Coolibah, which was developed by the Brotherhood in conjunction with Melbourne Grammar School, one of the city's oldest and most prestigious schools. Through this program, a member of Coolibah pairs up with a Year 10 student who is seeking to understand, and document, the life journey of a person living in poverty – it is an eye-opening exercise for many of these affluent lads. Maureen's partner, Jordan, is taking the experience very seriously and has been deeply attentive to Maureen and her story. Finding the graves of her parents became an irresistible challenge for him, and he threw himself into the search with Maureen. They walked their feet off, made many inquiries and finally pinpointed the spot. Maureen stood and looked, and wept. This was the place where she remembered standing as a young girl at her parents' funerals, and it was an emotional moment.

**3. Roy Barrett** We know little about Roy other than that he was born in Geelong West in 1932, and that when he was about fourteen his parents died and he came to Melbourne; at that time he lost contact with his brothers and sisters. For many years he has resided in the Brotherhood's independent living units, and he attends the Coolibah Centre on a daily basis. He gets out and about, mostly in Brunswick Street. He is cared for by the Brotherhood, Southern Cross Care and the State Trustees. The support he receives is a wonderful example of how the most needy can be gathered up and given a sense of community and friendship that helps them feel safe and included. There is no doubt that Roy feels this is his home and he enters into as much of the activity at the Coolibah as possible, from carpet bowls or trying to help in the garden to sitting in on the weekly Communion service – sometimes receiving Communion and at other times just wandering off.

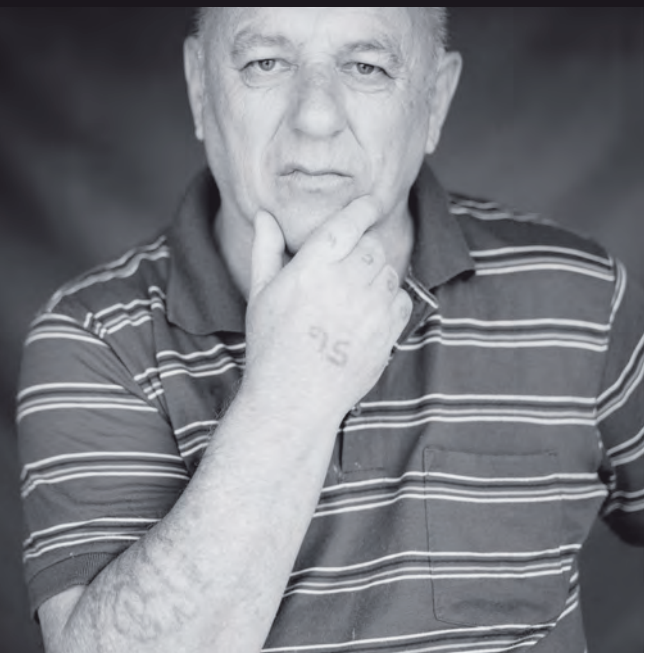
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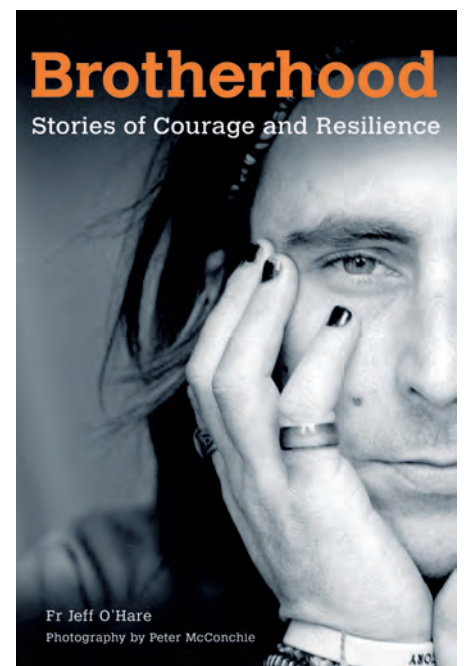


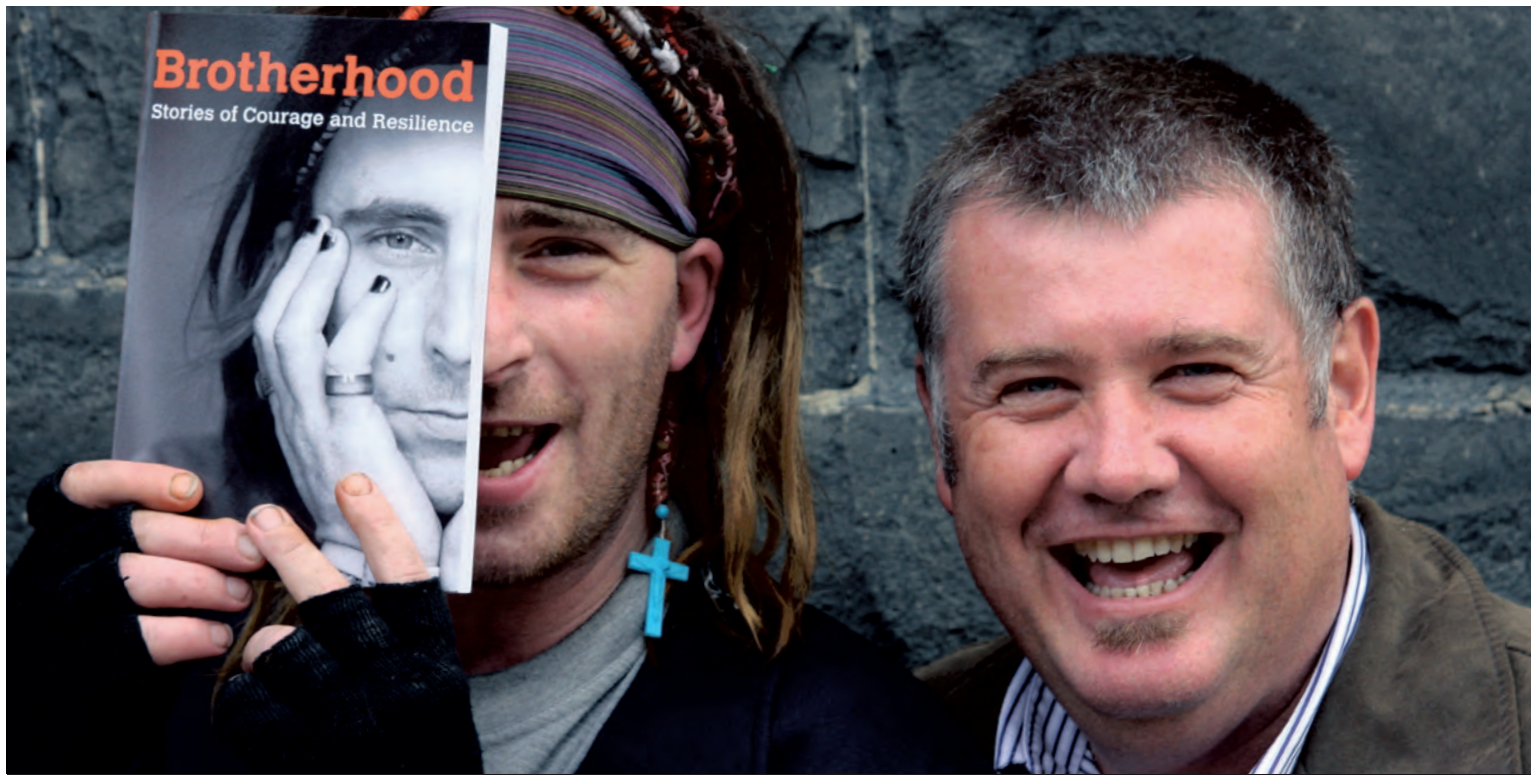
photos by Peter McConchie

**4. Carmelita Rajahpakse** 'I speak three languages – Singhalese, Tamil and English – which has been very helpful in the sort of community work that I love to do. I was taught by both family and the nuns that at the heart of the matter was not race, creed or colour but the human spirit, and I'm so thankful for that lesson. By believing there are no differences between people we can allow ourselves to be one big family. Beauty and colour are only skin-deep, but it is hard in a diverse land to keep the peace. I have always remembered that whatever we do, we do for the sake of our children so that they will have a future.' Carmelita has a great love of gardening, which kept her sane when she first arrived in Melbourne. As she settled in her daughter's home she would do what many newly arrived immigrants do – simply wait for her family to come home each night, which made for a very long day and exacerbated her longing to be doing the things she knew and loved in her homeland.

**5. Pat Parker** 'After it was over, I stopped being just a social drinker. I had a beer at a party when I was 30, and it just took over. People would say I looked good and I drank to celebrate that – to please others. I became an alcoholic and ended up at AA meetings. That blew me away, as there was a room full of people – professionals, well-known people, actors. I realised that it could happen to anyone! But I could not stop drinking and in the end I found myself on a park bench, the lowest moment of my life, with nowhere else to go. The kids were with friends, and I was alone. The sense of loss was overwhelming. Loss of family, friends, self-esteem – I'd lost the lot.'

**6. Gil Baker** Gil has acquired brain damage, the result of a brutal assault two or three years ago. Police witnessed the attack and someone even filmed the incident. The local bus had pulled up at the front of his house and Gil had gone out to help his wife with the shopping, when a car pulled up behind the bus and some youths jumped out with a shovel and other things. That's all he can remember. His three-year-old daughter was attacked and his wife assaulted. Gil ended up in intensive care: as well as suffering brain damage, he had six broken ribs, neck injuries, a perforated eardrum, his nose was broken and there was a 75mm hole in his skull. He has lost confidence, suffers physically and lives with severe loss of memory.





***I was excited by the prospect of writing BROTHERHOOD, for two reasons. I had always wanted to write a book, but more importantly I saw it as a great opportunity to give a voice to people whose stories might never be told.***

Two years later, now that the book is finished, when I see the faces of those whose stories are included, when they see the physical copy of the book, they are quite simply thrilled that their stories have been recorded.

They have expressed enormous joy in knowing that they are not invisible any more and that people in the community will read about their lives and share in their struggles and their triumphs. For me, this is the most important and the most satisfying aspect of the whole project.

Each of those who have told their stories was also photographed by the renowned portrait photographer Peter McConchie.

The images are powerful and beautiful and are important for each of the interviewees, who in many cases have lived life on the edge.

It is wonderful to have the faces of these special people alongside their stories, and it helps us to bring their stories to life.

I think the people that feature in the book can teach the reader many things.

Almost all of them have a wonderful ability to build networks, friendship and community.

This is despite the fact that they have been sometimes overwhelmed by the burdens of survival, and worked harder than many more advantaged people to help others in need.

This humbling truth is a constant thread through all of the stories.

I was also reminded that all our lives are very similar, wherever we are on the social scale. We are all as fraught and frail and fragile as one another – both the rich and famous and the poor and disadvantaged are all the same at heart. We all want the same things: health and happiness, friendship and family. Everybody deserves recognition and the opportunity to enter into mainstream opportunities and aspirations like the rest of us.

It was a huge privilege for me to spend time with these remarkable people and in many cases I was surprised by my own reactions to their journeys and stories.

I think of David Vincent, the Sudanese refugee, who at 27 has lived through more than the most of us would in a lifetime and who has experienced extreme horror and privation. While I was with him, writing furiously to capture his story, I was also crying, his journey felt so overwhelming.

And there he was, while I was desperately scribbling, with his hand on my shoulder trying to comfort me. It should have been the other way around!

It really hits me, when I read back over the book, just how privileged I have been. I have had all the opportunities in life anyone could hope for and I was reminded of my duty to use my resources to help others. As always, I want to share my gifts and good fortune and I want to be as

***My feeling was that through sharing personal stories from people that live on the fringes and edges of our society, we could help readers understand the work being done by the Brotherhood in a much more dynamic way. I hope that we have achieved this.***

Author Fr Jeff O'Hare

available as I can be to those in need of my time and assistance.

As a chaplain this writing process has helped reinforce the challenge that I have to work harder at receiving people unconditionally. It is critically important that the church, all of us, reflect God's unconditional love out into the community and that the church opens its arms to welcome everyone into the household of God. Jesus' last address to his disciples included his incomparable self-gift, "I no longer call you servants: but I have called you friends", as well as his final and ultimately only command, to love others as he has loved us.

It is our call to build unconditional relationships and to reach out to one and all, no matter who they are or where they come from – this is the Gospel imperative.

Brotherhood author Fr Jeff O'Hare

Images: Brotherhood of St Laurence Chaplain Fr Jeff O'Hare with, clockwise from left, Simon Mansell, Rhonda Hamley and Pat Parker, and Elyse Maurelli

## Order Brotherhood – Stories of Courage and Resilience today!

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