



In the same month as the 'National Close the Gap Day', as Australians we are all challenged by its theme – **Transform Power** ... As we are invited to walk with our First Nations sisters and brothers, we bring you our first *Mini Bilum* edition for 2022.

Mercy Works supports seven Indigenous projects around Australia, seeking to **transform power**. You may be as shocked as we are by the story of the Nunga Babies Watch project in Adelaide, which is named after the Aboriginal Court where women are sentenced, and as such their children are likely to be placed automatically into State care if they receive a custodial sentence. Another Stolen Generation is – as Elder Aunty Pat says – “a national disgrace”. Telling the truth is part of that journey and on the ground they are witnessing first-hand what is going on.

We are proud to report on two of our projects in partnership with the local community in Timor-Leste and the Philippines. At great odds they show wonderful results despite these challenging pandemic lockdowns.

We look forward to increasing our presence alongside more communities now the world is opening up. In March we were delighted to take our first trip to St Joseph's College Mildura, and to receive (extravagant) Mercy Hospitality! Our *Mercy Connect* Melbourne team are so pleased to be able to resume our adult language classes for refugees and asylum seekers at the Dandenong Library.

Thank you for your continuing support of **Mercy Works** through these very challenging times. Together, we seek to **transform power** with many vulnerable communities.

Sally Bradley RSM
Executive Director

Silent Continuation of the Stolen Generation

DEMANDS FOR THE SA GOVERNMENT TO ACT FALLS ON DEAF EARS

Mercy Work's Adelaide First Nations Advocacy project – known as Nunga Babies Watch – has called upon the South Australian Government for immediate action to end another Stolen Generation from happening.

“We demand an end to the arbitrary taking of our children and their placement in non-indigenous settings,” says one action of the 20-point statement, presented by members of the Nunga Babies Watch in partnership with the Grannies Group (respected Elders in the community). *“We are strongly and irrevocably opposed to the adoption of our children from non-kinship, out-of-home, residential care and/or foster care. We do not want ‘assimilation’ of our children to continue, nor do we want a silent continuation of the Stolen Generation,”* said the statement, presented by Ngadjuri woman Aunty Pat Waria-Read, at South Australian Parliament House in December.

In South Australia, one in every 11 Indigenous children lives in state care, and only 53% are placed with their family or kin. The latest report by the SA Guardian for Children and Young People shows the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care has increased from 4,370 children to 4,647 between June 2020 and June 2021, an increase of 6.3%.

Aunty Pat, who also heads our **Mercy Works Salt N' Pepper Adelaide** project, a pre-release and post-release outreach program for Aboriginal women in prison, is disappointed the group have had no response.

“This is a national disgrace. Months later and there's been no response from the Ministers, I thought there would be an uproar. It's a continuation of the Stolen Generation.”

Included in their submissions is the call for an Independent Aboriginal Controlled Child Care Agency, and an Aboriginal panel to review decisions taken by the Department of Child Protection (DCP).

“We're not going to let it stop us, even if we get no response. We're going to get on with the business so we can inform people. We're going to go on raising the issue with Aboriginal women. Our Voice is connecting with the community.”

“The DCP has to be held accountable for its decisions in the taking away of our children. If an Aboriginal child can't stay with their mother, follow the mother's bloodline and you'll find some-one who can look after that child.”

The **Mercy Works** Project came about after Aunty Pat, a former chaplain for the Department of Correctional Services, saw first-hand the DCP taking children away from their mothers while they are in hospital, or as soon as they are in jail, often presenting them with an order to take their children into residential care until they are 18 and without being informed they have a right to a lawyer.

Mercy Works is proud to partner with this project, along with our other six First Nations Projects, to work in partnership towards Closing The Gap and breaking the cycle.

Members of the Nunga Babies Watch and Grannies Group Julie Toyama, Louise Davies, Jean Pinkie, Dorothy Young, Diana Grose, Pat Waria-Read, with SA Best MLC Connie Bonaros.



The House of Hope

'BALAY BANAAG OFFERS THESE GIRLS A FUTURE'



It's fitting that *Balay Banaag* – one of two projects **Mercy Works** is proud to partner with in The Philippines – translates to "House of Hope".

For the 15 girls aged between six and 18 who live and learn here, all daughters of females working in prostitution, the residential centre provides shelter, support, education, and an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty for girls "at risk".

Located in Davao City and in partnership with the Australian Marist Solidarity, *Balay Banaag* aims to provide a protective and caring environment, as well as emotional and psychological support to these children to help them overcome their painful abuse experiences. The aim is to transition them back to mainstream schooling.

One Marist priest, who visited the centre recently, reported the girls who live there describe *Balay Banaag* as being like a security camera, such is the safety they feel.

"For them, Balay Banaag has modelled them to become better persons...they feel supported and cared for. Their stay has changed their way of thinking, that is, to make studies a priority for their future. They know the sisters are looking after them and are ready to support them for food and shelter and they feel home and safe. Balay Banaag is a home where they can freely express themselves and develop their gifts and talent," wrote the priest who visited the residence in November 2021.

"They are empowered and guided well. They described Balay Banaag like a CCTV in a positive way, that monitors and guides them and keeps them safe."

The girls who live here are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. It is one of the most impoverished communities in The Philippines. Many have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and face discrimination because they are daughters of prostitutes. They participate in life skills training, therapeutic and counselling sessions and maintain collaborative relationships with their mothers and families.

"If this project did not exist, I think the girls would be lost and go hungry. I think there is no other place that can accommodate the children of the prostituted women in the city... the children would be working in the streets like their mothers. Child prostitution would be rampant. This project is special that needs expertise and dedication to work for children in need of protection. Many children like them would become victims of abuse and exploitation without the service of Balay Banaag."

And despite the challenging impacts of Covid, which saw restrictions imposed and visitations with their mothers limited, **Mercy Works** is proud to share two girls from the centre were re-integrated back into their family in October 2021.

"Balay Banaag offers these girls a future with dignity, hope and independence," says our outgoing Overseas Project Manager Sister Anne Foale RSM.

△ Smiling children at the *Balay Banaag* Centre in the Philippines

THE POWER OF ONE SOWING SEEDS IN TIMOR-LESTE

It was during a UN-fact finding mission into the Baucau District that Laurentino Guterres, who was acting as an interpreter for several UN bodies leading up to Timor-Leste's official independence, met a blind woman who ran her own business.

He began organising regular group meetings of people with a disability, with the blind woman as the key spokesperson. Two decades later, that group has grown to over 250 disabled people across 13 remote villages, and now employs six locals.

The *Katilosa Community Centre for the Disabled* is one of three **Mercy Works** projects in Timor-Leste. Run in partnership with the Australian Marist Solidarity (AMS), this local NGO supports children, youth and adults with a disability with a goal of good health, quality education and reducing inequalities. The centre provides physiotherapy, assessments, referrals, and support as well as an Inclusive Education program for children and adults unable to attend their local schools.

Despite the centre having to adapt in Covid to a full outreach support model, 97 children and adults were still delivered services. Staff visited the homes of the disabled and carried out at-home therapy, teaching families how to do self-therapy in between scheduled visits, as well as Covid safety sessions and distributing school equipment.

And in further good news, students from Dili University are now helping in the centre, teaching visually impaired students Braille and how to communicate. According to Laurentino the children have made "remarkable progress in just a few days".



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