

Message from our Director

I recently returned from a two-week visit to Papua New Guinea, where JRS started working late last year with West Papuan refugees living along the border in the country's Western Province. Most of them arrived and settled there in the mid 1980s and have stayed ever since (*see page 4*). Visiting three refugee settlements along the border, I was struck by the precarious conditions faced by the people there—trying to eke out a livelihood, from one day to the next, from the meagre produce they obtained from their small gardens.

I was also struck by the large number of children we saw wherever we went. There has not been an accurate census in the area in several years, but it is estimated that close to 60% of the population is under 15 years of age. Unfortunately, with so few resources, the future prospects of many of these children seem to be very limited. The majority can only expect to receive three or four years of schooling, with a lucky minority attending middle and secondary school and even fewer having access to

tertiary studies. With such a grim scenario, it is no wonder education is so highly regarded.

Last week, as I shared some of my experiences of the trip and the challenges faced by these refugees with one of our young JRS volunteers, I was touched by her comment that we are truly lucky in this country. 'As young people in Australia, we have so many wonderful opportunities, and yet most of the time we take them for granted,' she said. 'We just forget how little others in so many parts of the world have.'

Her reaction touched me because here was a young person who was actually quite conscious of how *lucky* she was. Not only that, she was also willing to learn more and understand better the difficulties faced by others less privileged, in particular asylum seekers and refugees, and willing to do something to alleviate their plight.

In this issue of *Link* we highlight the contributions of some of our young JRS volunteers who so generously share their talents and skills to support our work: from volunteering as research assistants looking

at forced displacement issues in the Pacific region, to taking up a year-long overseas placement in Cambodia; from helping coordinate our annual Christmas party, to helping support a JRS International project for the rehabilitation of child soldiers in Central Africa. As these young people can attest, you are never too young to get involved and make a difference!

In order to raise awareness of the issues faced by asylum seekers and refugees both in Australia and around the world, and to encourage and facilitate further this involvement of young people in the work of JRS, we will soon be launching two new initiatives: the JRS Youth Award and a young adult immersion and reflection program. As this young volunteer also pointed out, 'It is only when we are aware of a situation that we can do something about it'.

We thank our young volunteers for 'doing something about it', for their commitment and for being a source of inspiration to many of us.

Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ

A joyous Christmas

Refugees and asylum seekers were the guests of honour at the 2008 JRS Christmas party.

Nelson (pictured), who is one of our clients from the Shelter Project, enthralled guests with his performance of a traditional Sri Lankan dance. He was accompanied on the drums by his friend, Deinesh. Nelson had reason to celebrate the positive events of 2008, when he was finally granted a permanent residence visa. Young adults from MAGiS, the Ignatian Young Adult Ministry, joined some of our other volunteers, using their extensive skills to help plan and host the party: they wrapped gifts, assisted volunteers with the food preparation, blew up balloons, decorated the venue and lent their warm companionship to the evening. We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped make this such a joyous Christmas celebration!

As we were going to press we heard that Nelson has even more reason to celebrate: he received news that his wife and two children, aged three and six, have been granted visas to join him in Australia.



Please send us your email addresses!

We are currently updating our email database. If you'd like to know about upcoming events or pressing issues, please send your email address to info@jrs.org.au and we will add you to our email database.

JRS Australia launches Youth Award

The first annual JRS Youth Award will be launched this year, with the aim of engaging students with the broad topic of refugees and asylum seekers in a multimedia context. Based on JRS Europe's Pedro Arrupe Award, the competition will initially be promoted in Ignatian schools and schools linked to the Ignatian and JRS networks. JRS hopes to expand the competition to other schools next year.

Groups of students from two categories (Years 9/10 and Years 11/12) will be required to research the plight of refugees

and asylum seekers, conduct interviews with local refugees and asylum seekers, and present their findings and resolutions in a multimedia project, utilising platforms such as advertisements, radio segments, short films, websites, PowerPoint presentations or artworks.

Cash prizes are up for grabs, and the closing date for entries is 18 September 2009. For more information about the competition, log onto www.jrs.org.au, phone us at (02) 9356 3888 or speak to your school.

Facing up to poverty

Fifteen young adults recently shared a MAGiS experiment, journeying with people experiencing poverty at St Canice's in Kings Cross, Sydney. MAGiS is the Ignatian young adult ministry. For a week we lived together as a faith community, being with those who are marginalised

Swahili. Another day, Sandie Cornish, Assistant to the Delegate for Social Ministry, shared with us the wealth of church teaching that points us towards living out a faith that does justice. We came to see how our response to suffering was moving us to compassion, calling us to do



and probing questions of justice. As our week progressed, we realised the question for each and every one of us is 'How best can we love?'

We spent a day immersed in the work of JRS. The director, Fr Sacha Bermudez-Goldman SJ, shared with us stories of accompanying asylum seekers in Australia. We were able to be with, listen to and share stories with refugees who had left their homes to flee oppression, often leaving family and friends behind. We shared a beautiful mass and African meal with Fr Sacha and six asylum seekers, singing hymns and praying the Our Father in

our part in making the world into a better place and to join one another in following Christ.

James O'Brien

JRS to conduct young adult pilot project with MAGiS

JRS Australia and MAGiS, the Ignatian young adult ministry, are planning to conduct a six-month pilot project for young adults in Sydney. Participants will volunteer at JRS for six months, accompanying asylum seekers, organising a major JRS event, promoting the work of JRS, visiting schools, writing an article for Link, and helping to judge the newly-announced JRS Youth Award. The project aims to offer young adults the opportunity to deepen their relationship with God, to increase their awareness of the plight of refugees and asylum seekers, and to inspire them to put their faith into action. For more information visit www.jrs.org.au or phone (02) 9356 3888.

Bob Geldof backs JRS' Sydney Ball

Sir Bob Geldof has officially endorsed the JRS Winter Solstice Ball. The singer, who rocked the world with Live Aid and Live 8, recently met some of the organisers of the ball to learn more about the work of JRS. Sir Bob has recorded a message of support, which will be played at the ball, to be held on Saturday 27 June 2009 at Sydney's Hilton Hotel. Tickets cost \$150 each and can be booked through Katie Coolican on 0422 261 114 or (02) 9356 3888

JRS Ball expands to Brisbane

JRS will hold a winter ball in Brisbane for the first time this year.

'We are targeting people between the ages of 20 and 30, although all are welcome,' says ball organiser Katie Cook.

Katie's counterpart in Sydney, Daniel Street, was guest speaker at a recent Vision Evening in Brisbane, where plans for the 6 June ball were conceptualised.

For more information email JRSBallBrisbane@gmail.com or go to www.jrs.org.au.

Never too young to make a difference

Not many students conclude their high school career by staging a rock concert in the heart of Sydney. Isadore Biffin concedes she really *was* aiming high when she invited major Australian artists to perform at the concert, which endeavoured to raise funds for a rehabilitation centre for former child soldiers run by JRS in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DCR).

'I went for gold,' laughs Isadore, explaining how she contacted the managers of high-profile artists such as The John Butler Trio, Missy Higgins and The Whitlams. 'I had a running joke with my family that I could have made a scrapbook out of all of the polite refusals that I got. If I was a big-name artist I probably wouldn't say yes to a 17-year-old who was calling up saying "Will you play at a concert I'm not sure will actually happen?"'

But Isadore's perseverance was rewarded when seven bands – among them The Dawn Collective, Adam Cousens, Tim Ireland and The Shipwrecked – agreed to take part, and thus the *Article 39* Concert was born.

Named for Article 39 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides for the rehabilitation of children who have suffered traumatic events due to armed conflict, the concert started out as Isadore's Year 12 major work. As a student of a Steiner school in Sydney, she was required to write a 10,000-word thesis, supplemented with a practical component.

Leaning towards advocacy, and in a world 'filled with causes', Isadore selected one close to her heart: child soldiers. 'I see it as the worst abuse of every right that every child in the world should have,' she says.

She focused her attention on the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa, where, according to a JRS report, up to 30,000 children have been co-opted into a prolonged civil war.

'It has been such a long, ongoing war, and the world is really only just starting to wake up to the suffering of the people,' says Isadore, referring to the 5.4 million people who have died in the DRC in the past 10 years. 'If you think about that and break it down it's more than 45,000 people a month.'

A JRS-run rehabilitation centre for former child soldiers in the DRC was identified by Isadore as a beneficiary for any profits that might result from the *Article 39* Concert. She conceptualised the project's brand with the invaluable help of a mentor and a graphic designer friend, then deftly organised a venue, artists, ticket sales, merchandise and guest speakers—including Associate Professor Steven Freeland, who is Visiting Professional at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Two-hundred-and-fifty people attended the concert, raising almost \$7000 net, an outcome that exceeded Isadore's expectations. 'It was an incredible journey and there were so many people along the way who helped to make it a reality,' she says.

Isadore's parents introduced her to social advocacy at a young age. By the time she entered Year 8, she and her friends were putting their gardening and babysitting skills to use to raise money for a school in Bangladesh. 'Our goal was \$550, which is enough for schooling for a year in a pre-primary school in Bangladesh. I think we got about \$300!'

Nurtured by a school that 'is very supportive of being more aware of the world and what's happening as opposed to just focusing on exams and getting the best mark and always trying to be better than everyone else', Isadore organised to do her Year 10 work experience in Ethiopia.

'One of the things I love about volunteering is being able to meet so many other people who are passionate about the same causes, and to have a great time while doing something that will make a tangible difference.'

Isadore acknowledges that her advocacy 'won't save everyone', but she hopes that it will both enlighten her peers to the atrocities committed against children and return some of these former child soldiers to a more peaceful existence. 'If you're giving former child soldiers a chance to go back into school and then contribute to their community it really does make a big impact on the large picture.'



The JRS-run rehabilitation centre offers the children counselling, medical support and vocational training or the opportunity to attend school. 'It's also giving them a network, integrating them back into their own age-group in a way that is more natural, and giving them a chance to have a childhood,' says Isadore.

Isadore insists that there are many young people eager to advocate on behalf of others, but says knowledge and resources are often in short supply. 'Only once we're aware of a situation can we do anything about it.'

Her own journey as 'a crazy Year 12 student with an idea I wasn't sure could happen' has rewarded Isadore with some priceless lessons. 'Even a few months before the concert, nothing had come together. My venue had backed out on me. It was a great lesson for me to see that you have to persevere, and you have to believe that it can happen.'

Isadore is currently taking a gap year, working to save money for university and travel, and volunteering with JRS Australia. She hopes to encourage other young people to get involved in refugee issues and use their talents to make a difference. And she's also determined to stage the second annual *Article 39* Concert this year, promising that it will be 'bigger and better!'

Read Isadore's blog at <http://isadorebiffin.wordpress.com/>

To see a live stream of the *Article 39* Concert go to <http://www.moshcam.com/blog/?p=124>

JRS arrives in Papua New Guinea

Mariano Griva arrived with his wife, Fernanda, in the small town of Kiunga, Papua New Guinea, in early October to take up his role as Information and Advocacy Project Officer in collaboration with the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga in the Western Province. Mariano shares some of his early impressions.

When we first arrived in Kiunga, we were both enthusiastic about this opportunity to work with West Papuan refugees, and the issues and people we have met in PNG so far have not failed to meet our expectations. There are approximately 20 refugee settlements in the border area of the Western Province. Most were settled in and around 1984 when asylum seekers fled the then-named Indonesian province of Irian Jaya. Some arrived even earlier.

Part of my work for JRS involves providing the refugees with reliable information of events pertaining to West Papua in order to enable them to make more informed decisions about their future. Other activities involve strengthening the

capacity of both the staff in the diocese and of the refugees themselves to advocate for their rights, and providing information to relevant government, church and other international refugee organisations so that improved changes in policy can take place.

There are many issues which adversely affect the lives of these refugees. One example is a large, multinational mining company which began operating a few years before 1984. Its dumping of poisonous tailings into two of the major rivers in this province—the Ok Tedi and the Fly—has had a profound impact on the livelihoods of people dwelling on the banks of both these rivers. In fact, both refugees and non-refugees living in the affected areas will most likely have to abandon their current

settlements because of the environmental hazards involved. Yet for the refugees it will be their second displacement: initially because of the political turmoil in their home land, and now as a result of environmental degradation of the habitat that has given them refuge.



We hope that through a better awareness of circumstances such as this, and of the plight of West Papuan refugees in general, more durable solutions will be found to a history of more than 25 years of displacement.

Update: Shelter Project

The Shelter Project has recently employed a new staff member to assist on the project part time. It will be fantastic to have an extra pair of hands working on the project! We are currently providing support to around 70 asylum seekers and refugees, including families, with about 30 people living in our accommodation facilities or being assisted with rent. Since the last issue of *Link*, a number of the asylum seekers we are working with have been granted protection visas, and are now embarking on a new journey as permanent residents of Australia!

Right now we would really appreciate help with:

- Secure accommodation for homeless asylum seekers - the need is as great as ever for affordable housing options.
- Second-hand vacuum cleaners for clients living in our accommodation.
- Video player for our largest share household - many great videos have been donated but we have no player!
- Donations of travel 10s (pre-paid bus tickets) for use on the bus network.
- Any employers willing to offer work or training, voluntary or paid - URGENTLY NEEDED!

Louise Stack, project coordinator

We welcome our newest international volunteer, Taya Hunt, who finished her Bachelor of Law/Arts in Human Rights and Ethics in Brisbane just a couple of years ago, and will be starting her JRS overseas placement as a legal officer in Cambodia in early March. We also welcome to our JRS Australia office Kim Mandelik, our new receptionist/admin assistant.

If undeliverable return to:

**Jesuit Refugee Service Australia
PO Box 522
Kings Cross NSW 1340**

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