

Former refugee commends JRS

Isabel Guterres, a former East Timorese refugee and later a Jesuit Refugee Service team member in Thailand, has paid tribute to the Jesuits while accepting the Australian Catholic University's highest honour, Doctor of the University, at a ceremony in Bacau, East Timor.

'When I had to leave my beloved and troubled country and become a refugee, I was given shelter and food and education by the Jesuit Refugee Service in Thailand', Isabel told students and guests at the Catholic Teachers' College graduation ceremony, where 55 students received education degrees completed in collaboration with ACU.

'I was just a name and a face, but I was treated like one of them and I saw many other refugees sharing the same experience.'

The award was made in recognition of Isabel's lifetime commitment to justice and service, and, in particular, to refugees.

Isabel fled political persecution in East Timor in the mid 1980s, seeking refuge in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, where she used her experience as a refugee to assist other displaced people. With the help of the Jesuit network, she later arrived in Australia, where she qualified and practised as a nurse, and continued to provide counsel to those who had sought refuge from insecurity and political upheaval.

'In Australia, I have also witnessed the work of the Mercy Sisters, the Jesuits, the Sisters of Charity and many other religious and lay people', said Isabel. 'They work with the homeless, refugees, asylum seekers, Aborigines, and migrants. The dedication given to their work inspired me to bring my own talents to those who struggle for justice and for a decent quality of life.'

Returning to East Timor in November 1999, Isabel worked for JRS, where her gift for languages were invaluable in the return of refugees and negotiations between the Timorese people and the Australian, Portuguese and Indonesian military, helping to diffuse otherwise difficult situations at tense border checkpoints. Isabel also collaborated with local teams to assist in the development of East Timorese nationhood.

Following the withdrawal of JRS from East Timor, Isabel was appointed as a National Commissioner to the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, and since 2006 she has served as the Secretary General of the Red Cross of Timor Leste.

'Every citizen of our country has known suffering of one kind or another', she reminded fellow graduates in Bacau. 'Every one of us has also seen the face of God in the kindness and goodness of those who reach out in the face of human suffering.'

Vice-Chancellor Professor Greg Craven said Isabel's presence as an alumnus of ACU National was an honour for the university.

'The cause of the poor and the suffering became a life changing mission for Isabel as she dedicated her energies to assist others', he said. 'She has never wavered from this commitment and has given hope to those with whom she has come into contact.'

The Editor of Eureka Street, Michael Mullins, said it was significant that Isabel received a welcome in Australia that would motivate her to return to her homeland. 'Had she been treated differently in Thailand and Australia, she may have opted for a life of greater material wellbeing in Australia. Isabel's story is a lesson in the value of treating refugees with humanity', said Michael.

Read Michael Mullins' Eureka Street editorial, *Isabel's lessons in humanity*, [here](#).

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