

# LINK Newsletter - Christmas Edition 2023



## LETTER FROM OUR DIRECTOR

Dear friends,

In these days leading up to Christmas, there is a tremendous poignancy to the messages of love that we share and the wishes we extend to one another for health, happiness and peace on Earth.

*At a time of such challenge in our precious world, we can readily feel overwhelmed.*

We are bearing witness to tragic scenes and stories of devastating hardship, with the knowledge that there is much preventable suffering, globally, of which we are less aware. It can feel hard to discern our path and contribution in the face of all of this.

At JRS, here in Australia and globally, we are privileged to hear so very many stories from the over one million people who we accompany and serve, and with and for whom we advocate, across their displacement journeys.

**These stories teach us so much, and provide our greatest guidance and inspiration for the work that we do to support individual people, families and communities, as we lobby for better laws, systems, and collaborative efforts to achieve a safer, fairer, and more peaceful future for all.**

Within this newsletter, and through our [16 Stories for 16 Days](#) of Activism to End Violence for Women and Girls, you will find many inspiring stories of tremendous hope, survival and contribution as well as suffering. Please read and share them.

**You will also find inspiring stories of wonderful contributions made by so many people to support refugees, people seeking asylum, and our holistic work at JRS.**

That is also part of our great privilege. Here at JRS we see and are immensely grateful for the extraordinary lengths to which our friends go to fundraise and donate time, talents and material support as part of our tremendous community effort.

In this newsletter you will read accounts of some of these incredible efforts on the part of Board members, staff, volunteers, parishioners and students to “go the extra mile” in doing their part for a better world.

These include a 7.5km ocean swim, an 80km run, extraordinary fundraisers, and an out-of-hours drop-in donations hub!

**We will be sharing more of all of these stories of survival and contribution over the year ahead, to show-case more of what inspires and motivates daily, and connects us in our humanity.**

JRS has been inspired in our mission by the words of Pope Francis: *‘Be artisans of peace, around you and within you; ambassadors of peace, so that the world can discover the beauty of love, of living together, of fraternity and solidarity.’*

***‘Be artisans of peace, around you and within you; ambassadors of peace, so that the world can discover the beauty of love, of living together, of fraternity and solidarity.’***

We believe that we can craft a more fair and peaceful future by taking concrete actions, individually and collectively, that draw us closer to each other.

Every act of kindness and compassion, carefully chosen and well-informed words in dialogue, every donation of time and funds generate ripples that contribute to a powerful current of hope and goodwill to create a better future for all.

I don’t have words to thank you all enough for the myriad ways in which you journey with us as part of the JRS global community.

**Your loyal support, your stories of inspiration and hope are what sustains our work, and we are deeply grateful for that.**

Wishing a very happy Christmas to all who celebrate and every joy to you all for a far more peaceful year ahead.

Warmly,  
**Tamara**





## Eve goes the extra mile!

We want to offer special congratulations and thanks to Dr Eve Lester, Chair of the Board of JRS Australia and long-term advocate for refugees and people seeking asylum, who swam 7.5km in the Victorian Open Water Championships, to raise money for the important work we do at JRS Australia. And she earned a Silver Medal!!

We love all the creative ways our community comes together to support us, but please remember not to try this one at home!



## 16 STORIES FOR 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM

### THE FINDING SAFETY PROJECT EMPOWERS WOMEN TO REBUILD

*From the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on the 25th of November, to International Human Rights Day on the 10th of December, JRS Australia's Finding Safety Project answered the call of the 16 Days of Activism.*

The 16 Days of Activism is an international movement coordinated by UN Women, and it represents an annual call on governments, civil society, women's organisations, young people, the private sector, and the media, to **come together to address the global pandemic of violence against women and girls.**

The team in JRS Australia's Finding Safety Project uses this time to amplify the work we do with women who have sought asylum in Australia, have a refugee background, or are migrants in situations of vulnerability, who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing, sexual or gender-based violence ('SGBV').



This year, we decided to do something special, and use our platform to amplify the stories of the resilient women we accompany in the Finding Safety Project: *16 stories for 16 Days*, about the extraordinary journeys women take to create safety for themselves and their families, and to rebuild in the face of adversity.

These women come from incredibly diverse backgrounds, and yet are united by a common thread: by standing together in community through the support of the Finding Safety Project, they defy the isolation that often seeks to silence survivors of violence, and bravely share their stories.

**We are deeply privileged to accompany survivors through our Finding Safety Project, and grateful for the generosity of our donors who support us to offer services to women who often have nowhere else to go.**

We provide women seeking protection or resolution of their migration status with access to emergency financial relief, speciality casework, psychosocial support, and referrals to other health and legal assistance.

Women in our Finding Safety Project can also gather together with their families in our private Women’s Space cottage, to support each other, engage in community activities, and plan for their futures.

When they are ready, they can also engage with our Employment Assistance Program to continue investing in themselves through education and training, and finding meaningful work.

*The global theme for this year’s 16 Days of Activism was “UNITE! Invest to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls.”*

We have been heartened by the response to date to the powerful stories shared by our clients.

**During this giving season, we hope that reading, and learning about the important work of our unique Finding Safety Project inspires ever greater investment in the women we serve, our holistic support of them, and a future where women and girls are empowered and free from all forms of violence.**

Please visit <https://aus.jrs.net/en/16-days-16-stories/> to hear the incredible stories of our clients.



# TURNING HOPE INTO ACTION

## MARCHING TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS



📷 *Josephine, Rana and Magdalene, from JRS Australia's Finding Safety Project Team, at Merrylands Civic Square, after participating in the Western Sydney March to mark the 16 Days of Activism for the Elimination of Violence against Women.*

During the 16 Days of Activism, over 150 community members, community workers, police, youth and leaders joined together for the Western Sydney March to mark the 16 Days of Activism for the Elimination of Violence against Women. JRS Australia's Finding Safety Project coordinated this event alongside Cumberland City Council.

**Supporters met at Merrylands Oval and marched through the main streets and CBD to the Merrylands Civic Square in a show of solidarity for those who have been impacted by gender-based violence.**

Participants and passers-by heard from Mayor of Cumberland City Council Lisa Lake who spoke of the incredible importance there is for organisations to be funded appropriately to address the scourge of gender-based violence.

The Mayor also addressed the disproportionate levels of violence experienced by women on temporary visas, and the important work of organisations like JRS Australia, who fill the gaps in mainstream support.

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.

Anewan woman and Community Corrections Officer Pam Simon shared her personal experience of domestic violence and bravely called for an end to the shame and stigma that many victims/survivors face.

She called for better support for indigenous communities to address violence, and called for an improved support system that is resourced to respond appropriately to the needs of diverse communities.

***'I walk the walk and talk the talk, because I can't be hidden anymore.'***

Dr Andrew King from Relationships Australia spoke of the importance of working with men who choose to use violence to dismantle the beliefs and attitudes they and their communities hold that condone violence against women. We reflect on the importance of this lesson particularly during this period of peace and forgiveness.



Michael Melville, Food and Material Aid Officer from JRS Australia's Foodbank, also participated in the walk as an ally and supporter. "I think it is really important that men show up and support the women in our community in their call to end violence and oppression. We blokes really need to step up and act now to break down the attitudes and beliefs that harm women and girls and lead to violence," he said.

Josephine Rechichi, Head of Accompaniment and Service at JRS Australia, and coordinator of the March, offered her insights into the meaning of this movement for our organisation, and for the women we serve:

'The 16 Days of Activism is a global campaign and a time for women and the community to stand together and say "enough is enough". Women have the right to live free from violence, persecution, oppression and discrimination. Women should not ever live in fear of violence in their homes, in their workplaces or in society. Ending violence against women is everyone's responsibility, and this gathering shows that Western Sydney is committed to stamping out gender based violence in our community and across the world. Together we say no more.'

*‘Women have the right to live free from violence, persecution, oppression and discrimination.’*

We thank all those who attended and supported this event. With your continued allyship and generosity, we look forward to building upon the success of this campaign in 2024.




## JRS AUSTRALIA'S EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM SUPPORTS REFUGEES TO FIND MEANINGFUL WORK

JRS Australia offers varied training programs for people with lived experience through our Employment Assistance Program - and through our new Pathways to Empowerment Project, we have been able to offer programs specifically for women to invest in themselves and their future.



Thanks to the kind support of our generous donors, since 2021 JRS Australia's Employment Program has been able to support 400 refugees and people seeking asylum to find meaningful employment as they settle into life in Australia. Last year, 220 individuals engaged in the program, 70 completed accredited training including White Card, first aid, forklift, traffic control, and security qualifications, and more than 100 people secured employment.

 CEO Tahera Nassrat from the Afghan Peace Foundation, delivering an information session about financial strategy, money management and budgeting with JRS Australia clients.

*We sat down with a client of JRS Australia's Employment program - Gina\* - to learn more about her story.*

**Gina\* is a mother and a passionate working professional. Gina's tale is one of strength and tenacity; of overcoming all odds to seek asylum in Australia and build a bright future for herself and her son.**

Gina fled her home country after experiencing violence, and moved to Singapore, where she worked in a blood pathology lab. Gina was working her way towards becoming a registered nurse in the in-patient/out-patient ward.

***'I came to a new place seeking some peace and I just wanted to make a new home away from home.'***

When Gina's ex-husband found her on her way home one evening, she began to fear for her and her child's security. Gina recounted sleepless nights, and days spent hiding in her house unable to leave and go to work to support her family.

**Gina fled to Sydney in 2018 with her son. She was thankful to have found safety, but she confronted many barriers in trying to set herself up in a new country.**

"Being a refugee and an immigrant you are just in limbo. I didn't know whether I could work without any problem. I didn't know whether I was going to be able to put food on the table or have a roof over our heads. I was so lost. I came to a new place seeking some peace and I just wanted to make a new home away from home."

**Gina turned to Google for the answers, searching for "help for people who are seeking asylum" - and that's where she found us at JRS Australia.**

During her early months in Australia, Gina remembers being in constant contact with the JRS Australia team.

"They don't feel like staff members, they feel like advisors who are more than happy to help with whatever they can. They were always encouraging me to step outside of my comfort zone and their kind words made me feel really good about myself."

Through JRS Australia's casework team, Gina was able to secure a protection visa for herself and her son, and after a few months she had approval from immigration to be able to start working.

**Since 2021, the JRS Australia Employment Program has assisted refugees and people seeking asylum like Gina to prepare for and navigate the Australian job market. Clients are equipped with the tools they need to feel confident to join the workforce, including access to workshops on work-readiness, resume building and interview preparation skills, information about employment rights and access to resources like laptops.**

With the help of JRS employment services, Gina completed some short courses which supported her with the skills and confidence to enter the workforce.

"Tamana [JRS Australia Employment Program Coordinator] is one of the best career coaches for any job openings in any career."



## 'She was willing to help me with everything from building up my self-esteem to scheduling interviews for me.'

"Tamana helped me create a resume and suggested other platforms to expand my job search outside of just Indeed. She was willing to help me with everything from building up my self-esteem to scheduling interviews for me."

The JRS Australia Employment team helped Gina use her previous experience working for a Non-Government Organisation in Singapore to find a meaningful job opportunity in Australia. She now works at a large insurance company with the ability to work from home. This way she can spend more time with her son.

**Through her new role, Gina is looking to continue gaining more experience and developing her professional skills so she can keep moving forward in her career in Australia.**

"JRS is an amazing organisation. They are a place that will help you with all different services like work opportunities and emergency needs. But they also help you to build a community and make friends in your new home."

**Gina fondly talks about all the amazing friends that she has met at JRS Australia, and the wonderful community that she has been able to build over her 5 years in Australia.**

She found her time there so valuable that she now volunteers when she can to ensure that new refugees and people seeking asylum have the same opportunities that she had when she first arrived.

**Like many people from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, Gina has found strength and purpose in giving back to the community. We are so grateful to know Gina and to have her in our JRS Australia family.**

JRS Australia does not receive any Federal Government funding as we value our ability to advocate independently for the rights of the people we serve.

*Any donation, big or small, makes an important difference and helps us provide crucial services that offer hope to refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia.*

*\*The individual's name has been changed to protect their identity*



Warm thanks to Fr Richard Leonard SJ and Fr. Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ (JRS Board member; pictured with staff member, Maggie) and the wonderful parishioners of Our Lady of the Way North Sydney for donating so generously to support the work of JRS Australia this Christmas, after years of dedicated support.

***The donations of our generous supporters enable us to sustain our vital work to support refugees and people seeking asylum.***

## TURNING FAITH INTO ACTION

*We had such a wonderful time with the students at St John XXIII Catholic College, who have turned their faith into action by creating a drop-in centre for people seeking asylum to access toiletries and other essential items outside of work hours.*



The students participated in a Q&A with one of our amazing leaders, Idrissa, and reflected on how his story sheds light on the many experiences of those they plan to help. If you would like to get in touch about how your school can get involved with our work at JRS Australia, visit: <https://aus.jrs.net/en/schools-engagement/>

## REFUGEE LEADERS RAISE THEIR VOICES: INSPIRING ACTION WITHIN THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY

At JRS Australia, we are privileged to work alongside a group of leaders with lived experience, who advocate for the rights of refugees, people seeking asylum, and people who have experienced forced displacement.

**Leaders in our Refugee Leadership Program participate in leadership development activities, and are engaged by our partners in school, community and church groups to share their stories, raise awareness, and inspire us all to take action.**


The leaders show incredible resilience and power by coming to these events, leading with an open heart and using their voices to speak for themselves, their loved ones – and the tens of thousands of people they don't know, who share their dream of safety, and a better life in Australia.

We recently held a Table Talk with St Patrick's Cathedral Social Justice Group, where Maryam and Magdalene – leaders in our Refugee Leadership Program – shared their stories to a room of guests from the church and school community in Western Sydney.

Although their stories are personal, Maryam and Magdalene both described coming to Australia after facing incredible hardship and persecution in their home countries.





 Leaders from JRS Australia’s Refugee Leadership Program, who participated in a an evening of sharing stories about “Finding Freedom” during Refugee Week, alongside JRS Australia staff members and volunteers.

The leaders also experienced added trauma upon arriving into Australia, including hostility from the community, discrimination at work, a lack of support to meet basic food, housing and medical needs, and dangerously long processing times on asylum applications.

**All these factors work together to undermine a person’s ability to support themselves, to seek family reunification, and to feel secure and hopeful about their future.**

***"Advocacy brings me strength."***

MAGDALENE, REFUGEE LEADER

As Maryam and Magdalene shared, this story is all too common for people who experience forced displacement and seek asylum in Australia. For many, if charitable organisations like JRS Australia did not exist, there would be nowhere else to go.

**One guest asked the leaders how they find the strength to keep going through this seemingly insurmountable adversity, and both women touched on the power of being stronger with and for other people.**

Maryam, who came to Australia with her young son, said: “When you feel weak, when you’re being traumatised, and when you can’t be strong, you have to be strong for your children.”

Magdalene finds strength in knowing she is one of many brave story-holders, who raise their voices when others’ are silenced:

*“When I hear other people tell their stories, it brings me an ability to speak up. People have worse stories than mine, but when I listen to them and hear what they’ve been through, it brings me strength. Advocacy brings me strength.”*

And just as the leaders find strength and purpose through standing up for others, we are in turn moved by their stories, encouraged to be brave ourselves, and inspired to take action within our own communities.

Guests at the Table Talk had great discussions about how they can help from within their church, school and community groups. Some ideas discussed included:

- Donating to JRS Australia’s Foodbank;
- Fundraising to support the 3000 clients JRS Australia serves annually;
- Inviting us to run a School Workshop; and
- Writing to your local MP.



## You always have the power to make a difference.

Speaking specifically to students from Catherine McAuley and Parramatta Marist High School, Magdalene made it clear that no matter your circumstances, you always have the power to make a difference:

“As students you might feel there’s nothing you can do. But you can. Tell our stories. Go home, go back to your schools, churches, communities – and tell our stories”.

**Sharing stories is such a powerful way of learning about each other, coming together as a community to fight against injustice, and to show up and do something good for each other.**

To end her speech, Maryam shared the poem Bani Adam by Persian poet Saadi. This same poem is printed on a carpet displayed at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

Please know there is always a place for you at JRS Australia. If you want to be part of a community committed to creating a brighter future for refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia, please consider volunteering with us: [volunteers@jrs.org.au](mailto:volunteers@jrs.org.au).

If you would like one of our Refugee Leaders to speak at your school, church or community group event, please reach out to us: <https://aus.jrs.net/en/schools-engagement/>.

**“Human beings are members of a whole, in creation of one essence and soul.**


**If one member is afflicted with pain, other members uneasy will remain.**

**If you have no sympathy for human pain, the name of human you cannot retain.”**

**“BROTHERS,  
SISTERS, LET  
US FACE THESE  
PROBLEMS  
TOGETHER; LET  
US NOT CAUSE  
HOPE TO  
SHIPWRECK;  
LET US  
TOGETHER  
MAKE A  
MOSAIC OF  
PEACE!”**

**~ POPE FRANCIS**



 *Team JRS raced for people seeking asylum! Our amazing staff members, volunteers and supporters Rachael, Rose, Marc and Rana, raced in the Bondi to Manly Ultra in late October - an 80km relay run from Bondi Beach to Manly Beach, to raise money for JRS Australia.*

## holiday break

JRS Australia Offices will close for the Christmas/New Year's season on Friday 22nd December 2023. We will reopen to the public on Monday 22nd of January 2024.

# THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO CAME TO OUR END-OF-YEAR GATHERING

*Thank you to our clients, supporters, volunteers and partners for joining us for our informal end of year gathering. It was very special to be able to spend time together, reflecting on the year that has been, and sharing our hopes for the year to come. We wish you all a safe and happy Christmas season, and we look forward to seeing you in 2024!*





[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.

Ph: 02 9356 3888 • Email: [info@jrs.org.au](mailto:info@jrs.org.au) • Web: [aus.jrs.net](https://aus.jrs.net)



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