

Claire Warner
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Thank you for being here today and thank you very much for this award and recognition. It's truly an honor to be in your company, and I mean that sincerely, as each of you in so many ways exemplify what it means to make a positive difference in the lives of others. And isn't that what this life is all about?

I'm sort of known as the "Monday girl" as Mondays are my day to visit the Sisters and the residents at St Dominics Village. I find that a real privilege and the highlight of my week. The Sisters there are a real gift to me, and selfishly, I get far more out of those visits than I could possibly give.

For those of you who don't know me, St. Dominic played a very large role in my life. I was raised in New Zealand and attended 12 years of parochial schooling at St. Dominic's Primary and St Dominic's College and Secondary school. And I was taught the entire time by the Dominican Sisters of New Zealand. It was a great experience! The Sisters were all intelligent, strong, independent women and they were amazing role models. And they were always up for a bit of fun! They also knew what caring and compassion were all about as they demonstrated that in so many ways, including looking after their own.

Our school was a gorgeous, big, gothic style building that contained the classrooms, the nuns quarters, the dormitories for the boarding students, and an infirmary for the sick and elderly sisters. We were never allowed in the private part of the building, but for some reason I was down there one day when one of the doors was left open. When I looked in I caught the eye of a very elderly looking nun. She was in bed and did not look well. We both smiled at each other. It was a special moment and I'll never forget her face. It was completely full of wrinkles and she was absolutely beautiful! In retrospect I wish I'd gone in - but I wasn't much of a rule breaker back then so I didn't. But wouldn't that have made her day! Sometimes we forget that it's often the little things that make the biggest impact. Holding someone's hand, a smile, a simple acknowledgment, a hug.

I'm not sure why I've always had such an affinity for the elderly. Perhaps the experience with the nun in the infirmary, or the time when I was 13 and worked as an aide in a geriatric ward alongside the Sisters of Mercy, or the fact that the stories my Dad tells always include his grandmother who lived with them until she died. 50 years ago we had nursing homes, but they certainly weren't as prevalent as they are today due to today's concentration of elderly in our population, and the fact that we're all living longer. Perhaps because of these increasing numbers and the increase in nursing homes there is a tendency to become dismissive, and to turn a blind eye to the elderly. Everyone is busy and over committed. I get that. And I know that everyone means well while sadly life gets in the way and sometimes it's far too easy to let the elderly become invisible. But we mustn't let that be the norm. I believe it should be

the other way round. Our elderly should be put on pedestals. They're our matriarchs and patriarchs. They were the ones who created our future. They're all sons and daughters. And they deserve our utmost respect and our efforts to ensure that their dignity, and rights, and sense of self worth, and comfort, are all maintained.

This isn't the forum for advocacy, but I'd just like to encourage each of us - me included - to do just a little bit more for our elderly. And it doesn't have to be much, because every action makes a difference. The next time you're in a nursing home, cover someone up with a blanket, hold their hand, say hello, stop and chat for a minute, don't just walk past without acknowledging them, tell them they're loved, give them a hug. I believe that hugs are truly magical. I can't tell you how many times I've hugged someone in a nursing home and they just haven't wanted to let go. Think about that! Why wouldn't they want to let go? It's because touch and affection is so important and yet so many in nursing homes don't get any of it. And if you're on the street and see an older person, smile, tell them how wonderful they look, pay for someone's groceries, look them in the eye, buy them coffee, give a gift. You could possibly be the only interaction that person has with someone else in a day. By each of us doing lots of little things, collectively we can turn a ripple into a much needed tidal wave for the elderly.

Thank you for recognizing the little things that I do, and thank you for trusting me with your Sisters at the Village and the other residents of St Dominics. I hope you all enjoy the last two weeks of Advent and that you all have a very Merry Christmas.