

THE SPIRIT THAT IS TINA BANITSKA

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Throughout life we need heroes, people who give us inspiration and who can motivate us on days when even the thought of getting out of bed requires a monumental effort. They may be on the world stage or they may be your quiet neighbor. There is one woman who stands out as a hero to many and whose courage and vision has created the stunning Convent Gallery in Daylesford

With a dream and limited finances, Tina Banitska could see how the derelict Holy Cross Convent, built in 1860 could one day become one of Australia's best galleries. The story of Tina's journey has become legendary – it's the story of a woman who against all the odds borrowed massively, bought the building and over two years of stressful renovations, selling many treasured possessions along the way, opened her cherished gallery in 1991. In the twenty two years since, The Convent Gallery has doubled in size, is recognized as a significant major art gallery, become a function centre and popular wedding venue and a multi-dimensional tourist attraction – all under the direction of Tina.

With all these achievements behind her, Tina still remains an unpretentious, 'down to earth' friendly and warm individual who can often be found performing every day tasks in the Convent from serving behind the retail counter, making coffee in the café, cleaning bathrooms or working in the office. She has the disarming knack of being able to make people feel that even in a crowded room you are the focus of her undivided attention.

Over the years, hundreds of young people have come under Tina's mentoring mantle, be they budding artists, dancers, fashion designers, jewelers, painters, both local and international – even those working in the hospitality and retail sectors have benefited from her tutelage. It is a given that those who work at The Convent Gallery and "pay attention" will leave with skills that will serve them well anywhere.

Although now closed to the public, Springmount Pottery in Creswick is where it all started for Tina and now where she offers artist residencies and workshops. "This job is about people. It's one of the reasons I set the Convent up, to share and interact and engage people," says Tina, who has owned and sold several galleries in rural Victoria. And it is that philosophy that underlies her latest project and vision, making her one of Australia's great arts benefactors.

In 2002 she won the tender for the Sacred Heart Convent in Ballarat – five times bigger than the Convent Gallery – turning it into a mentoring school for artists. While there have been residential artists in the past decade, as well as historical tours and a dance studio, it is only now that Tina is planning to ramp up the project, creating an artists' hub with scholarships.

"Art is the only inspiration we have to keep our hope going. It uplifts the spirit." And it is the spirit of Tina Banitska that uplifts many others.