

Portland to Penola trek sparks interest in south-west trails

By PETER COLLINS
July 16, 2014, 4 a.m.

LUKE Mills never expected his pilgrimage from Portland to Penola would become a must-do trek which is shaping up to bring thousands of visitors to south-west Victoria.

It comes as a bright contrast to the dark tunnel of grief which gripped the Melbourne secondary college teacher after his wife died of cancer leaving him with the care of three children six years ago.

After three years of what he described as “being in a real mess” he was encouraged to join two friends when they called last year on an Aussie Camino to follow a route through districts near where Australia’s first Catholic saint Mary MacKillop lived and worked in the 1800s.



Trekkers hit the road on the pilgrimage from Portland to Penola in honour of Mary MacKillop.

They spent seven days walking 217 kilometres, incorporating the Great South West Walk through to Port Macdonnell, Coonawarra and Penola staying at local pubs along the way.

Subsequent interest from people across Australia inspired him to organise a larger pilgrimage last Easter and he is planning for further treks before Christmas and early next year.

Last week he was in Portland to meet Glenelg Shire Council representatives about how the Camino concept could increase patronage of the Great South West Walk which runs along the shire’s coastal edge.

The state government yesterday launched a 10-year strategy to tap into the economic, social and environmental potential of Victoria’s network of more than 2000 nature trails.

“I didn’t think the pilgrimage would do me much good,” he told The Standard.

“But it’s been a great comfort — a sense of persistence and healing for me.

“My level of faith had been severely tested. I was looking for the meaning of why it (wife’s death) happened to me.”

“Now there’s a greater plan which has unfolded.”

Mr Mills said he was overwhelmed by the number of people who had contacted him wanting to participate in pilgrimages for various reasons.

He is also keen to make contact with indigenous communities connected with western Victoria.

“It’s hit a nerve and there’s been a bit of a groundswell,” he said.

“There’s a whole lot of reasons people would want to take part — for a spiritual journey or just a great walk along a beautiful part of Victoria and South Australia.”

The route is not the exact path followed by Mary MacKillop, who lived in Portland with her family before moving through various local communities helping low-income families and setting up a school at Penola, but it covers some of the territory and it keeps off main roads.

“She eventually wound up in Penola which is where our Camino finishes,” Mr Mills said.