

Secular saints inspire the spirit

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It was an iconic image. The happy face of the recently appointed first female befeater in the 522-year history of their service at the Tower of London. Moira Cameron, 42, stood bursting with pride between the men in scarlet tunics, who looked just like the ones on the gin bottles. She was an inspiring role model.

That got me thinking about the multi-century success of the Catholic Church in promoting saints as role models. Are they adapting to the modern era? You bet they are! The Catholic Australia website is full of saints.

Francis of Assisi is now the patron saint of ecologists and Clare of Assisi - and this is a direct quote - is patron of television because one Christmas when she was too ill to leave her bed she saw and heard Christmas Mass - even though it was taking place miles away.

It's a magical story, but I agree with the commentary that, "We need people to look up to whose lives embody ideals we hold important and strive to emulate."

Here's a couple of secular suggestions from my personal collection of inspirational people on this Australia Day.

On December 3 a group of people gathered around a grave in Manly Cemetery that had been unmarked for more than 70 years. They brought a rock from the slopes of Mount Cook in New Zealand and cemented it to the ground with a plaque. The tiny plaque bears the name of Freda Du Faur.

Du Faur was born in Sydney in 1882. In 1910, she was the first woman to climb Mount Cook. She did it in the record time of six hours, without modern equipment and wearing a dress.

Over the next three years she set many records. She was the first woman to climb all five of New Zealand's highest mountains. She accomplished the first grand traverse of the three peaks of Mount Cook. She defied social convention by climbing without a chaperone, sharing her tent with the guides and shortening her skirt. She had taught herself to rock climb as a child in the bushland of Ku-ring-gai Chase near her family home.

Like the 21st-century befeater, Freda Du Faur was a genuine groundbreaker. But there are dark elements to Du Faur's tale that make it much more complex than a go-girl action adventure.

Du Faur's partner was a woman called Muriel Cadogan. They'd met at the Dupain Institute of Physical Education in Sydney where Cadogan taught rope techniques. When you climb a virgin peak (a mountaineering term), you're able to give it a name.

Du Faur named two peaks Mount Du Faur and Mount Cadogan. Perhaps it was a way of declaring their bond when more conventional options were unavailable.

The couple lived in London during World War I and its aftermath, mixing with the Suffragettes. However, mental and physical illness led to Cadogan's hospitalisation and premature death. Du Faur's hospital visits with Cadogan were curtailed when the nature of their relationship was understood. Living back in Sydney alone, where she often walked in the bush near Collaroy and Dee Why, Du Faur took her own life on September 11, 1935.

This tragic tale involves silence, rejection and suicide. Yet with all its sadness, Du Faur's story is still inspiring to me because of the diverse group who gathered to celebrate her life at her newly recognised graveside. They included the contemporary mountaineers who'd organised the event via internet chat rooms and the principal of the Anglican school Du Faur attended, Jenny Allum from SCEGGS Darlinghurst. It's the school I attended as well. Now at last we could all recognise Du Faur's achievements, regardless of her sexuality.

Another very different woman captures my attention this Australia Day - a day some indigenous people call Survival Day.

Bino Toby, 50, is an Aborigine from central Queensland who has worked as a social worker for the Fred Hollows Foundation in the Northern Territory for three years. I first met her in 2005 when I visited as a Fred Hollows ambassador

The foundation works in indigenous communities and outstations to the east of Katherine in partnership with the Jawoyn Association, Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation, Katherine West Health Board and the Nyirrangulung Mardrulk Ngadberre Regional Council.

The average life expectancy for Aboriginal men in the area is 46 and Aboriginal babies die at a rate three times higher than other babies.

Toby's goal, she says, is to empower the women and help them get their own voice by working with them one on one. She does it primarily by modelling and building relationships. She models many things, including speaking loudly and directly to the community council. But, she says, "You can't do anything unless you've got relationships."

Last year, Toby organised fishing trips for the women with babies, squishing 26 women and their children into two troopies (Toyota Troop Carriers). "The women appreciate the time and the effort, and they share their stories," Toby says.

She believes her voluntary work with local sporting organisations, such as the Wanderers netball team in Katherine, is central to building community relationships. It is how you become absorbed into the community, she believes. She has plans afoot for Australian football community competitions for under-17 boys, involving the girls as well.

Toby is also thrilled that computer classes for women start next week, a joint initiative of the foundation and Charles Darwin University. It is this kind of painstaking, grassroots community development that offers flashes of hope amidst the darkness of Aboriginal health statistics.

These are the modern saints who inspire and enliven my soul. On this day that the diverse Australian community celebrates, who are yours?

Between Heaven and Earth: the Life of a Mountaineer Freda Du Faur, 1882-1935, by Sally Irwin, is published by White Crane Press.