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Hard work tempered with a touch of larrikinism



High jinks and hard study ... Katy Berg, Joanna Griffiths, Nairead Armstrong and Emma Fitch outside St Vincent's this month.

Photo: *Peter Morris*

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At St Vincent's College in Potts Point the nuns taught the girls they could be whatever they chose to be, writes Anna Patty.

THE moment the lights went out in the St Vincent's College dormitory, the pillow fights would begin. Food, forbidden inside the dormitory, was eaten and hidden under bedcovers when the sound of footsteps and rustling rosary beads signalled the approach of one of the Sisters of Charity.

Although discipline was strict at the college, which celebrates its 150th anniversary this year, making it one of the oldest Catholic girls' boarding schools in Australia, it was never harsh, according to a former student, Mary Doyle.

Having left a primary school where the ruler was routinely brought out to whack wayward children, Ms Doyle, 54, was surprised no children were smacked when she was at St Vincent's from 1963 to 1971. "There was discipline at St Vincent's, but no corporal punishment," she said.

"There was a real camaraderie among boarders. The nuns were encouraging and taught us you could be a doctor, a lawyer - anything you wanted to be. The emphasis was very much on education, not on just being a lady."

Former students include Elcie Wyse, who went on to become one of the early female medical specialists in Sydney. More recent alumni include the Olympic sprinter Melinda Gainsford-Taylor, the singer Deni Hines and the model Lara Bingle.

Gainsford-Taylor left her home near Dubbo in 1985 to join the school in year 9 to focus on her athletics with the trainer Jackie Byrnes. "Looking back, it was hard because I was a country girl

going to the city. It was a culture shock being near Kings Cross," she said.

"I got quite homesick early in the piece. But it was a great way for me to grow up.

"The school had a rooftop with the best view in Sydney. We weren't allowed there, but we would sneak up and enjoy the view of the Harbour Bridge and Opera House at night."

The Channel Ten newsreader Natarsha Belling said her teachers encouraged students to ask questions, which inspired her interest in journalism. "A strong sense of sisterhood was encouraged and nourished; we firmly believed we could achieve anything in whatever career or life-path we chose," she said.

"As I glance through my year book I recall I also competed in the London Trinity drama exams and the St George City of Sydney Eisteddfod. Concerningly, I received third prize in newsreading and first prize in Bible reading."

Paula Gallagher, who is president of the St Vincent's College ex-students' union, remembers balancing packets of Minties and Jaffas underneath a straw hat used to smuggle food back to the dormitory. A nun who remarked on her ridiculous posture later joked with her about the incident: "I'd have confiscated them and eaten them myself, you know".

Ms Gallagher enjoyed life-long friendships with the nuns from the school. "I remember the feeling of being respected there."

None of the Sisters of Charity order of nuns remained at the school by the time students such as Louise O'Sullivan (nee Wilson) arrived in 1993 to start year 7. Only a few could be found in the convent next door.

Mrs O'Sullivan was taught by lay teachers and says dormitory pranks during her time at the school were a bit naughtier than those of veteran old girls. But she shared the same pride in the school uniform as her elder predecessors.

"I had a ball there," she said. "You could still see some of the nuns walking around the convent next door, but they weren't usually in habits."

The present principal of St Vincent's, Michele Hugonnet, said Sisters of Charity nuns established the school in Potts Point on the former site of St Vincent's Hospital a year after they shifted the hospital to Darlinghurst in 1857. It first opened as a primary school in 1858 before expanding into secondary years in 1871.

The school's heritage buildings have been restored, providing a grand learning environment. The primary school enrolled boys until the 1970s, when it closed. These days there are 650 girls enrolled in years 7 to 12 - 140 of whom are boarders.

Ms Hugonnet said she found the students friendly, warm and, most of all, fun.

"There is a bit of the larrikin in our girls," she said.

Former students and teachers are invited to the St Vincent's 150-year alumni dinner on May 2. Contact Mary Doyle 02 9387 8702 or exstudentsadmin@stvincents.nsw.edu.au

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