

Friendship is a Two-Way Street

Michelle Mullane spends five afternoons a week taking care of children after school. She is a dog lover, an Elvis fanatic, a devout Catholic and a committed volunteer. Michelle shares the parenting of her 4 year old daughter with her partner and a foster family.

In addition to the love and support she receives from a broad range of family members and friends, Michelle also appreciates the support of a small group of men and women who meet with her regularly. This is the story of what friendship brings to Michelle's life.

The Newmarket community is very lucky to have a citizen like Michelle. Growing up only a few streets from the unit that she now lives in, Michelle has only ever lived as far as a few suburbs away. Michelle enjoys being known and knowing others in her local community, "A lot of people know me; I see people all the time. I think I'll always stay here because it's so handy."

It is the support that friends offer one another that Michelle regularly returned to as being the most important thing about friendships. "I have always liked giving to other people...I'm always giving." Michelle is well aware that others will be willing to help her out because of everything she has done for them over the years. "I've got plenty of groups so if I need anything they'll pitch in because of all the stuff I do. I'll have plenty of help around."

The parishioners of the Newmarket St Ambrose Church would likely be some of the first to admit how grateful they are to know Michelle and have her as part of the church community. Michelle is due to have surgery later this year and when reflecting on the six to eight weeks recovery time required, she remarked, "Newmarket Church are going to miss me! They're going to find it pretty hard without me because I'm the backbone of that church." Here Michelle recalls her past voluntary and paid work with the church, "I did before school and after school care, I helped in the parish office, cleaning and everything...now I'm constantly up there, five days a week and on weekends I go to church." Michelle currently volunteers as a church sacristan at St Ambrose's, opening and closing the church for ceremonies on weekdays and Sundays, as well as helping with preparations for Mass, baptisms and funerals.

In addition to a whole range of friendships from Michelle's voluntary work, special interest groups and the local neighbourhood, Michelle also has a more formalised circle of support around her. The impetus for starting this circle came about when Michelle needed to find a more permanent home after a long-term house and pet-sitting arrangement was coming to a close. "A good friend, Trish suggested for me to set up my own network group. I thought it was a good idea, planning for myself and planning for my future." With the help of an organisation that assists families to set up circles of support, along with Trish and Michelle's Aunty, Michelle invited about seven members of her Parish to be part of her circle. Thanks to the group's energy, brainstorming and some hard work, Michelle now lives in her own unit in Newmarket. When asked about this home Michelle said without any hesitation "I love it!"

During the initial period of helping Michelle to find a home the group met regularly, at least once a month. Although the group is not currently meeting on a routine basis, the circle members remain closely connected; the members speak on the phone, are in regular e-mail contact and catch up

informally at church. Some circle members have taken on specific roles to help Michelle with things like finances, tenancy or health-related matters.

Michelle's circle of support has recently been helping her to get on top of some health concerns. In Michelle's words "I've got the group who've helped me get through. They come with me for the appointments... otherwise I wouldn't be able to manage, because they [medical professionals] just push you down because you've got no voice for yourself."

Michelle sees her friends and family as an important aspect of her life "I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't have the support, the friendships, the relationships, my friends and family. I don't think I'd be able to get up and do what I do every day." The thing that Michelle likes most about friends is that "you know you've got someone there in times of need, or if you just need someone to talk to."