

LINK Newsletter | Christmas 2025



Leaders gather with JRS Australia's Policy, Advocacy and Communications Team at our Free Together event held on 4 July 2025. The evening was held to mark Refugee Week and showcase stories under the theme of "Diversity in Community".

Message from our Country Director

Dear friends,

Thank you for your support this year as we have continued working together to accompany, serve and advocate for refugees and people seeking asylum.

Earlier in October, I was able to visit Rome for the Jubilee year of hope and took the chance, while there, to visit the "Rooms of St. Ignatius," where the founder of the Jesuits prayed, worked, and directed the early works and mission of the Society of Jesus.

In those rooms, St. Ignatius wrote his many letters to Jesuits sent around the world, deliberated over and discerned the missions of his brothers, and eventually died.

I was especially moved to sit in the room where St. Ignatius met with and encouraged the Jesuits he was about to send across the world, seeking to bridge frontiers and address the greatest needs. Many Jesuits would be sent out from that room facing significant hardship, likely never to return to their homes again.

Pope Leo XIV recently joined a meeting of Jesuit provincials, leaders of Jesuit communities and works from across the world, gathered together in Rome.

In his address, the Pope recalled this traditional Jesuit practice of going out to the margins, encouraging Jesuits that "the Church needs you at the frontiers".

He pointed to the need to walk especially with those whose dignity has been violated. In particular, he highlighted the work of Jesuit Refugee Service and our mandate to stand in solidarity and advocate for change.

I am proud, since beginning in this role in August, to now be part of this work that is so expressive of the Jesuit mission; one that walks with some of the most marginalised members of our Australian community and affirms their dignity.

I have been heartened by the energy and commitment of our generous volunteers and the talent of our wonderful staff. I am touched by the ways I have seen the people we serve find a place of welcome and support at JRS.

This past year, we have witnessed a disturbing tide of anti-migrant sentiment in Australia, which may only deepen the feeling of marginalisation experienced by the people we serve and accompany.

I have also gladly seen our staff, volunteers, and supporters admirably confront and oppose this marginalisation through their everyday work and contributions.

Through our efforts across **Employment, Emergency Relief, Foodbank, English classes, Refugee Leadership**, and support for **women facing gender-based violence**, we all help to create a sense of home for people seeking safety.

Together we make JRS a place where refugees and people seeking asylum are empowered to make their unique contributions in our welcoming, diverse, and multicultural community.

We need your support to continue this vital work of accompaniment, service, and advocacy.

Your solidarity with refugees and people seeking asylum can support social harmony, expand our hospitality, and bring out the best of the Australian spirit this Christmas.

We are most grateful for your generosity.

With gratitude,
Fr. Brett O'Neill, S.J.



A HOME AWAY FROM HOME.

Finding Safety Project Manager Sara Muzamil shares stories from JRS Australia's one-of-a-kind Women's Space, where her team works alongside women on temporary visas who are experiencing gender-based violence.

The cosy cottage we call the Women's Space was generously donated to us by the Parramatta Sisters of Mercy. This heritage home once resided by nuns who dedicated their lives to serving others, giving above and beyond to those in need. **Today, it continues that legacy.**

The women we support have crossed oceans to be here, seeking safety, love, and acceptance. Many have endured abuse and discrimination, arriving in Australia with the hopes and dreams of a better life. Yet when relationships break down, they often find themselves isolated in a country where they don't speak the language, have no family or friends, and no one to turn to. Their world shrinks to survival.

That is where the Finding Safety Project steps in. Our team welcomes these women and helps them navigate systems, rebuild trust, and find connection through casework, community activities, and events. We often share about the services we provide, but in this newsletter, we want to speak about what it means to have a dedicated space for women to come together – and to experience a true home away from home.

Inside the cottage, women find something special. It doesn't feel like an office or a service. It feels like a home. The air is warm with the scent of a candle, and the sound of conversations and laughter from the kitchen reaches you before a word is spoken. Smiles come not out of obligation, but genuine care.

The walls are decorated with art created by women who visited before. Soft couches invite anyone to sit, rest, and breathe. The kitchen carries the smell of shared meals. Children play safely in their own room while mothers find a rare moment to connect or simply relax and enjoy conversations with fellow visitors to the Women's Space.

Here, women meet others who carry stories like theirs: stories of hurt, courage, and resilience. Though they speak many different languages, they understand each other deeply.

Silence turns into sharing, shame into solidarity. The walls of the Women's Space hold the weight of their struggles but also echo with joy when women dance, learn, and rebuild themselves, piece by piece.

The Women's Space is more than a safe place from harm. It is belonging. For many women far from family and community, it is the only place where they feel safe enough to laugh freely, rest without fear, and dream again. Staff and volunteers don't just offer support; they empower women with dignity, respect, and companionship.

One woman in her late sixties, for example, had been experiencing violence and had nowhere safe to go. For months, she left her house early each morning, spending her days in parks or libraries before returning home at night. When a stranger referred her to JRS, she began coming to the Women's Space.

Every morning, she arrived before staff, and every evening she stayed until closing. She made her coffee, read books in the garden, practiced her yoga routine, cooked her meals, and shared conversations with staff, volunteers, and other women.

Slowly, she began to heal. She found her voice again, joined workshops, learned new skills, and started to believe in a future shaped not by violence but by possibility.



Women participate in an Art Class at the Women's Space. Working with plants was so popular that a second class was held after an initial succulent potting session!

The impact of the Women's Space is found in these quiet but powerful moments, the first smile after weeks of silence, the relief of being understood, the joy of cooking a favourite dish from home with new friends.

For many women who walk through our doors, "home" has not been a safe word. But here, they are not clients or cases. They are themselves, welcomed, valued, and becoming part of a community.

The Women's Space is a living testament to what becomes possible when women are met with compassion instead of judgement, understanding instead of dismissal, and connection instead of isolation. It represents belonging. It is where women breathe without fear, speak without shame, and are reminded that they are strong, worthy, and deserving of care.

Through the Finding Safety Project, we witness women reclaim their voices, rebuild confidence, and begin to dream of futures once thought impossible. The Women's Space has become a vital part of this journey, not just a safe space, but a true home of safety, dignity, and hope.

In carrying out this work, we honour the legacy of the Sisters of Mercy. We continue to serve, accompany, advocate for, and support those in need. Drawing from our Jesuit tradition, we practice *cura personalis* – that is, we care for the whole person.

Through the Women's Space, we ensure that every woman who walks through our doors finds not only safety, but also community, peace, and hope for a better future: a true home away from home.



Longstanding friend of our Women's Space and Chair of Parramatta Lion Club's Sewing Circle – Vandana – hosted a 6-week sewing program for the women we serve. Some have gone on to continue advanced classes!

KHUJESTA'S STORY: FROM LEARNING TO LEADING THROUGH DIGITAL SKILLS

When Khujesta arrived in Australia in March 2024 with her husband and two young sons, she brought with her an extraordinary professional background and the determination to begin again.

Khujesta is a talented professional and mentor. At home in Afghanistan, Khujesta had a graduate religious education, earned degrees in Geology and Mining, wrote seven books in the field of Engineering and Mathematics, she taught at college, and held senior roles including as the Director of the National Environment Protection Agency (NEPA) in Afghanistan.

Khujesta was about to be appointed to a position as Deputy Governor when the government collapsed - and even afterwards she continued to work with the United Nations Development Program in the North of Afghanistan.

Following the fall of Kabul, Khujesta's life changed overnight. With the help of her husband's relative, an Afghan-Australian advocate, she and her family were sponsored to evacuate to Australia through a humanitarian program.

Like many refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia, Khujesta faced the difficult reality that her extensive qualifications and experience were not recognised here.

Refugees often arrive with skills, professional expertise, and years of experience, yet face systemic barriers to securing meaningful and sufficient employment.

Khujesta's husband, a former GP and security intelligence professional, faced the same barriers.

From limited recognition of overseas qualifications to unfamiliar recruitment processes, and the need to learn new workplace cultures - these barriers can often be insurmountable without advocacy and support.

Despite a successful career, Khujesta felt she had to start from scratch in Australia.

"I was worried that I cannot find a job based on my field of study or experience," Khujesta said. 'Even though I had previous UN experience - but it's hard to join the UN in different countries.'"

Within her first week in Sydney, Khujesta attended a community orientation session, where she was introduced to the Finding Safety Project and met the Project's Manager Sara Muzamil. Soon after, Khujesta connected with Tamana from JRS Australia's Employment Program.

Tamana set Khujesta up with training opportunities that helped rebuild her confidence, and introduced her to potential employers.

JRS Australia's Employment Program is designed to address exactly these challenges by providing refugees and people seeking asylum with skills training, mentoring, and connections that help them overcome barriers and re-establish themselves professionally in Australia.

Through out Employment Program, Khujesta participated in the Digital Sisters Project, which supported women to further develop their digital literacy skills, and connected all participants with a digital device.

This connection opened doors for Khujesta. First to a short-term role with Polaron, and then to a position as Lead Digital Mentor with Collective Leisure. In this role, Khujesta works across three projects: Digital Literacy for Seniors, Youth Mentoring, and the Digital Sisters Program; an initiative that empowers women to build their technology skills and independence.

"The Digital Sisters program was especially helpful," says Khujesta. "It gave me a certificate, new skills, and the confidence to teach others."

Today Khujesta isn't just learning, she's mentoring. She is helping other women navigate technology, gain confidence, and open doors for themselves. Alongside her work, Khujesta has completed Certificates III in Children's Services, Administration Skills, and English, and is fast-tracking a Diploma of Counselling.

Khujesta's story is a source of great inspiration for us. We know that when refugees find work, the benefits extend far beyond themselves.



Khujesta stands beside Employment Program Manager Tamana, receiving a certificate of completion for the Digital Sisters Program.

Like so many refugees and people seeking asylum, Khujesta has not only bounced back from hardship, but continues to make tangible contributions to our community by sharing skills, building social connections and giving back.

In Khujesta's case, her contributions extend beyond her digital literacy work. Through her volunteer role as a Community Mobiliser with the Finding Safety Project, she helps other women connect with resources, navigate services, and build safe, supportive networks.

"I am so grateful to JRS," Khujesta says. "It feels like a family, a place where I can be myself, cry, and be happy. And I'm grateful to Australia for giving us freedom, safety, and opportunity. Sara and Tamana played a key role in my life and career here."

Khujesta's husband is now also studying in his field while caring for their youngest child - and their eldest is thriving at school. Khujesta works hard to support their family.

Khujesta's journey reflects what our Employment Program is all about: recognising skills, building new ones, and making real contributions to the community.

Refugees bring knowledge, resilience, and leadership. With the right support, people like Khujesta don't have to start over - they can help others make Australia home too.

Thank you for making our work possible.

So many of the people we serve, like Khujesta, are required to start from scratch when they seek asylum in Australia. With your help, we can continue to provide opportunities and employment pathways for refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia.

CLEARER VISION BRIGHTER FUTURES



In early July, our Casework team partnered with OneSight Essilor Luxottica Foundation to host a free Vision Clinic for the people we serve. We supported over 50 people seeking asylum, refugees and other migrants to have their vision tested and corrected. A total of 54 pairs of prescription glasses were ordered, and 7 ready-made reading glasses distributed on the spot!

Corrected vision can be life-changing, and a necessity for work, study and everyday life! We're so proud to have facilitated this for our community.

THANK YOU

TO OUR PARISH, SCHOOL AND
VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY



Through our **Schools and Community Engagement Program**, thousands of people have worked alongside us to learn about the experiences of people seeking asylum in Australia. Thank you to everyone who has volunteered their time at JRS, hosted a workshop and listened to a leader's story, collected essential food and personal items for our Foodbank, or made a financial gift to our core programs. **You make JRS a home away from home for us all – and from everyone here, we wish you a blessed, safe, and happy Christmas.**



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