



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT

Private Members' Statements

7 March 2016

TRIBUTE TO SISTER DIANA SANTLEBEN

Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend) (12:16): Sister Diana Santleben is a fixture of the Wallsend community. She has become such a recognisable part of our community that many were surprised when she revealed, "I wasn't born in Newcastle ... I came here 12 years ago to retire." A Catholic nun and refugee advocate, Sister Di has given her life in service to others, and on Australia Day this year her service was recognised when she was named Newcastle's Citizen of the Year. When asked by the *Newcastle Herald* how she would make use of her Citizen of the Year award, Sister Di encouraged all women in Newcastle to drop in and meet with female refugees at Zara's House, a support centre she helped to establish in Jesmond in 2016.

Zara's House is designed to provide a place for refugee women to put their skills into practise and develop supportive social networks. Zara's House will be a boon to Jesmond and the broader Wallsend community, and though its development is relatively recent, for many years Sister Di has worked closely with newly arrived refugees in the Newcastle region to help them acclimatise to their new home. So much for retirement! In 2006, Lochinvar's Sisters of St Joseph established Penola House, a refugee outreach and support service. Sister Di was an integral part of Penola House, and I had the pleasure of meeting with her there in October 2014. In 2011 Sister Di and her fellow Sister of St Joseph Betty Brown were a crucial part of a push to start an investigation into the state of Newcastle's refugee housing. According to reports of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC], "There were several community protests after the sisters raised the alarm about sub-standard housing and exorbitant rents."

There is much to admire about Sister Di: her tireless community spirit, her compassion, her resourcefulness and tenacity, and certainly her honesty.

She is not afraid to give you her views—she does not keep them on the shelf—and she is very passionate about our local community. When the former member for Paterson demanded to know why Syrian refugees were not staying to fight against ISIS, Sister Di called him to task and said:

All we achieve by sending our children to die is dead children.

Sister Di was quoted as saying:

For how many generations will we go on in this way before we realise there is a better way to do things?
Australia needs defending by being dignified and open and loving.

In a profile written by a local student for a feature-writing course and published on the blog "A Zimbabwean Girl Against the World", Sister Di revealed her dream for herself and for Australia: She said:

To ... go and retire in my garden because I don't have anything more to do. It's all finished. I just go Righto! There's no need to keep [it] going because everybody is being treated with respect. Everybody is getting on with their lives. Families are loving each other. Kids are growing up strong proud Australians and strong proud Muslims and strong proud Africans and strong proud doctors and nurses and businesspeople.

It is certainly an admirable goal. Perhaps the best measure of Sister Di's impact on the local community came when she was awarded Citizen of the Year. Looking into the hall on Australia Day, packed with freshly minted Australian citizens, she recognised many people she had worked with and who she had come to call her friends. Sister Di's boundless empathy and compassion is a constant reminder of a fundamental truth that we in Wallsend understand better than most. I salute Sister Di and wish her all the best as Newcastle's Citizen of the Year.