**Entry type:** Person
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# McGuire, Ethel Clarice MBE, JP

(1923 - 2011)

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| **Born** | 19230601, Melbourne Victoria Australia |
| **Died** | 20110314, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia |
| **Occupation** | Social worker |

## Summary

Described in obituaries as ‘a ruthless battler, hard to beat’, and ‘a fiery champion of the battlers’, Ethel McGuire was a founding member of the Australian Association of Social Workers. She married in 1953 requiring her to resign from her permanent position in the Commonwealth public service, but she returned as a full-time temporary officer by the early 1960s, eventually becoming Assistant Director of the Welfare Branch in the Department of the Interior. Ethel was the driving force in the establishment of social welfare services in Canberra and in 1963 was instrumental in the creation of the ACT Council of Social Service. She played key roles in numerous Catholic voluntary and professional activities including marriage guidance, adoption, the development of the Marymead Child and Family Centre and the formation of Catholic Social Services in Canberra. She was renowned for her formidable advocacy for people, especially children, in need.

*Ethel Clarice McGuire was inscribed on the ACT Honour Walk in 2020.*

## Details

Ethel Clarice Cannon was born on 1 June 1923, the eldest surviving child of Thomas and Jane Cannon of Sunshine, Melbourne. A devoted Catholic all her life, Ethel’s family background was a potent mix of Irish Catholic working class and Scots Presbyterian, and she grew up in an environment of heated discussions around the dining table about politics, religion, trade unions, the public service, and family matters. These laid the basis not only for her steadfast determination to help children in need, in particular, but also for her formidable debating and advocacy skills later on. Her father died when Ethel was 11 and she helped her mother to raise her younger siblings, taking on part-time jobs to help the family finances. She won scholarships to secondary school and the University of Melbourne where she pursued a BA degree and studies in social science while also caring for homeless women through the Legion of Mary. Ethel graduated with a BA from the University of Melbourne in 1946 and became a founding member of the Australian Association of Social Workers. She worked for the Department of Social Security in Hobart, Melbourne and Perth where she met fellow public servant Kevin McGuire and married him in 1953. The McGuires moved to Canberra in 1955 where Kevin continued his public service career. They had five children – Thomas, Peter, Dermot, Justin and Jane.

Canberra grew rapidly after World War 2 as public service departments were moved to the capital. The growing population was young: throughout 1950-1975, almost 40% of the population was under 21. Few people had an extended family nearby to help with burdens or crises, and social networks were insufficient to compensate for that lack. There were very few professional social workers in Canberra, and most of them were married women who were unable to pursue their careers full-time because of the near-ubiquitous ‘marriage bar’. Government-funded child welfare in the ACT was originally handled by the NSW Child Welfare Department from its offices in Cooma and later in Queanbeyan. Their staff visited Canberra and supported a number of families who made their homes available for fostering and short term placement as family crises emerged. Similarly, church-based social services in the ACT were typically managed by their larger NSW service systems – e.g. the NSW Catholic Adoption Agency handled adoptions for the ACT archdiocese. These arrangements became unworkable as Canberra grew, and in 1968 the Commonwealth government enacted a Child Welfare Ordinance for the ACT, funded through and administered by the Department of the Interior. The ACT then withdrew from the NSW system. The widespread ‘marriage bar’ had required Ethel to resign from her permanent job but in no way stopped Ethel from continuing her involvement in social welfare matters when she arrived in Canberra, first as a volunteer and, by the early 1960s, as a full time temporary officer in the Welfare Branch of the Department of the Interior. After the marriage bar was removed in 1966, Ethel regained tenure as a permanent officer, ultimately becoming Assistant Director of Welfare until her retirement in 1989.

Ethel's 40-year career coincided with significant shifts in philosophies and practices in social welfare practice. In the 1960s, for example, she was involved in the adoption programs of both government and the Catholic church, but by the 1980s she was helping change the law to make it possible for children and their birth mothers to obtain information about each other. As the senior social worker and then Director of Welfare, Ethel had a particular interest in child welfare. Through much of her career, the policy of removing children at risk from their parents or their environment, typically placing them in institutions or foster care, was widespread and taken for granted. Ethel insisted that the ACT try to ensure that children of Indigenous background were adopted or fostered by other Indigenous families. Later in her career, as the awful consequences for many children of being removed and placed in situations of abuse and fear became much clearer, Ethel was an adviser to the Catholic church and various religious organisations in trying to help and compensate people who had suffered in such places.

When Ethel arrived in Canberra in 1955, she found a very small number of other professional social workers, most of them married women who could not work full-time and so volunteered in various organisations (e.g. Ethel herself was secretary of the Catholic Marriage Guidance Council). She brought them together as the ACT Social Workers Group to encourage and support the growing number of social welfare and non-for-profit organisations that were serving the Canberra community. Under Ethel's leadership, the Group obtained a grant of 10 pounds from the local chapter of the National Council of Women to help establish an ACT Council of Social Service (COSS) as a coordinating mechanism to lead local service development, promote positive social change, be part of policy debates and contribute to the national network of Councils of Social Service. At the inaugural meeting of the ACT COSS on 30 July 1963, Ethel was appointed the Honorary Secretary of the Executive Committee. Twenty-nine agencies became members. Ten years later that had grown to 74 agencies and 34 individual members; by 2000 it had risen to some 130 agencies. The COSS was run on a shoestring in the 1960s, relying entirely on volunteers (the first paid staff member was appointed in 1972). Ethel was its driving force from the outset, and through the COSS she was able to influence almost every aspect of policy and practice in social welfare in the ACT over the next 25 years. Importantly, she ensured a significant, if hidden, subsidy from the relevant Commonwealth departments which gave their staff flexibility in volunteering their time to the COSS and its activities. As it grew, the COSS, with Ethel's close involvement, addressed issues ranging from initiation of mental health services, public housing and child poverty, to needs of the elderly, day care services, and services for children and families in crisis.

Ethel also played a key role in the formation of Catholic social services in the ACT, as the powerful NSW Catholic Welfare Service and Catholic Adoption Agency withdrew and the ACT developed its own social welfare systems and services from 1968. In particular, Ethel was instrumental in enabling the establishment in Canberra in 1967 by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary of Marymead Child and Family Centre as an out-of-home care facility for children of families in crisis, with funding support from the Commonwealth. Over the ensuing 20 years Ethel championed Marymead and its services behind the scenes and, on occasions, in fiery battles with authorities in the Department, the ACT justice system and the Archdiocese. By the time she retired in 1989, Marymead had grown substantially and had expanded into in-home care for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and their families. Ethel joined the Board of Marymead on her retirement, serving until 1998.

Ethel McGuire was renowned for her formidable political and networking skills. As Jack Waterford, former editor of the Canberra Times, noted in his obituary, she had 'an inside line to powers through Catholic, feminist, judicial, public service, civic or old mates, as well as the experience of having been in Canberra from the time it was a fairly intimate town of under 10,000. She helped develop many of them. She never hesitated to co-opt anyone to a purpose; if her motives were invariably pure, she was entirely ruthless in pursuing her ends.' Ethel McGuire was awarded an MBE in 1976 for her public service. In addition to her responsibilities as a public servant, and voluntary work for Marymead, she served on other boards such as the YMCA and Outreach and was the first woman elected president of the ACT branch of the Professional Officers Association of the Commonwealth Public Service. Her name was inscribed on the ACT Honour Walk in 2020 in recognition of her contribution to the ACT's social services. Ethel died on 14 March 2011. Bishop Pat Power, in his eulogy at her funeral, commented that 'everyone here today would have witnessed Ethel McGuire standing up for the most vulnerable in the Canberra community. She used her professional skills, her vast experience and her considerable influence in the community to be a fierce and tireless champion of those people who would have been damaged or disadvantaged without her intervention.'

**Author Details**
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