

Christmas edition 2020: Celebrating 40 years of JRS



 Image credit: Flashpoint Labs.

Director's letter

Carolina Gottardo

This year marks a new milestone for JRS. Namely, 40 years of JRS walking with people who have been put in the most vulnerable of situations. Yet, people who are at the same time, incredibly resilient.

When Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ established JRS in 1980, it was created as an emergency response. The belief was that once the problems of displacement were sorted out, there would be no need for JRS. This did not happen. The growing challenge of forced displacement around the

world escalated to huge proportions. Not only did JRS remain open, but it continued developing in response. Now, JRS is active in 57 countries around the world.

JRS' 40th year anniversary is a milestone for an organisation that has remained faithful to its mission to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of forcibly displaced people.

I vividly remember the sensation that I felt the first time that I walked into JRS. This same sensation arose in me when visiting another JRS

country or regional office. JRS exudes warmth, welcome and vibrancy. A feeling that people are there for you. And this is exactly what JRS aims to evoke. JRS wants people to feel that they are welcome regardless of their race, gender, religious belief, sexual orientation or migration status. It wants women, men and children to feel that we are there for them, that we will walk with them, and that they will be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve, throughout the challenges they face.

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I have been the Director of JRS Australia for almost 4 years now. My journey has been an interesting one. I was the first female lay director. Much has happened during this time. Displacement over the world continues to increase. At the same time, asylum and refugee policies in Australia have become even more punitive. Every time we believe we have touched rock-bottom, a new, even harsher policy than the one preceding it is introduced – one that we had not even thought about.

Forced destitution for people seeking asylum in the community has become the norm, indefinite detention is still widespread, the COVID crisis has hit people seeking asylum and migrants in vulnerable situations in a devastating manner. Nonetheless, here at JRS, I have been inspired by some of the most resilient people that I have ever met.

The people we serve bring light and hope to this world. The staff and volunteers are dedicated and generous. The people in the community that I have come into contact with, including many Congregations and laypeople, are inspiring. At JRS I have witnessed everyday miracles performed by everyday people. This has come from acts of kindness, accompaniment, a smile at the right time and so much

generosity and warmth. This is the spirit that remains alive at JRS.

In 2020, this spirit has been so evident. When the pandemic hit Sydney our elected federal government excluded people seeking asylum and migrants in vulnerable situations from receiving JobSeeker, JobKeeper and other support. But parishes, schools, religious congregations, private companies, partner organisations, cross-faith partners and others have been helping us in the form of food drives and donations of financial resources for urgent needs like medicine. New JRS volunteers are packing and delivering food via our COVID-19-safe foodbank. With the new 2020–21 federal budget slashing funding to refugees and people seeking asylum, this spirit of welcome will prove essential to keeping people safe and supported. This spirit is alive at JRS and gives me hope.

JRS Australia has changed a fair bit over these past four years. We now have a Women's Space for female survivors of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), a growing employment program (Empowered to Work), a housing program, a well-developed advocacy program focused on targeted parliamentary lobbying, evidence based research and also a strong community organising model.

Facilitating leadership opportunities and promoting the agency of people with lived experience of being forcibly displaced is emphasised strongly at JRS.

Our activities and funding base have also expanded, but JRS has always remained faithful to our values and principles. Like all other JRS offices around the world, the mission remains the same, namely to accompany, to serve and to advocate.

My journey with JRS is sadly coming to an end. The 40th year anniversary of this remarkable organisation is an optimal time to reflect. I feel immensely privileged to have been part of the JRS journey. I have met amazing people. I feel particularly proud that we have continued standing true to walking with those that are often neglected, ignored and excluded; people who have so much to teach us. I also feel hopeful for the future and can't give up on the thought that maybe the dream of Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ of JRS disappearing because it is no longer needed, will one day come true. In the meantime, let's celebrate JRS and the JRS community – people like you – who continue walking with the women, men and children that we have so much to learn from.

~Carolina Gottardo
JRS Australia Director



"The 40th year anniversary of this remarkable organisation is an optimal time to reflect. I feel immensely privileged to have been part of the JRS journey. Let's celebrate JRS and the JRS community – people like you – who continue walking with the women, men and children that we have so much to learn from."

 Pictured is Carolina packing food for the JRS Refugee Foodbank. In the background is Amelia Savage, our JRS Community Development Coordinator. Image credit: Flashpoint Labs.

Sarah Puls reflects on 40 Years of the JRS Community

Sarah Puls is a passionate advocate for the rights of people seeking asylum, a social worker, and Good Samaritan Sister, who served as the JRS Casework Team Leader from 2015–2018.

I had the pleasure of working with JRS Australia for four years as the JRS Case Work Team Leader between 2015 and 2018. In those years, and since then, I often find myself reminding people who objectify or stigmatise people seeking asylum that they are just people. **We are all just people. Humanity bundled together, with our challenges and our gifts, with our dreams for the future and our love for family and community. Just regular people.**

When I was asked to write this reflection, I accepted willingly, thinking that it would be a pleasure to reflect on the wonderful work that JRS does and contribute to the celebrations. But it has been much more difficult than I thought. It is difficult because there is so much. In the 40 years of JRS, policy has become so much more punitive towards people seeking protection. In 2020, the situation facing people who come to Australia seeking safety and those who are waiting to have their refugee status considered, and for the chance to rebuild their lives in Australia is so unfathomably bleak, and only seems to be getting worse.

It is horrific to reflect on the shifts in the policy and practice in Australia which have led to the current nightmare scenario. I am filled with rage when I recognise that, having signed the refugee convention, politicians in Australia, some media, and far too many people in Australia just flatly deny the humanity and dignity of the human beings who come to our country seeking safety.

The process of applying for protection is inconceivably slow and forces people to live with uncertainty and without the right of residence or family reunion for long periods. There is no real reason for the long delays. Those who face long periods of uncertainty are treated in ways which should rightly shock a society which is accustomed to basic human rights. The decisions to indefinitely detain innocent people, to force incredibly sick people into destitution, to leave people homeless and unable to work should shock us. I'm not sure that they do anymore.

Through my role at JRS, I had the absolute privilege of coming to share in the journey of hundreds of people who came through our doors seeking information, critical support and a sense of community. To know those people



and to have been blessed with their trust in sharing with me their hopes, fears, dreams and challenges is a gift beyond words. **The parts of our work that were painful – like never having enough resources for all those desperately in need of help – have faded in my memory, especially in comparison to the joy and honour of the relationships of trust that held us all together.**

And when I think over what JRS has been for the last 40 years, that is the thing that deserves to be named and honoured the most – the relationships.

The relationships are the most essential part of the mission to ACCOMPANY, SERVE and ADVOCATE.

Within all that JRS does, relationships are the practical way that those three things interact and flow from each other. It is these relationships that make English classes possible, that make the foodbank possible, that make donations possible, that make interagency collaboration possible, that make advocacy possible. And for JRS, those relationships are broad and inclusive and draw people together in a fluid community of hope and action which refuses to be intimidated or distressed by the ongoing challenges facing those needing protection and forced to navigate a dehumanising system. JRS responds to the dehumanisation by drawing humans together to respond in real, practical, and empowering ways.

At the beginning and the end of everything that happens at JRS are the people who are seeking asylum. While they are in vulnerable situations because of structural injustices which oppress and exclude them, it would be simplistic and untrue to simplify these children, women and men as merely people who receive a service from JRS. These people who come to Australia with skills and experience, with hope and determination, are not passive *cont on p4*



📷 The JRS Community has come together in 2020 to continue to provide critical support to people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations. Pictured are our JRS team packing food for the JRS Refugee Foodbank that now feeds over 900 people in Sydney per week. Image credit: Flashpoint Labs.

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recipients of some charitable act. They are integral parts of the community in ways that often happen quietly behind the scenes but which are so important to the shape of that same community.

And while refugees are core to JRS in a particular way, my experience is that everyone in the community thrives when the integrity and value of every person is valued. The JRS community consists of many people, and everyone is of equal value in this community. The people accessing services and contributing to this community through their gifts, skills, humour and generosity matter. The people who encourage their communities and schools to give food to foodbank matter; as do the people who generously volunteer to provide practical support like English classes or a welcoming face at the front door. The people who walk into meetings with the government and continue to challenge the injustice and advocate for better ways matter, as do the people who listen to the stories of hardship and try to meet the practical as well as emotional needs. The people who serve on the JRS board, the supporters who

work in the community to advocate and educate, the partner organisations who are beside JRS in so many ways... all of those people together are the creators, the inspiration, and the practical energy behind JRS.

As a Catholic, I sometimes am disheartened by the ways that opportunists pick particular bits of Catholic Social Teaching and act as though that defines how one should think and act. For me, JRS embodies the core of what Catholics, and most people of faith and goodwill believe – that every human being is as valuable as any other – not in a way that diminishes, but in a way that holds up the ideal that **every person is equal in rights and in dignity**. Every person belongs in the community. Every person has the right to strive towards the fullness of life – that is our ultimate aim. JRS understands that people's dignity and rights don't stem from citizenship or religion or location, but are simply a result of their humanity. Of our shared humanity. **As we celebrate 40 years of JRS, I think we are really celebrating 40 years of people coming together, working together to be a force of humanity in a world that needs it more than ever.**

JRS is on the move!

Part of what we value most about the work of JRS, is that we're always on the move. The work is never static. We walk with the most marginalised, we shift our work to where the need is the greatest, and we adapt our ways of working to ensure we are doing the greatest good. The work of JRS is people-centred, responsive and flexible, and these are characteristics that have certainly been needed in 2020.

In the last 5 years, the work of JRS Australia has shifted and changed with the needs of the people we serve. Often that has meant moving locations to be where we are most needed or relocating to improve our service delivery. It has also meant partnering with a range of services to offer more holistic and coordinated support.


In 2015, JRS moved to Western Sydney to establish Arrupe Place, a centre of welcome, hospitality, and practical support. The vast majority of people seeking asylum live in West and South West Sydney. At a time of increasingly punitive immigration policies, we needed to be where the people are. Space was needed for professional casework, for volunteers to provide cups of tea and a listening ear. We also needed a space for RACS lawyers to provide free legal support to help women, men and families lodge their protection visa applications.

Our initial location was a lovely little cottage generously provided by the Sisters of Mercy Parramatta. In 2016, we took on a second cottage nearby to grow our community activities, foodbank and hospitality space. Again, as policies shifted and people seeking asylum were facing a prolonged to indefinite wait for protection, there was a growing need for more casework, more food, English classes, an employment support program run in partnership with the House of Welcome, and even more legal assistance.

The next shift came in 2018, when we received funding from WomenNSW to set up an innovative new project focused

 *Packing Foodbank. Image credit: Flashpoint Labs*



 *Our team receives a huge donation from St Declan's Parish. As of November, our JRS Refugee Foodbank feeds over 900 children, women and men in Sydney every week.*

on women seeking asylum and women on temporary visas who were at-risk of or who had experienced sexual and gender-based violence. At the same time, we were offered space in Westmead, thanks to the solidarity of the Marist Brothers. This meant we could shift our drop-in casework, community development activities, foodbank and legal clinics to Westmead, allowing the Sisters of Mercy cottage to be used exclusively by the JRS Finding Safety Project as a Women's Space for accompaniment, information, casework support, and leadership training.

Now, after 2 years of operating from Westmead, during which time we have had the space to grow our relationships with parishes and schools, develop community activities in partnership with the people we serve, increase our volunteer base, and significantly upscale our foodbank services, we're shifting back to Parramatta and back to the heart of the Diocese of Parramatta.

With the COVID crisis, 2020 has thrown a number of unexpected challenges our way and as we move towards being able to welcome people back for more face-to-face services and activities, we are grateful to have a new space to work out how to offer support that is safe, responsive, and COVID-safe, yet still welcoming and inclusive. While change and relocation can be stressful, JRS have somehow always ended up where we need to be; with the people we serve namely refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in vulnerable situations. We thank you for walking with JRS on this journey.

Advocacy update: 40 years on, the need to advocate remains crucial


40 years on from when JRS first came into being, advocacy in collaboration with refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in vulnerable situations remains crucial. In 2020, the broader JRS community continues to help advocate for policies of welcome and protection in the COVID-19 Crisis.

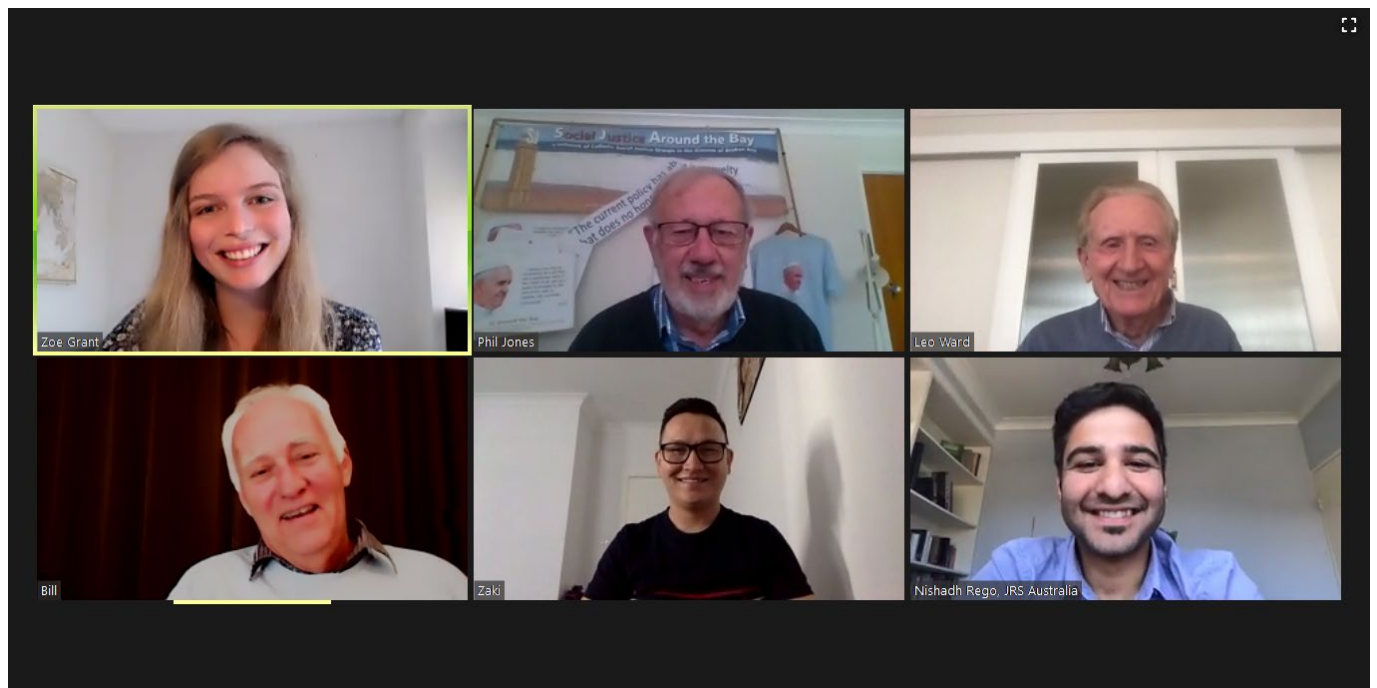
This year in March, with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, people seeking asylum suddenly faced a new challenge. Already, they had fled persecution, lost their belongings and assets. Already, they had been separated from their friends, family, and communities. Many had experienced traumatic periods of prolonged detention, destitution, and uncertainty in Australia, often in offshore camps. Others had been in our cities and towns, sometimes in 'immigration detention centres' more akin to prisons. Now, in COVID-19 these people were almost certainly going to be excluded from the country's national pandemic response measures.


And so it happened. People seeking asylum often were the first to lose jobs in the crisis but were still excluded from JobKeeper, JobSeeker and other federal government support. As many as 40,000 women, children, and men nationally have not had their claims for protection assessed by the Australian government. Even if borders were open, these people could not conceivably return home.

These women and men, including former engineers, teachers, social workers, farmers, and doctors who have worked and



 Pictured, Carolina Gottardo with community leader, Sajeeda Bahadurmia who spoke at JRS Australia's 2020 International Women's Day event on the agency and leadership of forcibly displaced women. Special thanks to Women NSW for your support of the JRS Australia Finding Safety project.



 Our Forced Like Jesus to Flee – Migrant and Refugee Sunday (27 September) Webinar was inspired by Pope Francis' theme. The event was hosted in conjunction with Social Justice Around the Bay and explored what it looks like in Australia to support people who have been forced, like Jesus, to flee their homes. The webinar focused on the plight of refugees and their families in the pandemic. Speakers included Nishadh Rego (JRS Policy, Advocacy and Communications Manager), Zaki Haidari, (Community Advocate), Phil Jones (Social Justice Around the Bay), Bill Aitken (Social Justice Around the Bay) and Leo Ward (French's Forest Parish). MC: Zoe Grant (JRS Community Organiser).

paid taxes for years, now need a safety net in their hour of need.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, JRS Australia has advocated for people seeking asylum and other migrants in vulnerable situations not to be left behind. It has been a remarkable collective effort.

The people we serve have shown great courage and resilience in speaking out about their experiences and about the changes they want to see. JRS works with leaders and diaspora communities with lived experience of forced displacement due to persecution, conflict, and other factors. This year, these leaders spoke to the media and to decision-makers. They spoke to the Prime Minister's office, to Ministers, and to state government politicians, highlighting the daily indignities that they have been forced to endure.

The broader JRS community have also been vocal in advocating for human dignity – people like you.

Parish leaders have held meetings with their MPs, school children have stood in solidarity with their fellow asylum-seeking classmates, and CEOs and Bishops have written directly to the Prime Minister.

Schools, parishes, and organisations are helping JRS continue to fill the material void left by our elected federal government. They are helping us to provide food, shelter, money for specialist medications and support people to find employment where possible. Demand for our services has increased by 254% since March 2020. This is not sustainable.

Unfortunately, the Federal Budget, handed down on 6 October, did not allocate any new support for people seeking asylum in the pandemic. In fact, existing funding to the already-diminished Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) was cut in half. At the same time, the Government allocated \$55 million to keep Christmas Island detention centre open and other immigration detention measures.

The Federal Government also began exiting highly vulnerable families and individuals evacuated from Manus Island and Nauru for medical treatment from long-standing community accommodation. These people were given just 3 – 6 weeks to find jobs and new places to live.

This combination of decisions was yet another clear signal that not only were people seeking asylum to be left behind in the pandemic, they were to be wilfully and deliberately cut off meagre support at the same time.

Fortunately, the warmth of people like you remains a crucial antidote to these policies. It is also crucial for JRS Australia, and the broader JRS Australian community, to continue advocating for human dignity and protection. Our elected leaders must understand the impact of their decisions; that they seriously consider humane and feasible solutions placed in front of them. They must know that so many members of the Australian community want our nation to welcome, promote, protect, and integrate everyone in need. Thank you all for your support in these efforts.

🗣️ *Our Caseworker, Maegan, on a call with a client in the COVID-19 crisis. Demand for our direct services keeps growing due to people seeking asylum's exclusion from all federal government support. Image credit: Flashpoint Labs.*





Each week our Foodbank feeds over 900 people. Image credit: Flashpoint Labs.

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What JRS Does

JRS Australia advocates for policies of welcome and protection at all tiers of government. Through COVID-19, JRS Australia continues to provide emergency assistance, a Foodbank, professional casework support, an employment support program, facilitates free legal advice, as well as conducting targeted advocacy work, and a project to empower women.

 www.facebook.com/JRSAustralia

 [@JRS_Aus](https://twitter.com/JRS_Aus)

donate

How your donation will help

Your support allows us to continue to advocate for policies of welcome and protection and to provide people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations with COVID-19 safe specialist casework support, employment support, emergency payments and assisting women who are experiencing violence as well as providing food via our JRS Refugee Foodbank to people who have been otherwise left behind.

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