

Aspiring Olympic javelin star-turned-nun receives ACU's highest honour

A javelin star who swapped her Olympic gold medal dreams for life as a religious Sister has received an Honorary Doctorate from Australian Catholic University (ACU).

ACU has awarded its highest honour, an Honorary Degree of Doctor of the University, to Sister Melissa Dwyer of the Canossian Daughters of Charity in recognition of her remarkable tenure as principal of a secondary school in Malawi.

Sr Dwyer was principal of Bakhita Secondary School in Balaka, a small village in Malawi, East Africa, for seven years between 2009 and 2016.

"When I was first asked to go to Malawi, I had to get the atlas out and have a look at where on earth I was being sent," Sr Dwyer said.

Malawi is considered one of the poorest countries in the world, and for young girls, education is not accessible. But Sr Dwyer's determination led to her school educating more than 600 young girls.

Sr Dwyer said many young girls, ranging between the age of 11 and 15, quickly realised that education was "the only way out of poverty".

"So very often the girls at our school would not just be the only one in their family that had a chance at secondary school education, but perhaps the only one in their entire village," Sr Dwyer said.

"It continues to amaze me that the hours that they invest in education.

"You talk about school days here in Australia being from 8:30am to 3pm, and yet over there, they are in the classroom before 5am and they leave the classroom at 9pm, six days a week.

"So coming in as a woman, as a religious woman, how can you not lay down your life when you see such inspiration around you every day?"

In her Occasional Address for ACU Brisbane's graduation ceremony on April 5, Sr Dwyer shared the story of a Year 7 girl from Bakhita Secondary School who dreamed of studying law only to find herself dying of an incurable disease.

"I was sitting on the floor with that little girl while she was in hospital dying, helping her to forgive her deceased mother, and seeing her do that, to then get well and come back to school and encouraging her to believe in herself," Sr Dwyer said.

"She has gone on to not only study law, but now work in law."

Sr Dwyer dedicated her honorary degree to the people of Malawi, "the people at the grassroots who gave me the opportunity to walk with them".

"It's on their behalf that I accept the acknowledgement, conscious that hopefully I can inspire one person, through my story, to make a difference with their life."

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis said Sr Dwyer was an inspiration to educators all over the world.

"Sr Melissa Dwyer dedicated her life to the service of the poor as a young woman, and through that commitment, encouraged and supported hundreds of young women in the world's poorest country to reach their potential," Professor Skrbis said.

"The work she has done and continues to do for the Church globally, in particular in increasing access to education to enable upward socioeconomic mobility, should be an inspiration to everyone, and it deserves to be honoured with this honorary doctorate from the university."

Born in Sydney but raised and educated in Brisbane, Sr Dwyer has been a Canossian Daughter of Charity since 2005 but spent her entire childhood pursuing a different religion – the javelin throw.

At the age of five a young Melissa Dwyer carved out a dream to win an Olympic gold in javelin, establishing herself as a record-breaking young athlete in the sport.

Whilst training, she also completed a degree in physical education, and was eventually selected for the Sydney 2000 Olympic trials.

However, she passed it up for a free mission trip to Tanzania with the Canossian Sisters.

In Tanzania she worked at a homeless shelter for one month, an experience that confronted her very being.

“A little girl begged to come back to Australia with me and be my servant, to carry my bags and tie my shoes, and I had to tell her there was nothing I could do to help her,” Sr Dwyer said.

“And it was from that space of feeling useless that I remember getting so angry with God...and it became very clear to me that there was something I could do and that was to give my life completely to God and completely to the poor by becoming a Canossian Daughter of Charity.

“So that's what I did.”

Sr Dwyer made her first vows in 2005 and has never looked back.

“I didn't see myself being a nun, didn't see myself working in the developing world, and I didn't see myself ending up on the other side of the world in a rural village school, but I wouldn't change anything,” Sr Dwyer said.

Sr Melissa Dwyer is available for interview. High resolution images of Sr Dwyer are available here, please credit *GFP Graduations*. The transcript of Sr Dwyer's Occasional Address is available on request.

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