

# LINK Newsletter - Spring Edition 2023



## LETTER FROM OUR DIRECTOR

Dear friends,


I extend warm Spring greetings. And I write from a heart that brims with gratitude, while aching with deep shared sorrows. What a busy few months we have had, amidst many transitions.

In July, we were honoured to host Br Michael Schöpf SJ, JRS' (then incoming) International Director for a visit to Australia as part of an Asia-Pacific tour.



 *Michael Schöpf SJ brings a wealth of experience to the Directorship, along with an intimate knowledge of JRS, having served us in several capacities, and most recently as Deputy International Director. Michael succeeds Fr Tom Smolich SJ, who leaves a wonderful legacy.*



 *JRS International Director (then incoming), Br Michael Schöpf SJ, visited Australia in July. He is pictured here (mid back row) with members of the JRS Australia team and partners, in Zahra's garden at our Parramatta headquarters.*

I am very grateful to the many Jesuit and lay colleagues who welcomed Michael so warmly across a dense 10-day schedule, rich with discernment, learning and exchange.

We were touched by Michael's deep listening and appreciation of our work, and the value he places upon accompaniment, alongside service and advocacy, as linked pillars of JRS' approach.

We are pleased to be working in increasingly closer alignment with our JRS colleagues globally, including through our headquarters, regional hubs and expanse of country offices.

In another significant transition, we are bidding farewell to JRS Australia's much-loved outgoing Assistant Country Director, Maeve Brown, who (in her own words) is stepping aside following much reflection and 9 years of service to explore further opportunities for learning and contribution. Maeve shares a beautiful reflection on her time with JRS in this newsletter. She has made an exceptional contribution to JRS and to the lives of so many within our community. We are deeply grateful and extend to Maeve our heartfelt best wishes for the future.

**Friends – there is no escaping the fact that we are living in volatile times.**

Devastating conflicts are raging in so many parts of the world. Some are receiving prominent coverage; some are neglected; all are utterly tragic. Major disasters have occurred with terrible frequency, loss of lives and infrastructure. We share a deep sorrow at all of these events and extend love and solidarity to all directly affected, including, most closely, members of the JRS team and our diaspora colleagues.

We were also greatly saddened by the outcome of Australia's referendum. In its wake, we re-embrace the generous invitation issued by First Nations people through the Uluru Statement from the Heart to walk together towards a better future.

JRS Australia was proud to support the Yes campaign, alongside many other faith-based organisations and leaders, and diaspora communities. We acknowledge the deep pain being felt by many, and will redouble our efforts to discern and enact our best contribution to building right relationships and reconciliation, in the Jesuit way.

**As you will read within the newsletter, we are witnessing unprecedented severity of need amongst the people we serve, including spiralling food insecurity and homelessness. Funding attrition, cost of living pressures, systemic exclusion from welfare support and the protracted uncertainty and trauma experienced by so many who have sought Australia's protection are all contributing factors.**

In the face of all of this we are working hard and remain strong. That is due to the hope and inspiration derived from the extraordinary resilience to which we bear witness daily; the many stories of survival, growth and generosity, including those shared below. It is due to you – our wonderful community – and the many ways in which you continue to deploy head, heart and hands to proffer support. Working together, we feel our shared humanity and discern our purpose and impact ever more clearly.

[Thank you for journeying with us.](#)

Warmly,  
**Tamara**



*Good News  
for Maggie!*

We recently had a team picnic at our office to celebrate something very special: **Magdalene, our wonderful staff member and Leadership Program participant has had her request for asylum granted!**

*We are so happy to know that Maggie will have a permanent future in Australia. **Welcome home Maggie, we are lucky to have you!***



## JUSTICE IS MORE THAN AN EVENT


### HOW STUDENTS ARE HELPING PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM IN TIMES OF UNPRECEDENTED NEED

*With cuts in government funding for people seeking asylum and increasing cost-of-living pressures, food insecurity and homelessness are rising sharply. Amid unprecedented need, the staff and students of Loreto are stepping up.*

When Maggie shared her story of seeking asylum in Australia at Loreto Normanhurst, it was unlike anything that the 1100 students at this all-girls Catholic school had heard before.

Several wrote to their teachers to say how moved they were, and that they were inspired to help. For some Loreto students, this was the beginning of their relationship with JRS Australia's Foodbank, which feeds about 150 families a week but has been struggling lately due to increased demand and funding cuts.



 *Maggie is a journalist, a member of staff, and a leader in the JRS Australia Leadership Program, which provides opportunities for people with lived experience of forced displacement to share their stories and advocate for their rights.*

Over the next few months, Loreto staff and students organised several food drives, generously donating their time and energy to help keep the shelves at JRS Australia stocked with essential items to help families facing food insecurity. For Loreto students, this is an ongoing relationship fueled by a commitment to help refugees and sustained by the school's Social Justice curriculum.

Loreto's unit on social justice is also reorienting to have a greater focus on refugees and people seeking asylum. The food drive is a hands-on part of this education so that students can take action on issues that they learn about in class.

'We agreed that justice is more than an event, more than giving someone a bit of money,' said Jacinta Wells, the Acting Head of Religious Education and Justice. 'It has to be embedded into the curriculum, so students understand why they have to create change and how they can do that.'

**Like Maggie, other participants in JRS Australia's leadership program have shared their personal stories at Loreto. They, too, have opened eyes and moved the school community to act. Idrissa is one of them.**


'Idrissa's story was very personal and vulnerable, and staff commented that they were shocked that the government is not providing the support refugees need,' Jacinta recalled.

'Hearing from Idrissa made our community at Loreto Normanhurst aware of some of the conditions that are faced by refugees when they arrive in Australia.'


'For example, when Idrissa said that when he gets on a bus, he has a different Opal card, this was not commonly-held knowledge by our staff and students. Refugees face barrier after barrier. We think Australia is a lovely place to come, it's sunny, friendly and peaceful. We should do more than say "aren't you happy to be in Australia?"'

Loreto's support for JRS Australia's Foodbank is critical. Historic cuts to a Federal government welfare program, for which some categories of people seeking asylum are eligible, have generated a dramatic 90 percent reduction in support over the last five years. The number of people who benefited from the program, called the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS), plummeted to just 1,300 Australia-wide, leaving many people already facing hardships more vulnerable to hunger and homelessness.



 Idrissa, a participant in JRS Australia's Refugee Leadership program, speaks at Loreto Normanhurst.



 Loreto Normanhurst students show the food items that they have collected for the JRS Australia Foodbank. 'Students at Loreto Normanhurst are very conscious of putting their faith into real world actions,' said Jacinta Wells, the school's Acting Head of Religious Education and Justice.

A NSW government funded emergency relief initiative enabled organisations like JRS Australia to provide critical support to people seeking asylum. But this program was discontinued earlier this year, and those who relied upon it now have nowhere else to go.

We are observing destitution, homelessness, spikes in family and domestic violence, and inability to buy medicines and food among refugees and people seeking asylum.

**Because of major funding shortfalls and steep Federal cuts to welfare programs, we are facing the prospect of having to turn away people with dire needs.**


### **But we are not giving up.**

Together with our friends in partner organisations, JRS Australia has been knocking on every door to make sure that those in power are aware of the crisis situation facing refugees and people seeking asylum. We have held dozens of meetings with state, local and Federal officials as well as with organisations in our sector to coordinate and advocate.

Meanwhile, the fundraising and donations that we receive from our supporters like the students and staff at Loreto, are more important than ever. They help us to sustain our intensive efforts to plug the gaps and tackle food insecurity and homelessness.

**‘I know that our contribution will help to make a difference.’**



 *Jacinta Wells, the Acting Head of Religious Education and Justice at Loreto Normanhurst, stands next to the food items that the school’s students and staff collected for JRS Australia’s Foodbank. The school’s food drive is a hands-on part of the Social Justice curriculum so that students can take action on issues that they learn about in class.*

‘I know that our contribution will help to make a difference,’ said Jacinta, about working with JRS Australia. ‘I recognise and value that as a big school community, we can make a big impact on your families and on the work that you do.’

**And the impact runs both ways: students are inspired to act, many of them able to put their education and their faith into practice in thoughtful ways.**

‘Students at Loreto Normanhurst are very conscious of putting their faith into real world actions. For example, many will donate blankets for the local women’s shelter. It shows the sincerity, empathy and care that students possess. It is intrinsic to who they are as a Loreto community,’ Jacinta added.

‘That’s what keeps me going,’ she said. ‘It’s the students’ passion, their care and their genuine desire to support families and communities.’

There is value to that kind of social justice action because it does two important things at once: it inspires the teachers and staff, and it shows students that they can make a difference here and now.

‘It doesn’t have to be perfect, everything doesn’t have to be in place,’ said Jacinta. ‘You just need to go out and do what you can.’

*If your school, parish or community group wants to hear from a person with lived experience of forced displacement or organise a food drive, please contact [schools@jrs.org.au](mailto:schools@jrs.org.au).*

# 'MY CHILDREN ARE THE LIGHTS OF THE STARS'

## A REFUGEE FATHER DEVOTES HIMSELF TO HIS CHILDREN'S SUCCESS

*Our Employment Program helps refugees and people seeking asylum of all skill levels develop market-relevant skills and find jobs – so that they can help their children build the future they want.*

Feda\* was born and educated in Afghanistan, where he trained to become a medical doctor and worked at a hospital in Kabul.

He first came to Australia on a scholarship in 2010 to study a Masters in Public Health from a university in Sydney. Upon the completion of his scholarship, Feda returned to Afghanistan.

'The knowledge I had gained here was useful for people in my country,' he recalled. 'They deserved the help and we needed to use our skills there.'

He started in a senior position in public health, a program funded by the World Bank. He oversaw major public health programs and managed significant amounts of international assistance.

**But when the Taliban violently took over Afghanistan in August 2021, Feda and his family feared for their lives and reluctantly decided to leave.**

The Australian government granted the family a visa. But reaching the Kabul International Airport, they found only chaos: throngs of desperate people trying to get to the airport, the turmoil making it impossible for Feda's family to enter.



\* Feda's name has been changed to protect his identity.

The only two Australian military planes sent to evacuate people left without them that day.

'It was really horrible because there was gunfire and my children were very scared,' Feda said.

They despondently returned home that day. But then came the deadly explosion outside the airport on 26 August, which preceded the end of the military evacuation flights.

Feda and his family decided to do the unthinkable – walk to Pakistan by road.

***'We had a few suitcases, only clothes. We had to leave our house, our car, everything.'***

Feda and his family tried to find rest for two days in the open air. There was no food, no toilet, and no water – and the threat of the Taliban was ever-present.

**After much hardship, they found their way to Australia, landing first in Darwin and then settling in Sydney.**

**Here, finally, was safety and security. But his children were struggling to cope with the dramatic changes.**

‘I took my children to the park and they cried. They have no family. No cousins. No one. Nothing.’ Feda recalled telling his children: ‘The moment will pass. You will achieve many things.’

He decided to focus on the future of his family and ‘sacrifice himself’ by pausing his own career to help his children adjust to their new life.

After initially taking ‘English as a Second Language’ courses, his children are now doing well in school. His daughter entered university and is getting excellent grades. Feda is as proud of them as he is dedicated to their success:

***‘My children are the lights of the stars. In them I found the light that I was looking for.’***

As Feda is not able to practise medicine in Australia, he found whatever jobs he could to make ends meet.

‘The job market here is completely different and requires various types of skills and capabilities, but I am willing to work in any job, even if they are not the same as my areas of education and expertise,’ he said.

‘I sacrifice myself for my family,’ he said. ‘I devote myself to them.’


He speaks of the hurdles of planting roots in a new country. ‘The big challenge for newcomers is settlement, especially getting a job. For professionals like doctors and engineers, they face big challenges in getting a job in their areas of training.’

Refugee and migrant doctors find it prohibitively difficult to get recognition of prior learning and qualifications because of cost, tests, and other stringent requirements. Most are unable to register with AHPRA and the national boards to practise medicine in Australia.

JRS Australia provided Feda with continuous employment support through remote and face to face sessions. The Employment Program helped him to gain the confidence and training to look for work and learn about the job searching process in Australia. Our Technology Bank also gave Feda a laptop, donated by Polaron, a language and interpreting service provider. He used the laptop to study, search for jobs and prepare for his current role in a healthcare-related field.

Feda is now able to support his family.

**Our Employment Program provides essential training to refugees to equip them with the skills needed in the Australian labour market. We also connect them with employers who need their skills and can offer them employment.**

 *In the background, a client participates in the RSA training organised by JRS Australia to equip refugees and people seeking asylum with the skills they need to be employable in Australia. The Employment Program helps refugees with skill-building and connects them with employers.*



### *‘She is greater than words.’*

Tamana Mirzada, our Employment Program Coordinator, has helped hundreds of refugees and people seeking asylum find jobs in her two years with JRS Australia.


‘She is great and wonderful,’ Feda said of her. ‘There are no words. She is greater than words.’

With his new job, Feda is able to afford the essentials and has to prioritise expenses to support his children so they can study.

His children bring him joy, and he focuses on their future as they build their lives in Australia.

*‘Light comes into my eyes, my heart and health,’ he says when he thinks of his children. ‘They have the potential to do anything!’*



 Tamana Mirzada, the Employment Program Coordinator at JRS Australia.

## How you can help



We are able to accept:

- Laptops up to 5 years old
- Macbooks up to 7 years old

We kindly ask you to wipe your machine and remove any passwords so we can provide it to the people we are working with even faster. Please make sure to include the charging cable and any other required accessories as necessary for the device.



**Do you want to donate a device to the JRS Australia Employment Program?**



### Collection

Please post devices to:  
10-12 Victoria Road  
Parramatta NSW 2150



### Contact

Tamana Mirzada  
Employment Program Manager  
tamana.mirzada@jrs.org.au

## Can't donate anything but still want to help?

If you like to offer training courses, employment opportunities, or would like to speak about how you or your organisation can assist we would love to hear from you!

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE HEART

### MAEVE BROWN, ON 9 YEARS WITH JRS AUSTRALIA

*Our outgoing Assistant Country Director reflects on her time at JRS Australia helping steward the organisation through difficult times with steady hands and a committed heart.*



After nearly 9 and a half years, it has taken much thought and discernment to know that it's time for me to step back from my work at JRS Australia ('JRS') and to see how and where else I can be of service.

While I know this is the right decision for me, I have struggled to tell others that I'm leaving, particularly when there is still so much work to do.

I have also struggled to find the right words to adequately reflect my time with JRS, and while I still don't know how to sum things up in a few hundred words, I want to tell you what I have loved most about working at JRS and what I will take with me when I go.

It's one thing to know about the horrendous treatment endured by people seeking protection both in Australia and in places of offshore detention, but it's quite another to witness it firsthand, to walk alongside the people who have been broken by our attempts to stop boats and put up barriers rather than find safer pathways.

***"... it's the accompaniment that sets JRS apart and is what I will remember most and carry with me."***

While the day-to-day of JRS work is often filled with responding to crises and requests for help with food, accommodation, emergency relief, support fleeing domestic violence, and finding support for people's deteriorating health and mental health, it is the heart with which JRS approaches this work that still leaves me in awe.

JRS defines accompaniment as a direct and personal approach to journeying with people. Within that is the recognition and acknowledgement of a shared humanity which often gets lost in the interactions that people have with services, institutions, and policies along their refugee journeys.

The referrals, the services, the research, and the advocacy work that JRS provides are all integral to ensuring better outcomes for the people we serve, but it's the accompaniment that sets JRS apart and is what I will remember most and carry with me.

In the early days of setting up our services in Parramatta, the greatest compliment came from a woman who would often drop-in for support and who told us that it ‘feels like (her) mother’s house.’ I love that JRS has been able to offer spaces of hospitality and welcome where people can feel heard, feel seen, and feel human. This may seem like a low bar, but these small acts of kindness can mean so much when people have left all that they know, are separated from those they love, and are *still* told they will never call Australia home.

I’ve also been told by many people over the years that they come to JRS because ‘we know them, we know their story, we feel them.’ I love that JRS values sitting with and listening to people particularly when they are most distraught and when they have lost hope, but also through the mundane joys of daily life. I want to measure my time at JRS in cups of tea, conversations about children and grandchildren, gardening advice, many tears shed and frustrations shared, and warm embraces.

I often get asked why I’ve chosen to do this work or what keeps me going, and while I won’t go so far as to say it’s a calling, it’s probably the closest I’ll get to knowing that I’m where God has needed me to be. It also makes it even more difficult to step back and know that it is also time for me to listen and search for what I’m meant to do next.

I doubt I’ll journey far and I hope our paths will continue to cross, but I know I will forever be connected to JRS and will continue to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and forcibly displaced people wherever I go.

**“I WANT TO MEASURE MY TIME AT JRS IN CUPS OF TEA, CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN, GARDENING ADVICE, MANY TEARS SHED AND FRUSTRATIONS SHARED, AND WARM EMBRACES.”**



*We are very grateful to Maeve for the years of service - and heart - she has given to JRS Australia. We wish her all the best as she takes this next step in her journey.*

[aus.jrs.net/donate](https://aus.jrs.net/donate)

### What JRS Does

JRS Australia accompanies, serves, and advocates for the rights of people seeking asylum, refugees, and migrants in vulnerable situations. JRS Australia advocates for policies of welcome and protection at all tiers of government and offers casework, employment, leadership and emergency assistance services.

### How your donation will help

Your donation allows us to support people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations who have **nowhere else to go**. Our clients rely on us for safe, specialist casework, training and employment assistance, crisis support and payments, programs for survivors of violence, as well as food and toiletries available through our Foodbank.



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