

the MercyWorks
Bilum

PLUS:
HOLDING
ON TO
ABORIGINAL
CULTURE

SISTERS OF MERCY IN AUSTRALIA & PAPUA NEW GUINEA | JUNE 2019

WE ARE THE
VOICE



MercyWorks

SISTERS OF MERCY
IN AUSTRALIA & PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Mission Statement

Mercy Works promotes social justice through the local and overseas relief and development activities that are part of the vision and mission of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia and Papua New Guinea.

The programs engage in partnerships with communities to promote justice and self-reliance, and to support people and communities who are displaced or denied access to basic resources such as education, health care and social welfare. Mercy Works programs strongly endorse the principles of freedom, mutual respect, environmental sustainability, participation and protection of the rights and responsibilities of all.

Direction

In *Australia*, Mercy Works offers community education in world development concerns, provides assistance with refugees, and works in partnership with Indigenous peoples. *Overseas*, the primary focus is in the South East Asia-Pacific region where, in collaboration with local partners, Mercy Works directs its efforts towards the education, health care, and social and spiritual well-being of those who are poor or displaced.

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The Bilum

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ACFID
MEMBER

We are a member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and as such committed to the ACFID Code of Conduct for Australian aid and development organisations. See www.acfid.asn.au

Cover: Steven Dude, *Mercy Works Project Coordinator for Kiunga, PNG.*

The Bilum

In Papua New Guinea, bilums or handwoven string bags have been crafted and used by people for hundreds of years to carry their most precious and essential belongings. *The Bilum* carries and communicates the stories of the people involved in the many projects supported by Mercy Works.

In this edition of *The Bilum* we have focused on language and communication, particularly the importance of indigenous language.





AILSA MACKINNON RSM AM
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

It has been a privilege to have experienced such encounters and to know that such good work is being done.

Dear Friends,

For seven years my life has been filled with lots of interesting experiences. During that time I have met countless people whose lives have been turned around because they have come in contact with Mercy Works.

I remember meeting one such man in Goroka, Papua New Guinea who had been in prison. He had attended rehabilitation sessions with Mercy Works and had gained an apprenticeship on a building site. The man spoke in glowing terms of his gratitude to Mercy Works. He said without Mercy Works he would still be living a life of crime.

This is just one example of the difference that Mercy Works makes in people's lives. It has been a privilege to have experienced such encounters and to know that such good work is being done.

Then there are the many generous supporters of Mercy Works. Volunteers in the refugee projects in Australia not only spend time with the refugees and asylum seekers, but also are vitally interested in

their welfare as these people find a new home in Australia.

Financial support, too, is an essential element of Mercy Works. Donations range from thousands of dollars at a time to small amounts. Some are one-off and some are consistent and continuing. All are welcome and all are put to good use. I have heard donors say they value Mercy Works as it is a small organisation and they know the money is being well spent on programs that make an incredible difference to people's lives.

My heart is filled with gratitude for the magnificent staff I have worked with over these seven years and for the Directors, committee members and the Mercy Congregation Leaders. Their support has been constant and their advice practical. It has been such a pleasure working with such dedicated people whose interest has been concern for the recipients in the programs.

I leave Mercy Works with a sense of great satisfaction and gratitude.

Thank you one and all. ■

We thank you

Thank you to all our supporters for your contribution to Mercy Works.

Whether you are a volunteer or a donor, we are very grateful to you.

It is only through you donating your time and money that our development

programs and projects are made possible.

On behalf of those marginalised and vulnerable individuals and communities that have been empowered to transform their futures because of your support, we say "thank you"!



Sr Ailsa engaging with students in Bobonaro, Timor-Leste

Ailsa has always been deeply motivated by the opportunity to improve the day-to-day lives of the people directly impacted by (Mercy Works) programs.

Sr Ailsa Mackinnon RSM AM retires as Executive Director

BY KATHLEEN DONNELLON
CHAIR OF THE MERCY WORKS BOARD

After 2,638 busy, frustrating and wonderful days in the role, Sr Ailsa Mackinnon has stepped down as Executive Director of Mercy Works.

In her seven years at the helm, Ailsa has taken Mercy Works to a new level; forging strong community links, developing governance and oversight processes and, most importantly, expanding programs to reach out to the people who need it the most. It's thanks to Ailsa's hard work and skill that Mercy Works is held in such high regard in the International Development community.

Ailsa has managed projects ranging from providing educational opportunities for asylum seekers, refugees and Aboriginal students in Australia, to ensuring remote villages in Papua New Guinea have access to clean water and health care, as well as working to reduce the malnutrition rates of school children in Timor-Leste. Ailsa has always been deeply motivated by the opportunity to improve the day-to-day lives of the people directly impacted by our programs.

As a natural communicator, Ailsa has taken every opportunity to connect with Mercy Works supporters through many school and community group presentations. She has also visited almost every Mercy Works project in

Australia, Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea.

She first visited Papua New Guinea shortly after she began in her role in 2012, where she saw first-hand the positive impact that Mercy Works programs were having on communities in the poorest regions and villages. The experience had a galvanising effect on her and has guided her decision-making processes ever since.

The Sisters of Mercy have been and remain, an integral part of Ailsa's life. The values of compassion, hospitality, justice and service, as exemplified by the Mercy foundress, Catherine McAuley, underpinned Ailsa's Mercy education, and are at the core of everything she has since done and continues to do. While she does say she always wanted to be a teacher, it wasn't until she was surrounded by teachers who were also Sisters of Mercy, that she was inspired to join them, and become both Mercy nun and teacher. Taking her final vows in 1971, she committed herself to a life of compassion, justice and service to the most disadvantaged in society.

Her journey through Mercy Works hasn't been without challenges. Leading a Development Aid organisation is always fraught with difficulty, as the needs of the program recipients all too often outstrip the funds available to provide the necessary support. Ailsa has always faced each challenge with grace and has been tireless in her support of Mercy Works

staff and volunteers. At the forefront of all her decisions, however, have been the people that Mercy Works supports each and every day – the most disenfranchised in our communities.

Throughout her time as Executive Director, Ailsa has expressed her deep gratitude to all of our supporters. Without them, and their support of the projects that Mercy Works undertakes, we would not be able to do what we do. Ailsa has told us that she will watch with interest as Mercy Works continues to grow and move forward into the next phase of its existence, and continues to respond to disadvantage and injustice experienced by our neighbours, whether within Australia, Papua New Guinea or Timor-Leste.

We wish Ailsa well in her continuing role as Vicar for Consecrated Life for the Diocese of Parramatta, and hope that she can also look forward to focusing a little more on her love of swimming and golf! Ailsa might be saying goodbye to her role here at Mercy Works, but her legacy lives on. Her depth of experience, her easy, friendly manner, and her compassion for all, will be sorely missed. The staff, volunteers and Board members of Mercy Works sincerely thank Ailsa for her extraordinary service and commitment to Mercy Works, its people and its projects over the last seven years, and we wish her all the very best for whatever adventures now lie ahead. ■

New Executive Director for Mercy Works



Change in all aspects of life offers fresh perspectives and creates new opportunities.

At Mercy Works this February there was a changing of the guard with the commencement

of a new Executive Director, Sr Sally Bradley, following the retirement of Sr Ailsa MacKinnon. Sally brings with her a wealth of experience in a variety of roles from a broad range of ministries, having devoted herself to living the Mercy values she holds deep in her heart.

Sally recalls, "I taught religious education in schools and it was during this time as a teacher that making a commitment to Mercy religious life began to make sense to me." Upon taking her vows as a Sister of Mercy in 1984, she became a member of the Melbourne Congregation. Reflecting on those early years, Sally describes "belonging to a community of women living a life of compassionate and selfless service helped me find my place in the world."

Over the years, Sally has travelled widely and has undertaken studies in Australia and overseas, mostly in theology and education. "Learning from, and appreciating, the wisdom of other cultures has greatly enriched my life experience," says Sally.

Working collaboratively alongside fellow Sisters of Mercy and lay colleagues throughout her career, she says "I have always ensured the focal point of my work has been to hold the Mercy values of justice and compassion at the

core of all my endeavours. These values and faith in the Mercy of God continue to guide my work towards empowering vulnerable and marginalised communities through development principles in my new role at Mercy Works."

When the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea was formed in 2011, Sally became a member of the first Institute Leadership Team. She served as an Institute Councillor for six years and looking back on that time, Sally believes "this experience has been invaluable in preparing me to take on the multi-faceted role of Executive Director at Mercy Works."

After completing her leadership term with the Institute, Sally took some time to discern what direction to follow in her future ministry. Sally likens this to "being at a crossroads and trying to find the best direction in which to use my knowledge, gifts and values in the most meaningful way. Being deeply engaged with the works of Mercy from the beginning of my religious life, joining Mercy Works as Executive Director became a clear choice."

Sally is dedicated to caring for the most vulnerable and has been especially touched by the Mercy Works projects supported in PNG, where she has previously spent time. "I believe we are making a very real difference in the lives of these people", says Sally with great passion and conviction.

Despite the many challenges and demands of her new position, Sally always makes time to chat and lend an understanding ear over "a good cup of tea!" ■

Contribution recognised

Every year on Australia Day, citizens whose deeds and actions benefit the nation in an outstanding way are honoured with awards. This year, one of our volunteers at the Mercy House of Welcome in Adelaide, was recognised for her dedication in assisting refugees and asylum seekers.

Sister Mary Symonds RSM offers pro bono legal services to refugees and asylum seekers who visit the Mercy House of Welcome. She works tirelessly for her clients, providing expert advice essential to this marginalised community that they could otherwise not afford.

For Australia Day in 2019, Sr Mary was nominated for the "Citizen of the Year" in the City of Port Adelaide-Enfield. Although she was not selected for this particular honour, she received an award for her outstanding contribution to the community.

We could not do what we do without people like Sr Mary and for that, we thank her very much. We cannot think of anyone more deserving of this award! ■



Sr Mary Symonds (left) receiving her award for outstanding services to the community from City of Port Adelaide Enfield Mayor, Claire Boan.

Photo credit: City of Port Adelaide Enfield



"Her faith in the Mercy of God has always guided her."

Sally and Maureen Sexton travelling up the Fly River in PNG



Living the Mercy SPIRIT

Steven Dude
travelling on the
Fly River

GOOD NEWS STORIES

Scholarship recipients reaping the rewards

Excited and filled with anticipation, Sr Anne Foale headed off from Sydney in mid-November last year to attend several graduation ceremonies for our Access To Education (ATE) Scholarship recipients in Papua New Guinea.

The ATE program offers students without the financial means to access tertiary education an opportunity to undertake studies through to the completion of their chosen course. The scholarship

includes payment of tuition fees and a study allowance to cover some of the costs for text books, stationery, travel and other expenses. Most students from remote villages will return home to apply their skills to improve the quality of life for their community. The majority of scholars are the first in their family to study at a tertiary level, so graduation ceremonies are a great celebration of the students' achievements.

One of these students

is Harudy Denem, a West Papuan refugee living in the western province of PNG. He began studying a Bachelor of Business Studies & Accounting at Pacific Adventist University (PAU) in 2014, but he was unable to keep up with the rising tuition fees. After contacting Mercy Works to seek some support he was awarded a scholarship through to the end of his degree.

Sr Anne had the pleasure of witnessing Harudy graduate from PAU in early



Mercy Works' many projects and programs couldn't be carried out without its well-trained and dedicated staff. Sr Anne Foale recently spoke to one such staff member for his perspective.

Mercy Works has three offices in Papua New Guinea in addition to the five located around Australia, including the head office in Sydney. The local staff in each of these places is key to ensuring the successful delivery of programs and projects. One such worker is Steven Dude, Mercy Works Kiunga Project Coordinator.

Steven has been in this role since 2015, having started working there part time in 2012. He is responsible for overseeing and managing all the Mercy Works projects in the Western Province, while maintaining a close working relationship with Mercy Works in Sydney, Project Leaders and Networking Partners.

Each of our past and present team members has a unique story, of which Mercy Works is part. During Sr Anne Foale's visit to Papua New Guinea earlier this year, she spoke with Steven to find out more about this capable and dedicated Mercy Works' team member.

What was your experience before coming to Mercy Works Kiunga?

Before coming to Mercy Works Kiunga, I was working with my local West Papuan communities as a Youth Leader. I gained experience by working with community leaders that enhanced my ability to carry out tasks for our communities. I am also involved in sporting activities with Kiunga Town Soccer Association. I represented the Kiunga team

playing soccer within the North Fly District and I was then selected to play for Team Western during the PNG games at Lae in 2010.

One of my biggest experiences was with Tingim Laip program. It's a not-for-profit organisation focusing on raising awareness about minimising the HIV/Aids epidemic in PNG. My role was coordinating with Tingim Laip stakeholders, implementing planned activities within Kiunga Township and reporting (narrative and finance) to the Tingim Laip Program coordinator of the Southern Region.

Being involved in these social activities and working voluntarily to assist the vulnerable people within Kiunga town was a huge task for me and at the same time it was enjoyable work. It has allowed me to meet and work with different classes of people. These experiences enhanced my skills, knowledge and desire to help others. My roles with the West Papuan Community include chairing meetings, discussing and finding solutions for issues affecting the community and working with UNHCR and other agencies as an interpreter for West Papuan Communities.

What are some of the main things you have learned since joining Mercy Works Kiunga?

I have learned a lot from Mercy Works, and three of the significant things are: good governance; effective people and project



Left to right: Harudy Denem at his graduation; Harudy's (front row, second from left) Bachelor of Business Studies & Accounting graduating class at Pacific Adventist University.

December. Her presence meant so much to him since no one from his family could afford the travel expense to be there for this special

occasion. Sr Anne reflected that he was very appreciative of the scholarship: "Harudy kept saying how grateful he was that Mercy Works was

able to fill the gap and help him finish."

Harudy's post-graduation plans include spending time with family in his home

village of Ningirum, before completing a further year of studies so that he can teach Business Studies. He is hoping to take up a teaching position at St Gabriel's Technical Secondary School in Kiunga, where he attained his secondary school certificate. Harudy would like to give back to the school that provided him with such a good education. He hopes it will help more young men like him to go on to tertiary studies. ■

management; and team work.

I am able to speak English confidently in public places. English is now my fourth language and since joining Mercy Works Kiunga I am able to write and speak English.

Personally, I started to be more self-disciplined and trustworthy towards friends, relatives and the surrounding community. I am nourished both spiritually and socially with my family and community to be a good community member. My experiences have taught me good values that help me understand the meaning of life. These values are: honesty; trust; caring for others; respect; and being responsible while maintaining my commitment.

What capacity building opportunities have you had since joining Mercy Works?

The three major capacity building opportunities have been: local skills training provided by the Diocesan Team for Pastoral Animation;

annual program activities for Mercy Works Kiunga to participate in reporting (narrative & financial) twice a year; and, project management skills development study at Divine Word University.

What do you appreciate about working with Mercy Works?

I came to Mercy Works Kiunga from a lower educational background, with few experiences dealing with people. Currently I am equipped with professional development skills from recognised institutions in Papua New Guinea. I came with little experience, but now I am filled with skills and knowledge of how to approach people and work with them from a social development perspective. Mercy Works programs operate with minimal resources, but always satisfy needs of our people and are appreciated by the beneficiaries. The only words that I have heard from the people we help are “thank you Mercy Works”.

The word “Mercy” has enhanced my desire and ability to assist people with compassion. When I encounter challenges, “Mercy”

GOOD NEWS STORIES

Board Member takes a closer look

In February this year, Mercy Work’s Deputy Chair, Sheena Barber, took her first trip to Papua New Guinea with Sr Anne Foale. She viewed the visit as an important opportunity to see first hand the vital work being undertaken there by Mercy Works.

“The language of change speaks loud and clear to all the individuals and

communities who benefit from our many projects,” said Sheena. “Speaking with mothers, children, men old and young, gave me a much better appreciation of the impact of our development activities. Seeing ‘Mercy in Action’ brought all sorts of emotions to the surface, but overall it was a feeling of immense joy at the difference being made.”

Sheena departed PNG with a strong sense that real change was being realised. “Transforming the future for our brothers and sisters in PNG who most need our help is at the core of Mercy Works’ mission and I believe we are making significant progress in achieving our goals,” she said on her return to Australia. ■



Girls dormitory building completed

Sr Anne Foale, Mercy Works Coordinator for Overseas & Indigenous Projects, visited Papua New Guinea in early March to witness first-hand our most recently finished building project – the girls dormitory at Maria Hilf Technical School in Kainantu, Eastern Highlands.

The dormitory was officially blessed and opened in a ceremony officiated by Bishop Dariusz and Father Kos. These celebrations were a joyous occasion and the culmination of months of planning and hard work. Its completion creates a further opportunity for girls in the community to gain tertiary education qualifications. The dormitory provides accommodation for female students who are participating primarily in

vocational training leading to a technical qualification.

Facilities such as these are an important part of Mercy Works’ focus on providing equal access to educational opportunities for girls and boys in PNG. Access to education is key in these communities as it delivers a pathway to future employment, bringing more dignity to their lives.

Those in attendance were given the chance to see the inside of the dormitory for the first and only time before it was handed over to the school for use. With the assistance of Sr Anne and the snip of a pair of scissors, the ribbon was cut and the dormitory was declared open. The community gathered together to celebrate the completion of

Steven Dude attending a graduation at St Gabriels

often gives me the courage and patience to deal with difficult people at project sites. After the completion of the task I often reflect and ask myself whether my actions were working simultaneously with the name of "Mercy".

Are there any challenges that you see in the future for Kiunga and the Western Province?

Mercy Works Kiunga Project is making an impact on people's lives and the demand is increasing. People from remote communities are seeking assistance and we are assisting them in the best way we can, with the resources we have available.

Large Liquefied Natural Gas projects will take place soon and the development will be more focused on the Western Province, there will be a need for increased focus on social issues. The challenge is how we can continue to fill the gaps so that our community members maintain their standard of living in a positive and sustainable way. ■



The word "Mercy" has enhanced my desire and ability to assist people with compassion.



Far left to far right: Mercy Works Board Member, Sheena Barber, testing out the local Bilum designs on her first trip to Papua New Guinea; Cutting of the ribbon to officially open the dormitory at Maria Hilf Technical School Kainantu; Anne with Josephine Jonduo (Principal) and student; Cynthia on her graduation day from DWU with McPhee and Bernadette.



with Mercy Works to update their progress towards achieving full occupancy of the dormitory over the coming months.

Maria Hilf Technical School is particularly grateful to the Old Dart Foundation for funding this building project through Mercy Works. ■

this project and what it means for their future. The Principal, Mrs Josephine Jonduo, was delighted to present gifts and mementos to the guests. She plans to stay in close contact

Education not the only agent of change

Much of what happens in our lives changes us in ways we never could have imagined. We grow and adapt to change; it introduces variety and excitement, while preparing us for whatever may come next.

Change has played a large part in the lives of McPhee and Cynthia. Both were awarded Mercy Works scholarships to study at Divine Word University in Madang and this opportunity to complete tertiary studies changed their future.

Now, the birth of their daughter Bernadette has brought great joy and more change into their lives.

Having completed her course, and with Bernadette being cared for by two

doting grandmothers and several uncles, Cynthia is now looking for work. McPhee will finish his studies at the end of 2019 and he too is more likely to find good, steady employment because of his qualifications.

Little Bernadette also has a brighter future, being raised by tertiary educated parents who know the value of education as an agent of positive change in their lives. ■



The POWER of language

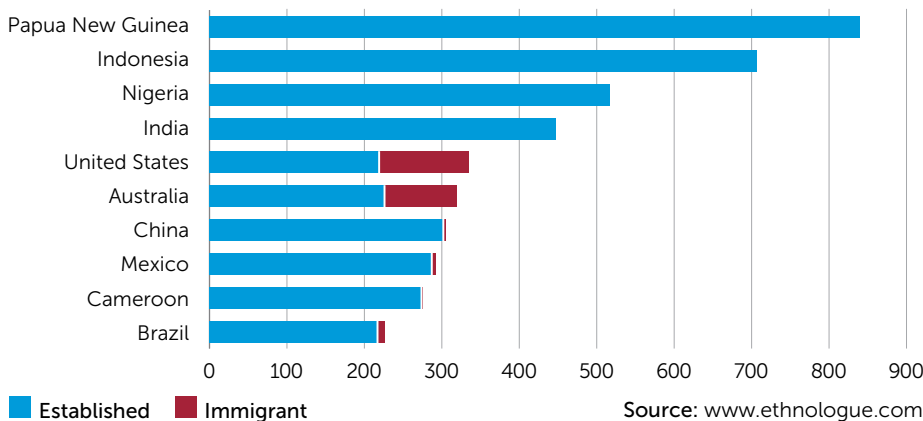
The United Nations has proclaimed 2019 to be the International Year of Indigenous Languages. The aim is to focus attention on the risks confronting indigenous languages. It is hoped that this focus will result in improved quality of life for indigenous peoples, wider international cooperation and reaffirm the continuity of indigenous languages and culture.

Mercy Works support this initiative and has set out to highlight the importance of language in everything we do. From preserving language and culture to learning new ones, we have been busy working towards supporting language in all its forms in our programs in Australia, Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea.

Indigenous languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. The graph below lists Papua New Guinea as having the most languages in the world, with Australia as sixth. Mercy Works' investment in programs in those two countries is helping to combat this decline and maintain the

essential link between language and culture.

Language is a universal communication tool; it has opened more borders than any type of technology. It is the basis of our entire communication sphere. Language allows the same message to be sent in a multitude of different ways, reaching far beyond the initial intended target. Being able to communicate with many different groups is an essential foundation for human existence. Its varying forms are the basis for all of us to understand, engage and connect with each other. It is at the core of how we navigate our path through life and gives us the tools to create our futures.



Bilingual the new normal in Timor-Leste

Growing up in tight-knit communities and families builds the basis for a child's first set of words. This forms the foundation of their ever-changing and developing vocabulary. Children listen to different sounds and begin to pick up the language that surrounds them. When they start their formal education, children learn in one language. Sounds about right?

This is usually how it happens in Australia. However, in Timor-Leste by the time a child arrives at preschool they will know the local language spoken at home and in their community, as well as Tetun, which they speak with outsiders who come to visit.

When they go to school, there will be two more languages to learn – Portuguese and English. So they learn in both the local dialect and Tetun at preschool, and they begin to learn Portuguese and English through their primary and secondary schooling, where they are also taught in these languages.

Having this ability to communicate in more than one way ensures that these children's links to their past are just as strong as the



Left to right: Teacher and Student engaged in one on one learning, Timor-Leste; It's heads down to learn the basics of English

Having this ability to communicate in more than one way ensures that these children's links to their past are just as strong as the ones they will create tomorrow.



ones they will create tomorrow.

Preschool education lays the foundation children will rely upon for the rest of their lives, but preschool attendance in Timor-Leste is still not available to all. The Mercy Works Early Childhood Learning Program is helping to make this a reality for many more preschool-aged children in the Maliana region. This access to preschool education represents an investment in the preservation of a unique culture.

Mercy Connect-ions

At 8:55am on a Friday, when many are walking into their workplace or the schoolyard, students from the Mercy Connect Melbourne Adult Literacy Class are gathering outside the Dandenong Library. Friday mornings are usually associated with a feeling of excitement because the weekend is coming, but these students are excited for a different reason.

They are about to embrace the chance to connect with others by communicating in a language new to them – English. These students are all refugees or asylum seekers and each and every one knows that to forge a better life in their newly adopted country, the English

language is central to finding their way in this land of opportunity.

Whether they are learning the letters of the alphabet or working on their pronunciation, the eagerness for learning never seems to fade. The dedication each individual student gives to learning, developing and understanding the English language in these classes is evident in the way they practise writing, reading and speaking.

The clock ticks over to 9:00am and the doors open to welcome inside the students, along with several dedicated volunteers. They all head for the community room, which quickly makes the large room look smaller than it is. Thirty-five students and volunteers work together with drive and determination as they focus on the various activities designed to improve their English language skills.

At 10:00am it's time for morning tea. With an incredibly diverse group of people and cultures, this often becomes an occasion for a celebration of one kind or another. The relaxed and inviting atmosphere presents the perfect environment for each student to practise their English skills in a group with whom they feel connected and comfortable. They not only learn

English – it eases the way to socialise and form friendships. These interactions form a vital part of their journey to build their lives in the new country they now call home.

Each student is offered a “Mercy Bag of Goodies” filled with practical items for all families. Everyone is extremely thankful and many engage in swapping goods depending on their particular needs. This simple act signifies they are comfortable in the class and in a place where they belong. The “Mercy Bags” are made possible from funds donated by the Mercy Action Support Fund and Mercy Connect is most appreciative of this assistance.

After more intense learning, it is 11:00am and today's class is over. As they start to pack up and prepare to head their separate ways, people say to each other “see you next week”.

These students walk out the door of the Dandenong Library with smiles on their faces. The Mercy Connect Melbourne Adult Literacy Class may have improved English, but it has achieved so much more – making connections, increasing confidence and facing the future with a touch more hope. That is the power of language. ■

FROM REFUGEES to small business owners

The support and assistance to refugees and asylum seekers provided by The Mercy House of Welcome in the north of Adelaide has been the catalyst for some great success stories

Moving across the world in search of a better life has been a fundamental feature of human history, bringing with it incredible diversity in ethnicities, languages and culture. In Australia, we are fortunate that our society has been so enriched by this multiculturalism.

Wajahat Ali, his wife Saiqa and their three children, Komail (20), Abbas (16) and Aniga (12), arrived in Australia from Quetta, Pakistan in 2013. In spite of the danger and difficulties in uprooting their entire family to flee from their homeland, the prospect of a safer life and a better future for their children in Australia filled them with the hope they needed to make that journey. In 2017, with the assistance of Sr Mary Symonds' pro bono work at the Mercy House of Welcome, the family received Five Year Protection Visas (as asylum seekers they are only entitled to Temporary Protection Visas).

For Wajahat and his family the Mercy House of Welcome has been an invaluable asset in settling into the Australian community and a different way of life. The assistance and support received at the House of Welcome was a lifeline – helping the family to improve their English language skills, utilising their strengths, becoming financially independent and setting themselves up for the future. These are among the most important benefits that the House of Welcome aims to pass on to all refugees and asylum seekers who come through its doors.

The result is a more cohesive and culturally vibrant Australian society, where effective cross-cultural communication is one of the foundations. We can communicate in so many unique and wonderful ways. Sharing a meal brings people together in an intimate



experience, opening the way for dialogue to exchange views and communicate our feelings.

Wajahat and Saiqa's experience at the House of Welcome has enabled them to build a thriving catering business after arriving in Australia with nothing but "the clothes on their back". This hardworking and entrepreneurial couple started their catering business three years ago. They began with a small food stall at Adelaide's Plant 4 Bowden Festival preparing traditional Pakistani food – butter chicken, lamb curry, biryani and samosas. Their menu has expanded rapidly to keep pace with demand and the ever-changing culinary landscape. For example, in response to the growing vegan market, they have created a number of hugely successful vegan options, which are now signature dishes on their menu.

Next year in March, they plan to have a stall at the much-anticipated WOMADelaide Festival. This event offers a wide variety of music, arts and dance in four days of non-stop entertainment, highlighting the enormous value



of a multicultural society and its potential to contribute to the Adelaide community.

The Mercy House of Welcome held a Christmas party last year to celebrate with the many refugees and asylum seekers whose lives and futures had been enhanced throughout the year. The catering for this event was supplied by Wajahat, Saiqa and the children. How appropriate that food should bring this family back to where they began their new life in Australia, giving them an opportunity to talk about their challenges, and how far they have come, with those who gave them support when they needed it most.

About the Mercy House of Welcome

The Mercy House of Welcome is a Mercy Works project located in the northern Adelaide suburb of Kilburn. The centre offers a number of services to help asylum seekers adjust to life in Australia through settlement and visa support, English lessons, budget counselling, assistance with accommodation, bills, food and clothing.

Without the right to work, welfare support



*Inset: The Ali Family – Komail, Aniga, Wajahat, Abbas and Saiqa.
Main: The Mercy House of Welcome Christmas Party was catered by the Ali Family. Wajahat's famous Butter Chicken made an appearance!*

or any legal rights, waiting for the outcome of their application results in immense strain on the physical and mental health of asylum seekers. Perhaps the most important part of the connection at the Mercy House of Welcome is the sense of hope in a better future it provides, knowing they have a safe space where they can go – a place where they belong.

Over 400 asylum seekers have come through the Mercy House of Welcome seeking visa application support since the centre opened in 2013. The temporary protection visa application process is a complex and lengthy one, and with pro-bono legal support from the House of Welcome, more than 250 applications have been filed. As a consequence, 104 visas have been granted. Twenty asylum seekers have also been denied visas, but are currently being assisted with the appeal process. Changes to the Government's asylum seeker policy have resulted in a decreasing number of immigration interviews being conducted for clients at the centre in recent months. ■

Holding on to culture

THE GOWOLA homework club is helping to keep the local INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE alive and preserving a culture thousands of years OLD.

“Language is the expression of our culture and our land. We cannot have one without the other. We cannot describe our culture and our land if we do not have language”, according to a report from the Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee in 2006.

That is why teaching the Yorta Yorta language to Aboriginal primary and secondary school students at the Gowola Homework Club is a core activity.

Mercy Access in Shepparton, which runs the Gowola Homework Club, is located in Yorta Yorta country. These traditional lands cover 20,000 square kilometres surrounding the junction of the Goulburn and Murray Rivers in present-day north-eastern Victoria and southern New South Wales. The people of the Yorta Yorta Nation are comprised of eight different clan groups, where Yorta Yorta is the traditional language spoken.

The Yorta Yorta people inhabited this vast area for tens of thousands of years prior to European settlement.

Currently there are 47 registered children at the Gowola Homework Club and 24 regular volunteers assisting with literacy and numeracy, as well as Yorta Yorta language time. In keeping with the connection between the traditional inhabitants and their descendants, the Club is held at

Rumbalara Football Netball Club. This space provides a cultural setting that assists in learning the Yorta Yorta language. An interior wall is patterned in family photos and weaving craft showing water, *wala*, red gum trees, *bala* and the Murray River, *Dungala* or *Tong-a-la Ma*. The wall was created some years ago by the community with specific craftwork of elders.

The Yorta Yorta leaders in Shepparton are publishing and teaching the language to encourage its use and knowledge within the community. One example is the beautiful book written and illustrated by elders and artists, *Yalka Lotjpa Nha-Children Speak See*, recently published by Kaiela Arts Shepparton. The Gowola Homework Club was grateful to receive a set of 20 copies from the Catholic Education Office, Sandhurst and it has already proved to be a very helpful tool for teaching the language to students.

Later in the year, the children are planning to participate in the Dungala-Kaiela Writing Awards, which has a section for Yorta Yorta language articles. This presents an excellent opportunity for Aboriginal children to celebrate their learning and language.

One of the most pleasing indicators of the progress being made at the Gowola Homework Club is that it is now possible

for a few students to present a Welcome to Country in Yorta Yorta language at the beginning of a session.

Mercy Works is proud to be playing an active role in connecting Aboriginal children to their Yorta Yorta culture and land through traditional language. ■



Jar-Keyshia, Lilah and Miah with their Dungala-Kaiela Writing Awards at the Gowola Homework Club in Shepparton.

Education is something many of us take for granted, but for some it remains a struggle to secure the opportunities they deserve through schooling. One Sydney high school, with the help of Mercy Connect Volunteers, is making this journey easier.

Learning is an integral part of development and provides the next generation with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate life and the many challenges it presents. Those people who have fled their homes to find safety in another country face immense pressure from the challenges of learning and fighting for an education. Having a voice in such circumstances is difficult, however Mercy Connect Sydney is helping refugees and asylum seekers in Sydney be heard.

Mercy Connect Volunteers are placed in many schools in the Sydney area and it is the work they do supporting and guiding students in their journey that develops a significant connection. Helping students to adapt and understand the environment and culture they now find themselves in is a crucial part of establishing a sense of belonging and acceptance. Developing and maintaining a connection with these students is the key to opening lines of communication and assisting them to become active members of the community.

Bankstown Senior College (BSC) is a NSW Department of Education secondary school providing innovative and quality education alternatives to traditional schooling. BSC strives for academic excellence, offering a wide range of HSC courses as well as vocational education and training courses.

As well as study for Years 10, 11, 12 students, the college provides Adult English Classes and located within the campus is Sydney's only Adult Intensive English Centre for newly arrived students aged 17 years and over.

Without the traditional confines of schooling such as uniforms and bell times, this adult learning environment supports individuality and independence, fostering a productive avenue of communication between the students, teachers



MUMS back to SCHOOL

and volunteers. Students who enrol at BSC possess skills and knowledge gained either formally or informally through their unique life experiences.

Many of the students suffer from post-traumatic stress and often find it extremely challenging returning to their educational journey.

Mercy Connect has four experienced volunteer mentors at BSC: Bronlyn Shoer, Christina Jinga, Lorraine Manning and Allen Conduitt. They work in partnership with the dedicated teaching staff, led by Hedy Brunet and Maria Pascalis, to support the refugee students as they engage in the learning activities that take place in their lessons.

Many mature aged students also attend the College, some of whom are mothers, juggling the demands of attending school for up to four days per week with caring for their families and adjusting to life in a new country.

Mercy Connect Sydney Coordinator, Paul Taylor, sat down with three of BSC's mature aged students at the end of the 2018 academic year.

Malak, Haneen and Noora are mothers who

decided to return to study, having made the journey from Iraq and Syria with their families to pursue a safer life with better opportunities in Australia.

Balancing their children's needs whilst being students themselves sometimes mean they travel for 90 minutes to school each day. This is but one example of their sincere passion and dedication to improving themselves through education. It further reflects their resilience, persistence and determination.

The outstanding support students receive from the teachers and staff at BSC is an essential part of this success story. Without the encouraging, warm, sensible and highly-skilled guidance provided by the College, these inspiring women, who are bravely carving out a new life in Australia, may fall by the wayside. Their gratitude and affection for their teachers is clear. It is evident that both teachers and students share a bond that goes beyond the classroom.

Paul asked each of them what advice they

Malak, Haneen and Noora are just three of the mums who have gone 'back to school' at Bankstown Senior College.



would give to recently arrived refugee and asylum seeker women. "Don't stay at home. Travel and get out of the house," advised Noora. "Seize the opportunities that life in Australia gives you to improve yourself."

Haneen recommended going back to school because it meant she could understand what school in Australia was like so she could "help her son with his school work, although sometimes he helps me!" For Malak, a former French teacher in Syria, it was about sharing with her three boys: sharing a love of education and to be going to school while they were at school too.

Malak, Haneen and Noora have all experienced significant loss throughout their lives and have travelled a difficult journey to where they are now. Their vision and resolve for a better life, combined with their willingness to connect with their new community, are now slowly being realised through hard work, perseverance and education. ■

Language key to future

Since arriving in Australia in 2015, asylum seekers Bibi and her father Daud's participation in Mercy Works' Adult Literacy Classes is helping them to make a new life.

"When I first came [to Australia] I could not speak much English and I was too shy to speak to people. My English has improved a lot and the volunteers who work here are very good. It has helped me a lot," says Bibi of her experience at the Mercy Connect Adult Literacy Classes.

She and her father, Daud, "saw a sign up in the Dandenong Library that said we could learn English on a Friday morning and we came along." And they have been going ever since.

Why? Bibi was studying at University in Afghanistan and had completed two semesters in Law and Political Science. In his homeland, Daud was a qualified nurse and pharmacist working for the United Nations as a field medic. But for both of them to make their way in Australia, they needed to improve their English language skills.

Daud fled with his family from Afghanistan to India. He then headed to Australia with Bibi,

his son and another of his daughters, arriving as asylum seekers in 2015 to start a new life. Daud's wife and their other three daughters are still in India, hoping to come to Australia soon.

Like most of their fellow asylum seekers, the family really struggled when they arrived in their new country.

Being forced to live in another country away from his wife and three of his children took an emotional toll on Daud. Living in a different society where everything is new made his circumstances even more stressful.

Daud knew a job would help relieve at least some of the pressures he was facing, but the language barrier was the main obstacle to securing employment. However, as his English became stronger through attending the Adult Literacy Classes, Daud found casual work at Dandenong Hospital.

Bibi has also benefitted from the classes and is now studying a Certificate IV in Tertiary Preparation. She has a simple message about participating in the Adult Literacy program: "I couldn't make it to Uni without the help of Mercy Connect. Thank you so much."

Daud too is very grateful for the opportunity provided by Mercy Connect. But even before he began working, he started volunteering in the Refugee Health and Well Being Service at Thomas Street Dandenong.

He explained why he was so keen to work in a volunteer capacity even before he could secure a job: "If you give something to the community, the community gives back."

Mercy Works is pleased to have had the opportunity to give back to Daud and his daughter through the Mercy Connect program. ■



Bibi hard at work at the Mercy Connect Adult Literacy classes

How you can help

You can help asylum seekers and refugees like Daud and Bibi overcome the language barrier by supporting the Mercy Connect program. Please make a donation by completing the tear off

form attached to this page and return it in the enclosed Reply Paid Envelope, or visiting our website at mercyworks.org.au

Thank you for your life-changing gift to those in need.

Thank you!

All Hallows School, Brisbane Aranmore Catholic College, Leederville Bunbury Catholic College
 Catherine McAuley College, Bendigo Catherine McAuley Westmead De La Salle College Cronulla
 Emmanuel College, Warrnambool Holy Cross Catholic Primary School, Woollahra Holy Cross College, Ellenbrook
 Holy Family Primary School, Kelso Holy Rosary School, Kensington John Paul College, Kalgoorlie
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 McAuley Catholic College, Grafton Mercedes College, Perth Mercedes College, Springfield Mercy College Mackay
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 Mount Lilydale Mercy College, Lilydale Notre Dame College, Shepparton Our Lady of Mercy College Burraneer
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 Sacred Heart Central School, Cootamundra Sacred Heart College Geelong St. Aloysius College, Adelaide
 St. Anthony's Catholic Primary School, North Rockhampton St. Anthony's Primary School, Girraween
 St. Brigid's Primary School, Raymond Terrace St. Columba's Catholic School, Bayswater
 St. Francis Xavier Primary School, Ballarat St. John Fisher College, Bracken Ridge St. John's Primary School, Lambton
 St. Joseph's Primary School, Kangaroo Point St. Kieran's Catholic Primary School, Tuart Hill
 St. Luke's Catholic Primary School, Woodvale St. Mary's Catholic Primary School, North Rockhampton
 St. Mary's Catholic School, Wellington St. Mary's College, Gunnedah St. Mary's School, Bowen
 St. Michael's School, Bassendean St. Michael's School, Gordonvale St. Monica's College, Cairns
 St. Patrick's College, Townsville St. Patrick's Primary School,
 Blacktown St. Patrick's Primary School, Wallsend
 St. Raphael's School, Parkside
 St. Teresa's Primary School, Brighton
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 Ursula Frayne Catholic College, Victoria Park
 Yidarra Catholic Primary School, Bateman

Right across Australia, school
 communities generously raise
 funds to support our projects.
 Our deep appreciation goes to
 all the schools that have helped
 raise this incredible amount from
 January to December 2018.

A PROJECT OF MERCYWORKS

MERCY CONNECT

SYDNEY · MELBOURNE · BALLARAT · PERTH

Help asylum seekers and
refugees overcome the
language barrier



OVERCOMING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

Arriving in Australia with little or no understanding of English is a major challenge in adjusting to a new life. Adult literacy classes and student mentoring in the classroom aim to significantly improve English language and communication skills.

Our programs create opportunities for a better future for refugees and asylum seekers by offering the chance to communicate.

You can help asylum seekers and refugees overcome the language barrier by giving to our Mercy Connect Appeal.

For more information on Mercy Connect and the difference our programs make, visit the Mercy Works website mercyworks.org.au

Personal details: *(please print clearly)*

Name:	
Address:	
State:	Postcode:
Phone: ()	Fax: ()
Mobile:	
Email:	

I'd like to give:

\$50 \$100 \$200 \$500 or \$

All donations to Mercy Works Ltd of over \$2 are tax deductible.

Payment details:

- Cheque *(payable to Mercy Works Ltd)* **OR**
 Credit card *(please provide your details)*

Card No.: Card type: Visa MasterCard

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Name on card:

Expiry date:


Signature:

- From time to time Mercy Works would like to send you information about our activities. If you do not wish to receive this information please tick this box.
- I would like to receive information about remembering Mercy Works in my will.

Any information you supply to us is protected by our Privacy Policy.

Completed forms: *(Reply Paid Envelope provided)*

Attn: The Administrative Assistant, Mercy Works Ltd,
PO Box 2023, North Parramatta NSW 1750

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