



2023/24
ANNUAL
REPORT

CatholicCare
Diocese of Broken Bay

A series of
truly
inspiring
stories

These heartfelt stories demonstrate the important work we do and our mission in action. They are reflections from people who have been supported by CatholicCare.
We have changed some names and photos to protect their privacy.



We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land across our Diocese. We recognise Aboriginal people as holding the memories, the traditions and the culture of the lands we live and work upon.
 We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



VISION

We strive for a world where people are safe, well and connected with each other in inclusive communities.

MISSION

We support and enrich the lives of individuals and families. We live out the Gospel by walking alongside people to find and build solutions to their needs. We deliver evidence based services, and do so with commitment, regardless of the difficulties faced.

VALUES

FAITH
 EXCELLENCE
 COMPASSION
 SOCIAL JUSTICE
 COURAGE
 Respect

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Catholic Social Teaching guides our work and provides the foundation for our values:



RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

Everybody, regardless of their age, ability, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religious beliefs, is of great value and worth. The work of CatholicCare upholds the dignity of all.



AN OPTION FOR THE POOR & VULNERABLE

CatholicCare gives priority to those in the greatest need, the most vulnerable, isolated and at risk.



SUPPORTING THE WHOLE PERSON

CatholicCare recognises the importance of supporting the needs and aspirations of people and communities in a complete way – we support them in body, soul and spirit.



COMMITMENT TO THE COMMON GOOD

Every one of us has a responsibility to consider the good of others and the good of us all, including future generations. CatholicCare hopes for a society in which every person has their needs met and can reach their full potential.



CARE FOR CREATION

Social, economic and ecological issues are interrelated and cannot be solved separately. CatholicCare operates in ways that nurture the web of life on earth. We are good stewards of all that is given to us.



WALKING WITH PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES IN SOLIDARITY

People thrive through relationships. We need each other and are responsible for one another. CatholicCare walks with people, supporting them to face challenges and celebrating with them in times of joy.



SUBSIDIARITY IN DECISION MAKING & ACCOUNTABILITY

CatholicCare respects the right of people to make decisions about their lives. We are accountable to the people and communities we serve in our decision making.



Most Rev Anthony Randazzo
Bishop of Broken Bay

Each year, we hope and pray that fewer people in our community will face the hardship of making ends meet.

We long for a time when families will no longer have to choose between providing a meal for their children or paying an electricity or medical bill, or when they will finally be free from the cycle of domestic violence.

Regrettably, this is not our reality. Our social services are increasingly called upon to help those in need. For 35 years, CatholicCare Broken Bay has been faithfully serving the communities of the Northern Beaches, Northern Sydney and the Central Coast, offering a wide range of services to enhance the wellbeing of individuals, families and the community. Every day, our CatholicCare teams bring their mission to life in the streets and homes of those who need both emergency care and long-term support.

They stand with the homeless, children, young adults, families, and those facing physical and mental challenges.

I am continually inspired by their tireless efforts, their generosity, their compassionate care, and their unwavering commitment to

upholding the dignity and respect of every person. As another year passes, I find myself once more profoundly grateful to our CatholicCare staff, volunteers and supporters. Through their dedicated work, they are living out Christ's mission to accompany the most needy and vulnerable among us. Thank you for your resilience, your service, and for helping those doing it tough in our community to experience love, support and hope. With every blessing in the Lord.



Ted Wzientek
Advisory Council Chair

We have seen significant development and growth during the last financial year, and in a challenging external environment.

The cost-of-living crisis across our Diocese, and right across the country, has been severe, and this has resulted in increased demand for support in the areas of mental health, domestic violence

and homelessness. This has all taken place alongside the Federal Government making significant changes to control costs in the NDIA and wage increases across many services, including more recently in childcare.

Recruitment and retention of staff remains very challenging. Despite all this, CatholicCare has managed to expand with additional centres, new services and new grants.

The Advisory Council worked closely with the Senior Leadership Team providing guidance across a number of key issues. Both the Mission & Identity Sub-Committee and the Clinical & Care Governance Sub-Committee have been effectively led by Fr David Ranson and Julie Anderson. The Finance, Audit & Risk Sub-Committee chaired by Veronica Collins reported that CatholicCare remained solvent with a surplus for the year.

During the year Natalie Acton and Anna-Maria Wade resigned from the Advisory Council. Emma McDonald resigned from her Diocesan position and the Advisory Council. May I thank all three members for their great contribution over the years.

I would also like to thank Bishop Anthony Randazzo for his leadership and his ongoing commitment and support to CatholicCare.



Tim Curran
Executive Director
CatholicCare Diocese
of Broken Bay

The 2023/24 financial year began with a flurry of positive activity. We made good progress with our plans to build two new early learning centres and a women and children's domestic violence refuge with funding from the NSW Government. We established new programs and service locations across our Permanency Support Program, Disability & NDIS Supports, Children's Services and Aged Care supports, and we finalised important ICT, workforce development, marketing and quality improvement projects.

The Federal Government also introduced or announced helpful policy and funding reforms such as the Housing Australia Future Fund, a 15% pay rise for aged care workers, additional funding for women and children fleeing domestic violence, and the recommendations arising from the NDIS Review pointed to a more hopeful future for NDIS participants and "legitimate" providers.

There were of course challenges to be grappled with, such as the dire housing crisis and worsening cost-of-living pressures which served to both increase demand for many of our support services and directly inflict hardship on many of our staff and volunteers, but there was a strong sense of progress and optimism within our

organisation and across the social and community services sector more broadly.

As the year progressed, we encountered more-and-more obstacles though. Planning barriers slowed or completely derailed our capital development projects. Delays in the roll-out of new funding promised by Governments hindered our ability to meet the drastically increasing demand for homelessness, domestic violence and mental health services. Funding indexation from our Government funding bodies fell well short of the increased costs of delivering services. And surviving as a legitimate provider under the NDIS became even more difficult due to the volatile and inadequate prices paid to providers, and the mayhem caused by unscrupulous service providers.

Taken together, these factors combined to cause alarm and uncertainty at leadership levels within CatholicCare. Managers and staff were required to devote significant amounts of time and energy to wading through bureaucratic red tape, implementing cost containment measures, and continually reprioritising projects and initiatives, deferring many, and abandoning some.

Fortunately, despite these unhelpful distractions, our incredible teams of staff and volunteers were able to continue doing the most important things - supporting, educating, encouraging, equipping and advocating for our clients and participants. The many testimonies and case studies in this annual report serve to highlight how incredibly well they did this work.

I thank them for their wonderful efforts throughout the year.

OUR SERVICES



Welcome to the annual report of the social care agency of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Broken Bay.

For over 35 years, our agency has been a pillar of support for communities across the Northern Beaches, Northern Sydney and the Central Coast. Our commitment is to uplift individual, family and community wellbeing through our diverse array of services.

Rooted in Catholic tradition, we extend our services to all members of the community, embracing every background, belief and circumstance. Our work is driven by the core values of courage, respect, and social justice, ensuring that each person receives care and support in alignment with their unique needs and choices.

In this report, you will find insights into our achievements over the past year, including our service impact and the vital contributions of our supporters and dedicated staff. We remain steadfast in our mission to walk alongside those we serve, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for all.

We delivered over \$73 million of services this year with funding from Government, individual supporters and other sources. With a workforce of more than 910 people, we offer:



FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES



CHILDREN'S SERVICES



DISABILITY & NDIS SUPPORTS



DOMESTIC & FAMILY VIOLENCE SUPPORTS



HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS SUPPORTS



THERAPY SERVICES



SERVICES FOR SENIORS



HOSPITAL CHAPLAINCY & PASTORAL CARE



PERMANENCY SUPPORT PROGRAM

WE CELEBRATE 2023/24

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & THERAPEUTIC SERVICES

Piloted a successful joint venture with employment services to assist the long-term unemployed to return to the workforce.

Delivered our very well regarded (unfunded) Healthy Young People program to 16 schools educating students about respectful relationships, youth mental health and gender issues.

Our Treetops Empowerment Group helped more than 80 domestic and family violence survivors regain their self-esteem and confidence.

Our Men's Behaviour Change Program and counselling teams ran weekly groups designed to increase family safety encouraging men to choose safe and respectful ways of relating with themselves, and their families.

We helped support those experiencing domestic and family violence via the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service which was particularly challenging this year with a new client management system, a hearing pilot delivered across multiple courts, the implementation of a new case management service and retendering of this program.

Our Intensive Family Preservation & MST-CAN teams continued their therapeutic work with families to build capability to ensure family members thrive, reducing the rate of children entering the out of home care system and we have improved community awareness, networks and referrals to these programs.

HOMELESSNESS & FAMILY SERVICES

Improved partnerships with Department of Health, Justice, Employment and TAFE services to improve service delivery at Dom's Place – our homeless drop-in centre in Hornsby.

Embedded children's trauma work into our domestic and family violence refuge.

Supported 1,071 clients through formal case management and accommodation to resolve housing needs in Northern Sydney, and another 77 young parents and their children to gain access to permanent housing on the Central Coast.

Provided immediate relief to 1,507 people across our Diocese via our emergency relief program.

Continued to build sustainability in our unfunded women's transitional accommodation.

Further developed community partnerships via our First Nations Supported Playgroup and commenced an additional supported playgroup in Berowra.

Implemented new drug and alcohol awareness education programs in schools.

DISABILITY FUTURES

Our Supported Independent Living (SIL) services expanded with the opening of Toukley and Point Frederick on the Central Coast, transitioning 10 new participants into these properties.

We welcomed and got creative with our 60+ clients across our two arts centres – Boonah in West Pymble and Tarooki in Brookvale.

In May we opened a new after school and vacation care program at St Gabriel's School in Castle Hill and successfully registered for the Child Care Subsidy.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

St Brendan's Early Learning Centre (ELC) in Lake Munmorah have been invited by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) to apply for the excellent rating (in 2024 only 28 ELCs in NSW achieved an excellent rating).

Successfully applied to take part in the NSW Department of Education Flexible Initiatives Trial and received \$190,000 to trial new or adaptable/flexible operating models at our ELCs which aim to remove educational, societal and economic barriers for families attending early childhood settings.

Successfully received a Federal grant to expand and/or build new ELCs.

Increased licenced places at four of our Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) services due to demand.

Opened two new OSHC services at Maria Regina in Avalon and St Martin's in Davidson highlighting our strong partnership with Catholic Schools Broken Bay.

SENIORS SERVICES

In partnership with St John the Baptist Parish in Woy Woy, our Memory Innovations Centre team began facilitating weekly programs which filled quickly, and we have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants and their families.

In July we received additional funding under the new Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme where volunteers visit vulnerable and isolated seniors.

We worked tirelessly to complete our accreditation to provide Home Care Packages, thoroughly reviewing our operations, policies, procedures and practices. Achieving this accreditation will help us expand our services, better serve the ageing community across the Diocese.

PERMANENCY SUPPORT PROGRAM

Implemented services in Northern Sydney increasing our reach into metro areas offering Intensive Therapeutic Care and Supported Independent Living services for 14 young people with experiences of trauma.

CatholicCare ITC services have led the state in occupancy for the duration of the year, meaning CatholicCare is the most consistent and responsive ITC provider in NSW - a fine achievement and great service outcomes for young people in crisis.

Extended our specialised services to sibling groups following traumatic family breakdown. Our STEP team played a pivotal role in supporting large groups of siblings in our supported home environment. Over the past year our team has supported 12 young people to recover and transition back to care with family, preventing unnecessary entry into statutory care.

Our Foster Care team had another fantastic year in delivering permanency outcomes for our children in care which included several restorations to family, adoption and guardianship outcomes. This is the core of our work and critical in preventing children living in institutional settings and statutory arrangements throughout childhood.

I DON'T KNOW HOW I WOULD HAVE SURVIVED

Peter never expected to be homeless. Five years ago, he was a married father of four kids, a high end wall paperer for Sydney's rich and famous. But following a breakdown in his marriage, moving out of the family home and a debilitating health problem, Peter suddenly found himself homeless, in and out of hospital, and with only a few dollars in his bank account.

"I had never been in this situation before and I didn't know what to do," he says. Unable to work and being strung along between temporary accommodation options, Peter was faced with a life of uncertainty, until he was put in touch with CatholicCare. "If it wasn't for CatholicCare, I don't know what I'd be doing," he says. "I don't even know if I would have survived. I probably wouldn't be here now."

Hailing from the United Kingdom, Peter had a good start to life. He left school at 15 to become a painter, working for a company hired by Buckingham Palace, Clarence House and Cleveland Row. He married an Australian woman and moved to Sydney in 1997. They had four children. He moved from painting to high-rise concrete repairs, but a back injury forced him to retrain as a teacher and wallpaper installer.

Even when his marriage began to fall apart, he was able to live comfortably, maintaining a steady stream of work and teaching at TAFE. "I had a pretty good life being single," he says. "I was renting a nice two bedroom apartment and was busy with my work. But it was about four years ago that I got colitis too."

Colitis is an inflammation of the colon and can severely impact the quality of life of anyone suffering from it, particularly those doing manual forms of labour. Peter still has no idea how he contracted the disease. "It was the reason I lost my job. You just can't continue full time work with this," Peter says. "About 18 months ago, it was just getting so bad and so painful, I was having flare ups and I couldn't work. I wasn't able to pay my rent and that led to being evicted."

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"The day I got evicted, the sheriff came around to change the locks and saw me in the corner of the lounge room looking so sick, he actually called an ambulance."

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Peter spent 55 days in hospital and when he came out, was forced to seek temporary accommodation. Money and other valuables he had set aside at his previous residence had simply "disappeared" when he was evicted. "I'd been paying tax my whole life, never had any handouts, didn't really know what to do and I had \$5 in my bank account with no idea what to do once I left the hospital," he says.

"I had a little bit of help from social workers but not much."

He was given a temporary place in a hotel on the Central Coast, but with only a kettle in the room to cook with, he was forced to eat noodles for four weeks straight. "With the income I was on, you can't afford to go out and spend \$20 on fish and chips," Peter says. "That was the thing that really shocked, only a couple of months ago, I was healthy and working hard, and this disease just hit me and upended my life. The fact I didn't know where I was going to be living tomorrow or the next week played a lot with my guts too."

While in temporary accommodation, Peter ended up back in hospital suffering appendicitis, a side effect of the heavy medications he was being prescribed to treat his colitis and other ailments. "By that time I was unable to extend stay in emergency accommodation and they put me in touch with CatholicCare," he said.

"They really helped me out. They found me accommodation, and I now have somewhere permanent to live. It's nice, it's clean and I can relax now this big weight is off my shoulders."

Due to his age, CatholicCare was able to secure Peter an affordable rental in a retirement village. "I'm the young one now!" he jokes. It's also a place where it's safe for his kids to visit, meaning Peter gets to spend more time with his family. CatholicCare has also been able to help him access other support services and get him to his appointments. "They've just gone that extra mile," he says. "I didn't have any furniture and they've helped me out with that too."

Sean, our Practice Manager, Homelessness & Housing on the Central Coast says he expects more people like Peter will be forced into homelessness in the next few months as house prices, rents and the cost-of-living soars. "In the last eight weeks, there's been 70 to 100 groups in temporary accommodation every night and that's almost a 250 per cent increase from this time last year," he says.

Sean says while homelessness is increasing, Government funding for services hasn't risen to fill the void. He also says it's important to give people dignity. "Even though we're just an accommodation provider, we're trying to grab the ball and drive it more and really help people with what they actually need. We're not funded to do all the extra bits and pieces."

"The expectation on the services is phenomenally high. We're trying to set a good standard for the sector which is what I feel our community needs," says Sean.

Peter says he wants to start volunteering at Mary Mac's Place in Woy Woy once he feels more settled and his health improves, to serve people who have also found themselves homeless or facing the uncertainty of temporary accommodation.

"There's going to be a lot more people in my position in the next year and hopefully, using my experience, we can help more people out!"



UNDERSTANDING ALFIE

Two afternoons a week, 8 year old Alfie attends after school care at Our Lady of Good Counsel Forestville. Led by his passion for garbage trucks and imaginary play, he has a special ability to draw other children into his fantasy worlds and games. "I've never come across a child who is so intuitive, smart and passionate about things," says Out of School Care Coordinator, Bronte. "He knows his likes and dislikes and is so driven by these." Today, Alfie is thriving at after school care, "but it hasn't always been amazing," says Alfie's mum, Antoinette. "It's been a bumpy road ... but good has come out of it all."

When Alfie first started at the OSHC 2½ years ago, he was in a mainstream class at school. After being diagnosed with autism and ADHD, Alfie transitioned into a support unit class. For Antoinette, keeping Alfie in a mainstream OSHC environment was a priority. "We didn't want him to be segregated in an OSHC environment as well."

For Alfie, being around lots of children and noise was challenging. "I knew we weren't supporting him the way we needed," says Bronte. "



We were really struggling to connect with him and understand his needs. We would say things like, 'Come on Alfie, you can do this,' completely overlooking the fact that it was the environment that needed changing rather than him."

After a particularly challenging term, Bronte recalls emailing her Practice Manager. "I told her I was struggling and didn't know what else to do." For Alfie, this email was the moment that everything changed. "We came up with a plan to meet with Alfie's parents," Bronte recalls. "Initially, it was very emotional and hard. I'd known Alfie's family for two years and it was really difficult to say, 'We're really struggling. How can you help?'"

Alfie's mum, Antoinette applauds the approach that was taken by Bronte and the team. "They looked at the situation and said, 'I don't know the answers, but I want to find out,'" says Antoinette. "We brought in an external behaviour support therapist, who focused on a positive behaviour support framework that targeted strengths and abilities, rather than assuming the worst."

After a series of meetings, training sessions and conversations with Alfie's allied health team, strategies were implemented to support Alfie. "We started incorporating really simple visuals for Alfie," says Bronte. "One of our biggest challenges was providing him with a space that was away from the other children where he could regulate himself. We had supervision issues because he would go into places where we couldn't see him. Now we use these portable dividers and Alfie has a little mat. When he needs time to regulate and decompress, he goes to 'Alfie Island'."

The language that the OSHC team use with Alfie has changed significantly. "After learning about choice fatigue, we have changed the way we ask Alfie questions," says Bronte. "Asking him an open ended question like, 'What do you want to play with?' is really overwhelming for him. Now, we will say something like, "Would you like to play with the cars or the trucks?" Limiting Alfie's choice helps him have a greater sense of control and structure."

Bronte says that the team have worked hard to understand Alfie and how he interprets the world. "We knew basic things about autism and ADHD but we needed to get to know Alfie."

Two children might have the same diagnosis, but every child responds so differently to things. There's a lot of trial and error involved, but the more we strive to be flexible and meet each child's unique needs, the better each child will feel in their environment."

Bronte says that catering for a child's needs can mean changing aspects of the service and this requires compromise. It isn't easy, hard work is involved, but at the end of the day, it is about creating better childhoods and life outcomes.

In a letter to Forestville OSHC this year, Antoinette thanked the team for persevering and turning Alfie's situation around.

"We really felt after your intervention that it was the start of a turning point for us. Please know that by stepping in and advocating for inclusion, you've helped create a wave of change that otherwise might not have happened for us. To see what Alfie is getting out of attending OSHC this term - developing friendships, building a healthier sense of self-esteem and truly belonging - makes me realise that he could have missed all of this if this wasn't for you and the team."

Today, the team at Forestville OSHC are more committed than ever to celebrating diversity and educating children about various learning challenges and medical conditions. "We use videos, worksheets and open conversations to encourage empathy and understanding," Bronte says. The humility and perseverance of the team throughout their journey with Alfie is already having flow on effects to other children who access the service.





GEMMA SURVIVES FINANCIAL ABUSE

For Gemma, aged 35, her \$26,000 debt didn't accrue overnight. Gemma's debt was the culmination of years of financial abuse, coercion, bullying and betrayal. Over many years, Gemma's ex-partner would use her car, without permission and refuse to pay road tolls. He knew very well that the fees and charges were being incurred in Gemma's name. As the debt grew to a crushing total of \$26,000, Gemma was left helpless, lost and vulnerable. Gemma rebuilt her life with the support of CatholicCare's financial counselling service, a compassionate creditor and a team of stakeholders working together.

"Gemma's debt was the result of the appalling abuse she was facing," says CatholicCare Financial Counsellor, Simon. "Gemma had tried to talk to the toll company to explain the unpaid bills, but it wasn't until she fled and got support from a women's refuge, that she realised support was available through CatholicCare to approach the toll company. With supporting evidence provided by a Case Worker from the refuge, we advocated on Gemma's behalf and asked the toll company to waive the debt on compassionate and financial hardship grounds."

To the credit of the toll company, they accepted that Gemma had suffered unacceptable economic abuse and cancelled all her debt. "She was genuinely shocked and there were lots of tears," says Simon. "It was a big relief for Gemma to finally forget about that horrible burden. She has a good full-time job, but she certainly couldn't afford to pay the debt. This outcome has made a huge impact on her financial position and mental health."

Advocacy is central to the work of Financial Counsellors. "Ultimately, we want to empower clients to know what to say to creditors they owe money to, but some clients just don't have the skills or would prefer someone to do it on their behalf," Simon explains. "There are some creditors who prefer to deal with someone who is independent of the client. They know the job of a Financial

Counsellor is to act in the best interests of the client, but they also know we value our relationship with the creditor and tell the truth. When we presented Gemma's case and provided supporting documentation, the creditor trusted that the debt wasn't caused by the client."

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Simon emphasises that no problem is too big or small to bring to a financial counsellor.

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Our team works with many women like Gemma who are survivors of domestic and family violence and are dealing with the harrowing impacts of financial abuse. Financial abuse occurs when someone uses money to control you, have power over you, scare or restrict you. Someone who is financially abusive might also use things you own, or things you both own (such as property), to cause problems for you.

Despite ongoing issues with her perpetrator, Gemma has been able to move on with her life knowing that she is debt free. "Seriously, this has been a massive worry for me and all I could think about was making payment plans forever and a day to pay this back," Gemma says. "I am still gobsmacked and absolutely relieved."

JO CREATES A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

When you enter the door of Jo's supported independent living unit, the atmosphere is calm and inviting. With plants lining the walls and a pale green and aqua colour palette, the unit is exactly as Jo had envisioned. "Jo has always been independent in mind and spirit, and we wanted her place to reflect that," says Jo's sister, Steph. "When Jo moved out of the family home in April, we wanted her to live in a place that reflected her own flair and was filled with her creature comforts."

For 47 years, Jo lived in the family home with her parents. Over the years as they aged, Jo's parents began finding it hard to meet all of Jo's support needs. "I was very nervous to move out. I was worried about how I would go being independent, but it has always been my goal to have my own place," Jo says.

As Jo's guardian, Steph orchestrated her sister's transition into a property with 24/7 support. "It's still hard to believe it's actually happened," Steph says. Steph explains that she had high standards for the kind of place and living situation that she wanted for her sister.

"A group home was not something that would have worked for Jo. We were very picky!" Steph laughs. But the hard work and advocacy resulted in a living situation that meets all of Jo's needs. "She has never been happier," Steph says.

Jo is very proud of the skills that she has developed since moving into her own place. "I've learnt how to speak up," Jo says. "I used to bottle everything up but now I will tell people when something isn't right." Steph agrees that Jo has come a long way in her ability to vocalise when there is a problem.

For Jo, there were many emotions and life lessons in those first few months, which have shaped her for the better. Steph explains that Jo came from a household with set meal routines, so there was a lot of money spent on takeaway food in those initial months. "Jo was like, oh this is great, I can eat Guzmen y Gomez, KFC and have three coffees every day!" Steph says. "Jo has since learnt a lot

about finances! She is now eating more at home and values a balanced diet. Now that Jo has adapted to her new living situation and has learnt to communicate with her Support Workers, she is more settled than she has ever been."

Jo says that one of the best parts of living independently has been getting to know the Support Workers.

“**It's great to know that I can be independent, but there is always someone here if I need them, Jo says.**”

“They help me with things like crossing the road and getting to work. I volunteer at a preschool five days a week, so they take me there and pick me up.”

For Jo, living independently has boosted her confidence and filled her with a deep sense of contentment. "I was worried about how I would go living here," Jo says. "But it's been so worth it."



AT THE MERCY OF HIS PERPETRATOR



For several months, 66 year old Peter lived between hotels. As he grappled with memory loss and substance use, Peter would rely on the goodwill of hotel owners and acquaintances for shelter. For a while, his trusting nature worked in his favour - that's until Melanie entered his world. Everything Peter owned was stripped away as he became a victim of elder abuse.

"Peter has an amazing ability to see the good in people," says Homelessness Case Worker, Jessica. "So, when Melanie entered his life and offered him a bed in her social housing property, he immediately said yes." Peter had met Melanie through the hotel he was staying in, and understandably the prospect of a proper home had instant appeal.

After a few weeks, Melanie asked Peter if he could start paying some rent. Peter agreed and asked her what he needed to do. "Just leave it to me," Melanie said, "I'll organise the bank transfer for you." Peter had no computer literacy, so he was glad that the money transfer process could be taken out of his hands. Little did he know, Melanie had begun transferring herself \$1,000 per week.

The abuse kept escalating and Peter became increasingly isolated. Melanie would call herself Peter's carer as she spoke to the bank on his behalf. She set up online banking for him and tried to access Power of Attorney. "She would ask him to sign documents, saying that they were for something else," says Jessica. "One day she went to Centrelink with Peter to access his account online and she changed the payment details to her own. From then on, all Peter's Centrelink payments went to Melanie without him knowing. She took his superannuation too.

"In total she pocketed \$30,000 but it could have been more."

One day, Peter received a phone call from the bank because they had noticed some suspicious activity. In that moment, everything clicked, and Peter realised what had been happening.

Peter immediately approached Melanie. "You've been stealing from me," he said. Melanie said she would "put a hit on him" if he tried to leave and claimed to know a lot of people who could harm him. Peter called the Police, and he was removed from the property and taken to Dom's Place, our drop-in centre in Hornsby.

"The whole thing happened very slowly, as abuse often does," says Jessica.

"Peter was so focused on having shelter and finally meeting his basic needs, he didn't realise that he was experiencing elder abuse."

Peter received support via Dom's Place, but Jessica explains that the support was provided remotely. "I would go to him because one of the perpetrators would come to Dom's Place occasionally. Understandably, he didn't feel comfortable coming so we would drop over meals, toiletries and other things he needed."

Peter was supported by CatholicCare's homelessness team to travel to medical appointments, to access support services and to liaise with hospital staff. "Peter had multiple medical conditions," Jessica explains. "As well as dealing with memory loss, he had emphysema, chronic leg pain and very limited mobility."

Peter was also supported to look for a social housing property. He was offered a property but shared with us that he didn't want to live alone, and he needed additional support. At this point, Peter decided that an aged care facility was what he needed.

The process of getting Peter into aged care was very complex. "He was 66 at the time, and his main source of income was job seeker payments. The age at which someone can access the pension is 67, so Peter wasn't eligible, and aged care homes don't want to accept someone who is on job seeker payments. The pension is seen to be a more stable income," Jessica explains.

After intensive support and advocacy from CatholicCare, Peter was accepted into an aged care facility where he lives today. "He has made great progress," says Jessica. "Peter has cut back on smoking and drinking, he has started exercising, his memory has improved, and he has forged a relationship with his sisters. This morning, he told me

he had an exercise class to attend. That's huge! Not long ago I couldn't get Peter to walk 50 metres."

At the height of his abuse, Peter was isolated and at the mercy of his perpetrator. His story points to the importance of community and connection, particularly for vulnerable members of our community.

Peter's story also sheds light on the gap in aged care services. Eligibility for MyAgedCare services begin at 65, yet the pension age has recently been raised to 67. This left Peter in a position where he could apply for a MyAgedCare package but was unable to access certain services including residential care, as he was not yet receiving the pension.

To the credit of Peter and CatholicCare's homelessness team, he is now in an environment that meets his needs and provides a space for him to enjoy positive relationships.

TAYLOR THRIVES IN HER PLACEMENT

Before entering an Individual Placement Arrangement with CatholicCare in October 2022, 12 year old Taylor had never lived anywhere for very long. Her placements with foster carers and family members would regularly break down, and in the months before coming to CatholicCare she was living in temporary accommodation with agency workers. "Taylor had no rhythm or routine. A random worker would stay with her for five days then leave, and a new worker would come," says House Lead, Rebecca. "She would go to school with food from the servo and her hair was matted."

Taylor's time at CatholicCare offered her care, consistency and an opportunity to learn essential life skills. After 19 months with CatholicCare, Taylor was accepted into a specialised disability placement with another agency. Taylor knew that her time with CatholicCare was only a temporary measure until a more permanent home could be found, but her time with us was significant and life-changing for both Taylor and her care team. "There are things we have instilled in Taylor that will stay with her forever," says STEP Program Manager, Melissa. "They have become a part of her. We were the longest, most stable placement she ever had."

"Our focus, when Taylor first entered our care, was to develop a predictable routine," says Rebecca. "We would always go to the park in the afternoon, then after the park we would race home for a bath. Learning self-hygiene and how to express herself through hairstyles and dress ups were some of the cool developmental stages that Taylor got to experience with us."

Rebecca smiles as she recalls Taylor's boundless energy, her quiriness and her desire to connect with people. "Taylor cares deeply about everything and everyone. She would introduce herself to everyone at parks, and if there was a party she was bound to gate crash," says Rebecca. While Taylor's personable nature is one of her most special traits, it also meant that a lot of protective work needed to be done. "We knew that if we were to turn our back for 10 seconds and a stranger asked her to go



with them, she would be gone. So the team did daily interactions around who is a stranger and who are our safe people," Rebecca explains.

In July 2023, Taylor received the devastating news that her half-sister had died by suicide. "The news was very difficult to process and amplified a lot of feelings for Taylor," Rebecca says. "With Taylor's cognitive disability, she wanted to be with her sister, but I don't think she really understood the gravity of what dying means. For a few months she would say, 'I want to die and be with my sister.' Through consistent, persistent support that behaviour thankfully reduced."

Taylor's care team showed great creativity in their pursuit to help Taylor develop her self-regulation skills. Rebecca explains a game that the team would play with Taylor, "When you feel like you're getting upset you call out, 'penguin!' Everyone then stops what they're doing to sit on the floor

and take deep breaths together. After a short while, Taylor would initiate the game and she would be the one to call out, 'penguin!' She was so open to learning these strategies."

Melissa says the great work of Taylor's care team was particularly apparent, because Taylor would often talk aloud to herself and echo things her care team said. "She would say, 'Taylor, are you really hungry, do you really need to eat that? Your belly is only as big as your fist. Have a look at your fist and wait five minutes.' And I'm like, 'That is Rebecca! That is what Rebecca has told her!'"

On Friday 21 June 2024, some of Taylor's workers sat her down to share the great news that she had been offered a disability placement. Taylor had been waiting years for a permanent home, so she was very excited, but with the feelings of excitement came sadness and apprehension. The team shared the news with Taylor on a Friday, and she moved the following Wednesday. "If you give

her too much time to ruminate it isn't helpful," Rebecca explains. "We made a social story about the new home, and we talked about what would be different and what would stay the same. She took us by surprise and gave us a performance of Frozen's 'Let it Go' as a way of saying thank you. It was very dramatic and totally wonderful!"

Taylor's growth during her time with CatholicCare was particularly evident at her farewell party. "She engaged so well with everyone at the party, she had conversations with carers, she initiated different games, and she was comfortable when things were slow," Rebecca recalls. For the first time in her life, Taylor had developed positive adult relationships and a safe place to be herself.

MELANIE TAKES CONTROL OF HER LIFE AGAIN



“**After being released from jail, Melanie wanted to start living a healthy adult life, but she didn’t know where to start.**”

“I felt overwhelmed and didn’t know how to move forward with my life,” Melanie explains. “I had no one around to support me. My ex-partner had died, and I’d lost contact with family and friends, so I said yes to casework support.”

Over the months that followed, Melanie received support and started working on a plan to rebuild her life. She decided that she wanted to complete a TAFE course, pay her own rent and form healthy adult friendships.

“I am well on the way to achieving the goals I set,” Melanie says. “I want to be a Social Worker so I’m studying a Cert IV in Community Services. I’m hoping that through my personal experiences I can give back to others.” Melanie does most of her TAFE work at Dom’s Place as it is an environment where she can focus. At Dom’s she has made friends who understand what she has been through.

It was 2 February 2024 and Melanie had just been released from jail. “It’s a strange feeling coming out of jail because it’s like you’re starting your life from scratch,” Melanie explains. “From jail I was taken to a hotel in Hornsby, and I was like, ‘OK, so now what?’ Melanie is forever grateful to the person who suggested she drop into our homelessness hub, Dom’s Place. “Everyone at Dom’s Place rallied around me and within two weeks they’d found me transitional housing. CatholicCare has given me everything I needed to sort my life out.”

Melanie had spent her 20’s living with a partner who controlled her life and was physically and psychologically abusive. At an age when her friends were discovering how to live more independently, Melanie did the opposite. She ended up relying fully on a person who she couldn’t trust. She lost her job, her bank account and her core group of friends.

Until Melanie finds permanent housing, she is developing her living skills and paying rent for her room at a CatholicCare transitional housing property. Melanie contributes to the shared living environment in preparation for when she will get her own long-term accommodation.

There are many reasons for Melanie to be hopeful about her future. With the completion of her course just around the corner, Melanie is excited to find work and her own home. She is working closely with a mentor and has started rebuilding bridges with family and friends.

As she moves forward with her life, Melanie knows that Dom’s Place will always be there. “If I don’t have food for the week, Dom’s Place will sort me out,” Melanie says. “If they can help, they will.”



DANIEL’S PAINTING JAZZES UP OUR BROOKVALE DISABILITY HUB

Daniel’s face lights up whenever he enters Tarooki Art Space, CatholicCare’s studio in Brookvale for artists living with disability. Daniel’s very own painting, ‘Bubbles and Bubbles’ was recently selected as the new artwork for the doors of our Brookvale hub, and Daniel could not be prouder. “I feel happy whenever I walk in, because I get to see my painting and my friends see it too,” Daniel says.

Daniel is one of the original artists at Tarooki. Six years later, Monday and Friday mornings remain the highlights of his week.

“Daniel is a gregarious, sociable, caring, full-time visual artist who loves a laugh and a joke with friends. His favourite genres are painting, ceramics, photography and film,” says Activity Leader, Dinah. “Daniel has an eagerness to help others. He willingly cleans up at the end of the day and helps wherever needed. He happily shares his artistic gift and looks forward to showing his artworks at the end of year exhibition.”

Daniel’s mother, Michelle describes the special moment when she first saw Daniel’s artwork on the door. “When I arrived in the afternoon to pick him up, the staff said, ‘Quick, come here, we have something special to show you!’ And there was his painting on the door. Daniel was so proud, and I was too.”

Daniel’s painting is one of a series that Daniel created in a variety of colours. The painting was inspired by his love for the beach and for photographing the sea. “Bubbles and Bubbles” was created very much in a meditative mode of circles,” says Dinah. “The use of the colour blue is reflective of our Northern Beaches location. It’s rhythmic and calming while being fresh and lively in its effervescence.”

Dinah describes Daniel’s artistic approach as slow and methodical. “He focuses well on detail,” says Dinah. Daniel has a special ability to immerse himself in his own art, while also being interested in other artists’ creations and attentive to their stories.

Artists at Tarooki are free to choose their projects and may even be working on several projects simultaneously. “The wonderful thing about Tarooki is that Dinah gives them ideas, and then they can go free range.” says Michelle. “They can be whatever they want to be.”

Dinah says that everyone who visits Tarooki stays for a while to breathe in the beauty and joy the studio exudes. “There are no mistakes at Tarooki, just variations and the results are wonderful,” says Dinah. “The artists gain self-esteem, confidence, friendships and artistic skills and everyone is welcome.”



EMBEDDING CULTURAL AWARENESS INTO EVERYDAY PRACTICE

Aboriginal Community Engagement Manager, Judith, knows the children are engaged in her cultural awareness sessions when the enthusiastic stream of questions begin. "Sometimes the questions are a little random! But generally, they're very culturally curious."

Kate who coordinates CatholicCare's Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) service in Woy Woy says that their relationship with Judith has enabled cultural awareness to become an embedded practice.

Over the last year, Judith has run numerous cultural workshops across CatholicCare's OSHC and vacation care services. "The workshops usually involve activities on paper, engaging with various artefacts, and giving the children a story to take home, usually The Rainbow Serpent.

During the sessions, I show them the Indigenous map and we talk about the land we are on. Recently I've been handing out a picture of a young child

with different parts of the body labelled in the Darkinjung and Darug languages," Judith says.

For Kate, knowing that Judith is available to answer cultural questions and provide guidance has been invaluable. "We have just introduced a native section to our garden, so we are consulting Judith about planting some Indigenous plants," says Kate. "Judith's presence at CatholicCare means that cultural awareness initiatives in our program aren't tokenistic."

Committed to avoiding 'tick-the-box' activities, the team at Woy Woy OSHC used Reconciliation Week to explore ways they could incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, knowing and doing into everyday life. "During the week we made a big jigsaw puzzle that represented ourselves intertwined with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures," says Kate.



The children also participated in conversations about reconciliation and what that means today. Parents have commented on how proud they are to see their children engage so openly and enthusiastically in these initiatives.

As Judith travels across CatholicCare's OSHC and vacation care services, she is impressed with how openly the children welcome and embrace cultural awareness activities. "Many of them are already very informed which is great to see, especially on the Central Coast," Judith says. "My focus, moving forward is our Northern Sydney services."

Soon, Judith will commence cultural awareness training for staff too. "The better informed the educators are, the more that they can develop their own ideas for cultural learning in the centres," Judith says.

As they persevere with their mission to embed cultural awareness into everyday practice, Kate and her team are grateful that Judith is only ever a phone call away. "I know that we can call Judith, and she will lead us down the right track."





A NEW HOME & A NEW BEGINNING

For many years, Trent had lived in community housing with his two sons, 22 year old Alex and 15 year old Marcus. When it came to parenting, Trent had all the right intentions, but his chronic isolation, depression and substance use saw him spiral into a difficult place.

“The family were extremely isolated, and their community housing property was dilapidated and required significant repairs,” says Intensive Family Preservation (IFP) Lead, Brigid. “They presented as suppressed, depressed and not engaged with the community. The living conditions were not acceptable, their personal hygiene was very poor, and Alex was doing the bulk of the parenting for his younger brother, Marcus.”

The family was referred to CatholicCare’s IFP program due to child protection concerns, the condition of the home, hygiene issues and Marcus’ limited school attendance.

“Marcus spent most of his days at home. He didn’t have any peers, he wasn’t socialising or engaging with the community, and he had poor sleep practices,” Brigid explains. “Alex had been out of school for a few years, he wasn’t engaged with an employment service, and he had no desire to get out into the community.”

Brigid says that while their father, Trent had issues with alcohol dependency, there were no addiction issues or red flags for the boys, which is what allowed them to “fly under the radar” for so long. “They weren’t the squeaky wheel, so they weren’t getting support,” Brigid says.

The housing block they lived in was notorious for drugs, alcohol and domestic violence, which meant they never felt safe to sleep at night. “They’d had windows broken, people knocking on the door at night, and Police asking them for statements about incidents at neighbours’ homes so it wasn’t a family friendly environment,” Brigid says.

Upon CatholicCare’s involvement, the first goal was to initiate a housing transfer for the family to a more suitable property. Following lots of advocacy, they

were accepted into a community housing complex that is integrated with supports. “Tenants who live in the complex are supported to connect with education, training and employment opportunities in the area, and to transition to housing independence. It really is an ideal situation for Trent and his boys,” Brigid says.

CatholicCare supported the family throughout the whole relocation process, which involved extensive rubbish removal, a deep clean and the provision of new furniture and belongings.

Since moving into their new home, Trent has joined community groups, abstained from alcohol and sought support services. Marcus is now enrolled in TAFE, he is spending more time outdoors and he is slowly engaging in the community. Alex has gained independence with an apartment of his own across the hall from his dad and brother, which allows them to maintain regular contact.

Our IFP team worked alongside Trent to build his capacity to support his sons with their routines, their hygiene needs and their contribution to daily chores. They were also supported to recognise the importance of community engagement and reaching out for supports when they need it.

“I can’t emphasise enough how much improved their living situation is now,” Brigid says. “To be surrounded by support services within walking distance is what they needed. Trent is engaging with chaplaincy services and community events, and he is in a good headspace.”

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The journey of Trent and his family is testament to the power of advocacy and understanding the unique needs of a family.

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CatholicCare and other stakeholders collaborated to highlight the family’s lack of historical supports and this ultimately led to approval of the housing transfer and a hopeful new beginning.

PASTORAL CARE BLESSINGS ARE TWO WAY

For Pastoral Care Practitioner, Denis the most wonderful part of working in Hospital Chaplaincy & Pastoral Care has been the realisation that blessings are both given and received.

Denis recalls a profound experience of working with an elderly gentleman of Asian heritage earlier this year. The gentleman, who Denis refers to as the 'Fisherman' originated from a seaside village, where fishing was a critical survival skill and later, a source of joy. Indeed, the connection that formed between Denis and the Fisherman enriched and blessed them both.

"I first met the Fisherman when a doctor referred him to me as he was agitated and the medical supports were not alleviating his concerns," Denis says. "He became a palliative patient when his condition deteriorated quite quickly and there had to be hospital care for him, which he was not expecting. He was Catholic so I was asked by his doctor if I might meet with him to see if a pastoral care visit might assist."

Denis discovered that the Fisherman was concerned about one thing that he had yet to achieve. Ever since arriving in Australia as a young boy, the Fisherman had been sending money to his brother and his family who were still living in the poor village for all these years. With a hospital stay longer than he had expected, the Fisherman had not been able to honour this important commitment to his brother. "He couldn't think of much else, hence his rising anxiety," Denis explains.

With the Fisherman's permission, Denis spoke with the hospital's allied health social work team, and they brainstormed solutions that would enable the Fisherman to keep that financial commitment to his brother. When a solution was found, Denis describes a peace and calm that came over the patient. "It was wonderful to see," Denis says. "A 'blessing' he called it."

The blessing became two way when Denis had the privilege of visiting him several times a week until he decided he was well prepared for his death.

“**Over the weeks he generously shared his story as a young boy in the seaside village,” Denis recalls.**”

"The story came when I asked where he went to school. He told me he didn't go to school. It was a poor village and he spent his days finding, growing or catching food. He became very good at fishing which supported his family. He said he and his brother were sadly orphaned at a young age. They were basically homeless and had to fend for themselves, with occasional visits to a Catholic orphanage. As a pre-teen he got a job making shoes in a factory. He felt that was a blessing as his life could have easily gone in another direction."

The Fisherman went on to explain how one day some Australian business people visited his factory to buy products and machinery to set up a shoe factory in Australia. They were impressed by his skills, especially as he was so young. After a few years, they asked if he wanted to come to Australia to work in their factory. The Fisherman knew in his heart it was a really great opportunity, even though he would miss his brother very much. It was then that the young man decided he could help his brother from Australia.

The journey was arranged, and the business owners became his immigration sponsors. The Fisherman was in his late teens when he arrived. Denis recalls the special moment when he asked where the factory was located, "He told me it was in a country town in NSW and told me the name. It happened to be my home town. I knew of the factory and its location in town."

Denis describes being amazed at the shared experience and the new connection they now had. "I naturally asked about fishing in the nearby rivers and dams," Denis says. "He was animated about fishing for rainbow trout. Again, fishing helped him survive on a budget to have savings to send to his brother."

The Fisherman's story of coming to the Northern Beaches unfolded over weeks as he spoke of his fishing on the Narrabeen Lakes. "He told me the best spot," Denis recalls. "He told me about the bait he uses, which is failsafe and successful on every fishing outing. He also told me about his very regular meal of fish soup, that he missed while in hospital. A Catholic Pastoral Care volunteer brought him fish soup from the local mall a few times.

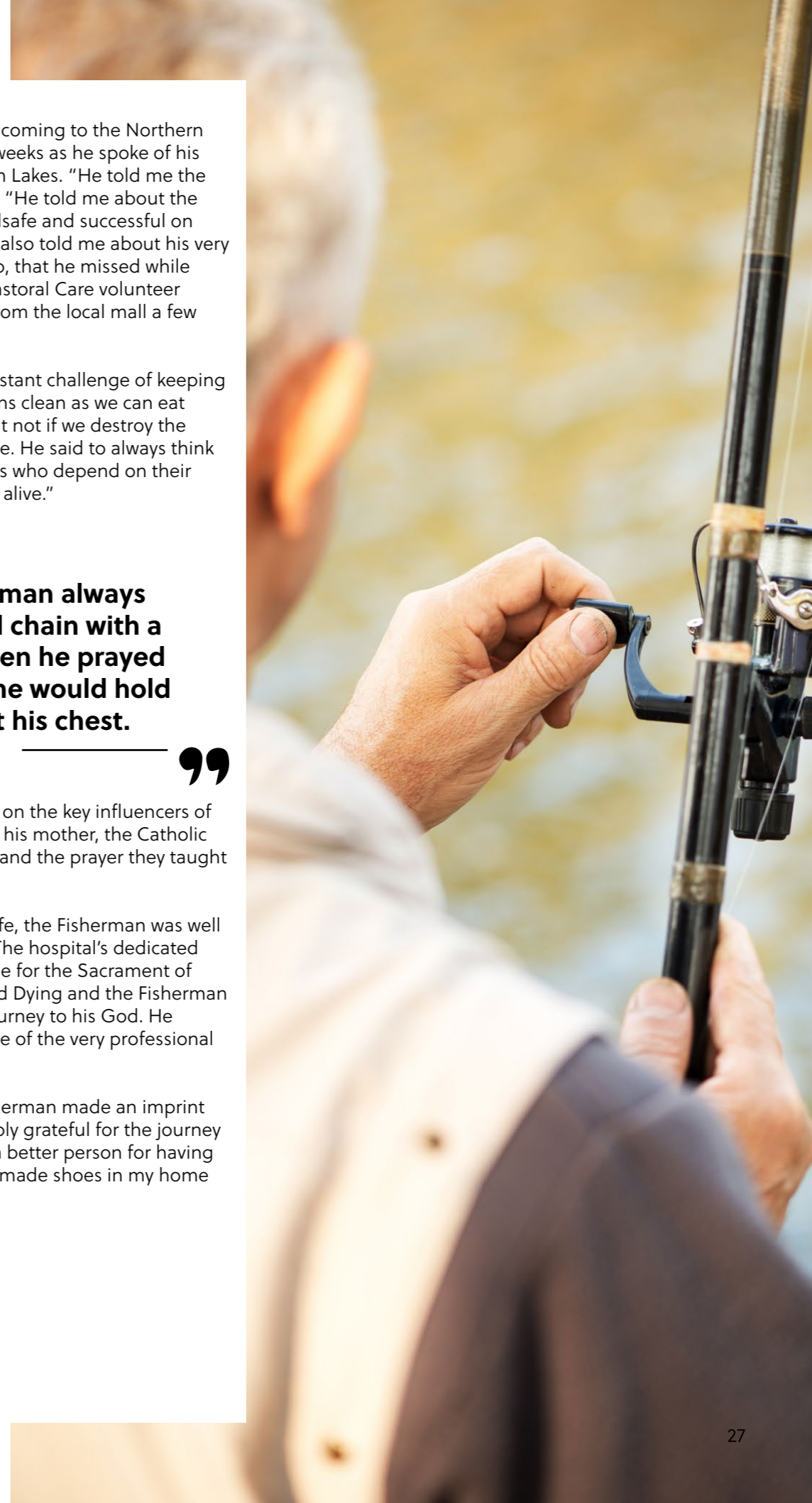
We talked about the constant challenge of keeping our waterways and oceans clean as we can eat for free if we can fish, but not if we destroy the resource across the globe. He said to always think of people in poor villages who depend on their waterways to keep them alive."

“**The Fisherman always wore a gold chain with a crucifix. When he prayed with Denis, he would hold it against his chest.**”

The Fisherman reflected on the key influencers of his faith, which included his mother, the Catholic sisters at his orphanage and the prayer they taught him, 'The Memorare'.

In the last weeks of his life, the Fisherman was well prepared for his death. The hospital's dedicated Chaplain Priest had come for the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick and Dying and the Fisherman was ready for his final journey to his God. He died in the generous care of the very professional palliative care staff.

Denis' time with the Fisherman made an imprint on his life and he is deeply grateful for the journey that they shared, "I am a better person for having met the Fisherman who made shoes in my home town."



COMPANIONSHIP & TRAVEL TALES KEEP ESTHER GOING



Once a fortnight, 80 year old Esther is visited by Lynn, who volunteers with CatholicCare's Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme. "I've spent many hours in hospital rooms lately, and there have been moments when I've wondered if this is the end of me," says Esther. "All this time in hospital has taken a lot out of me physically, mentally and even psychologically, but Lynn is my light."

Esther's hour with Lynn is her little piece of solace as they gather over hot cups of tea and talk about books, politics, television programs and travel. "We are both passionate readers," says Lynn. "Esther's home is filled with zillions of books, and this shared passion meant that we hit it off right away."

Esther immigrated to Australia from Hungary in the 1970s. "I came to Australia without a word of English, and I worked in Canberra for over 20 years," Esther explains. "I have two daughters, one who lives on the Central Coast and one in Melbourne. Unfortunately, I don't see much of my daughters because they work full-time. Companionship is so important for me because my husband has passed away and I am on my own 90% of the time."

Lynn had been searching for volunteer work when a Facebook ad appeared for the Aged Care Volunteer Visitors Scheme. "I believe it's really important to link older people to the community, and I'm a good listener so it's something I thought I might enjoy and be good at," says Lynn.

Lynn will occasionally take Esther to the local shops, but due to Esther's health complications, their recent visits have taken place at home.

“**Sometimes I feel trapped in my home and in my body, but Lynn transports me to other places,**”
Esther explains.

"I love it when Lynn tells me about her trips to New Zealand to visit her husband's family. A part of me feels like I'm transported there as she shares her stories, and I can almost see the streets and the mountains. When I imagine New Zealand, I think of a little England, and these thoughts are what get me through the hard days."

Esther was thrilled when she discovered that she and Lynn, by fluke, had been reading the same novel. "I couldn't believe it," Esther says. "The Book Binder of Jericho is not a common book, yet we were both drawn to it. It is the story of how women kept Britain running when men went away to fight in the war." In the blurb for the book, one of the main female characters is described as "extraordinary but vulnerable," and the other main female character needs to watch over her. It isn't hard to see why this novel about strong women and their relationships gripped both Esther and Lynn.

As it becomes harder for Esther to leave the home, Lynn sees it as her mission to keep Esther connected and engaged with the world around her. "It has been a very rewarding experience," Lynn says, and Esther will forever sing her praises.

COUNSELLING HELPS KATIE BUILD HER PSYCHOLOGICAL ARMOUR

Every day, 39 year old Katie sets several alarms on her phone with positive affirmations. "At 9am, the alarm will go off and read, 'You'll be OK,' and then at 10am it might say, 'I am in control,'" Katie says. "I also have a gratitude journal and many sensory items that I use when I can feel the anxiety creeping in."

As Katie grapples with the effects of prolonged domestic violence and ongoing challenges with the perpetrator, her counselling sessions at CatholicCare have given her the confidence, the motivation and the insight to prioritise her wellbeing.

For many years, Katie was subject to various forms of coercive control from her ex-partner. As his controlling behaviours escalated, Katie experienced a loss of confidence, habitual self-doubt and the sense that she was always walking on eggshells. She also experienced chronic anxiety and the feeling that she was worthless and powerless. Throughout all of this, Katie raised five children, four of whom have mental health issues and are neurodiverse.

Katie approached CatholicCare for help when she first left her partner. "We had just split up and I knew that I needed extra help. Initially I was thinking of mediation, but it soon became clear that what I really needed was to work on myself. Being able to talk and have someone provide me with not only a listening ear, but also different strategies has been so helpful. Learning how to process my thoughts through mind mapping has been massive for me."

CatholicCare Counsellor, Peter has journeyed with Katie and witnessed her growth in self-awareness, self-esteem and self-love. "Katie's situation hasn't

changed a lot," Peter explains. "Her ex-partner has left the home, but he is still in her life. Despite the circumstances, Katie's dedication to her own growth is to be admired. Her success is largely due to the amount of work that she has done outside of her counselling sessions. As the counsellor, I have provided support and Katie has put the work in."

“**Peter has helped her develop a psychological armour amid the storm. Everything has been for protection.**”

Katie says that before receiving counselling support from CatholicCare she would have given up and fallen into a heap if a strategy didn't work. Katie now has a wealth of tried and tested strategies, and she continues to build her psychological armour.

Today, Katie is firmly on the path of rebuilding her confident, independent and empowered self, and there has been a flow on effect to her children. "I love teaching my daughter the strategies I've learnt, and we practice them together," Katie says. "Things are still hard, but I am moving forward and I am proud of where I am today."

BLAKE CHOOSES TO LEAVE HIS OLD LIFE BEHIND

For as long as Blake can remember, he has yearned for community and connection. Growing up in social housing with a mum who tried her best but faced many challenges, Blake longed for a place to belong. His search took him from drug dens to prison cells and ultimately, into a life of homelessness. Today, as Blake reflects on the turmoil that had consumed him, he describes the three available paths as ... "to take my life, to rot in jail, or to turn my life around. And with the support of CatholicCare, I chose the third."

Rebecca works in CatholicCare's homelessness services. She has known Blake for six years. "Even through the tough times, Blake has always been respectful and grateful for those at CatholicCare. Blake is very resilient and keeps picking himself back up when things aren't going well for him," she says.

The day that Blake met Rebecca will be forever etched in his memory. "I'd just got out of jail and I was stoked. I got this address to go to. It was for a house to live in.

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"Rebecca told me she was from CatholicCare and was there to help me - she's the reason I'm still alive."
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During the last six years, Blake has been heavily supported by our homelessness team. He has made great progress during this time, but the road hasn't always been smooth. "We supported Blake to find housing after he was released from custody, but unfortunately the housing block was bad for his recovery. He was surrounded by drug use and criminal activity. Blake would sustain periods of recovery for 12+ months, which shows his resilience and strength, but the environment would trigger his relapses," Rebecca says.

We supported Blake to leave this property and he is currently in transitional housing with CatholicCare until something more appropriate is found. "He is doing so well so we want to support him on that journey," Rebecca says. "At that first house he was close to suicide, he'd had multiple overdoses, and he couldn't move forward, so it was clear he needed something different."

Today, Blake is sober and in recovery. He has been linked in with CatholicCare's financial counselling and therapy teams and is proud of how far he has come. Blake enjoys going to the gym and he is passionate about sharing his story on social media with the hope that he might positively influence others.

Rebecca says that one of Blake's greatest strengths is his ability to motivate others on their recovery journey. "It is inspiring that he has led such a colourful life yet has managed to get to where he is today. Blake has had a particular impact on one of the young guys in our transitional housing and has motivated him to do something about his substance use. They go to the gym together which is really positive for both of them."

Blake is proud that he chose to turn his life around. "So many of my mates have passed away due to the way of life that I used to live. I am one of the only mates still standing, and now I want to help others make the choice to keep living."



OSCAR'S SEARCH FOR FAMILY TAKES HIM TO NEW ZEALAND

From a young age, Oscar wondered about his estranged family, but these thoughts were often associated with sadness. After entering care with CatholicCare in 2019, his team of workers became his substitute family. "Over the years, we have had many conversations about family, and what that means for Oscar," April says. "When he arrived in our care, he was quite angry with his parents, and he had no interest in reconnecting." Five years later, Oscar is deep in his 'family finding' journey, a journey that has taken him all the way to New Zealand.

At a case planning meeting in 2020, Oscar mentioned that he wouldn't mind reconnecting with his family. "This was a huge statement from Oscar," April says. Until then, his cousin, Sarah, who he'd met by chance at the hospital, was the only family member in his life. "I immediately got started on family finding for Oscar," April recalls. "It had now been 10 years since he had any contact with his parents and any other family member other than Sarah."

April discovered that Oscar had an 8 year old brother named Noah on his father's side, and Noah's mother was very open to initiating contact with Oscar. Oscar was invited to spend Christmas with Noah last year – an incredibly special time for Oscar as it was his first Christmas with family since entering care.

"It took me a little longer to track down Oscar's parents," April explains. "All of the phone numbers, emails, addresses and family information I had received had been incorrect. However, I was almost certain of the towns in outback NSW they were living in. I posted in community groups asking that if anyone knows Rebecca (mum) or Luke (dad), could they please pass on my details."

Sure enough, the local service station owner helped. "Rebecca often comes through here to fill up her car on her way back into town," he wrote back. "I'll pass on your details when she next comes in."

A few months later, April received a phone call from Oscar's mum, Rebecca. "She and her partner were initially hesitant to speak with us, but they softened once they realised we were not there to judge them, and that our purpose was to reconnect Oscar with family. The very next week we arranged a hotel for Rebecca and her partner on the Central Coast so that they could reconnect with Oscar. Bringing them together in person after so long was initially awkward, however, after an hour or two they warmed up, and they have kept in contact weekly ever since. He has plans to visit her soon."

Oscar's journey towards reconnecting with his dad has been a little more complex and the process is ongoing. "When we eventually located Oscar's father, he was very hesitant to rekindle his relationship with Oscar," April explains. "I asked if he would at least entertain the idea of having a phone conversation with him, and he agreed. Oscar has been hot and cold about building a relationship with his father, but has recently expressed that he would like to."

Whilst all of this was going on, April was working hard to make Oscar's dream come true of meeting his maternal side of the family in New Zealand. After many months of planning and liaising with the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), Oscar and April boarded a plane to New Zealand in June. "This was a relationship that Oscar had been wanting to build for such a long time, so he was excited but also understandably nervous that it wouldn't meet his expectations," April says. During his time there, Oscar got to meet several members of his extended family, and to say that the trip met his expectations is an understatement. "You could not wipe the smile off of his face for weeks after the trip," April says. "He has remained in regular contact with family and he plans to visit again next year."

Reconnecting with family has played a pivotal role in the growth of Oscar's sense of identity, confidence and self-worth. Reflecting on this family finding journey, April says, "It has been one of the most positive experiences of Oscar's time in care, and an absolute career highlight for me."





Before commencing Brain Games classes, Susan participated in a study at Sydney University's Brain and Mind Research Centre. "I had an MRI scan and cognitive tests done two years ago, which established what the problems were. Since then, I've been doing Brain Games classes every week and I go home and practice the puzzles I have difficulties with. I also incorporate physical exercise into my daily routine.

“ _____
"Two months ago, I went back to have the same tests done, and they were surprised to find that there was no change in two years. I believe that these classes have been a real contributor to me not deteriorating."
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Memory Innovations Centre instructor, Jacqui describes Susan as highly intelligent and dedicated to supporting others in the group. When Jacqui was looking for a volunteer to help with her Wednesday class, Susan was the obvious choice. Her first-hand experience and empathetic nature made her uniquely suited to this role.

Jacqui says that Susan's contribution to the class is invaluable. "During the class she will help clients who haven't heard or understood something. Susan understands the complexity of dementia and the different ways it presents itself. The clients really enjoy the generous way she assists others and shares her own experiences."

Given her diagnosis at a young age, Susan encourages younger members of her family to be proactive with their brain health. "I tell everyone about Brain Games!" Susan says.

"The Memory Innovations Centre is so successful because of the strong women at the helm. It's amazing what CatholicCare has developed," she says.

Susan is determined to maintain and improve her cognitive functioning as she navigates life. Given her own challenges, Susan's dedication to supporting others is truly commendable.

SUSAN GIVES BACK TO OTHERS WITH DEMENTIA

"My dad, my aunty and my grandmother all had Alzheimer's disease," says Susan who is a participant and volunteer at CatholicCare's Memory Innovations Centre (MIC). "I thought there was a chance I may get Alzheimer's one day, but what I didn't expect was to receive a diagnosis in my 50s. It was a surreal feeling because I felt fine, and I still do. But that's the thing with Alzheimer's. You think you're fine, but the rest of the world knows you're not."

Susan started attending classes at the Memory Innovation Centre over two years ago. "I have gained so much in that time," Susan says. "Every day I use the strategies I've learnt to help my short-term memory. I love the people there. I love the atmosphere. It's a safe place where it's OK not to remember stuff."



A SHARED ZEST FOR LIFE & ADVENTURE

Rain, hail or shine, 82 year old Rudy will never say no to an adventure with his CatholicCare Support Worker, Anthony. With a twinkle in his eye and a radiant smile, Rudy is always ready to go when Anthony arrives at his door. From coastal strolls to waterfront coffees, their bond has grown over many rainy walks and shared adventures.

Rudy is proud of the life that he has lived. His satisfaction with life is evident in his calm and peaceful nature, despite the challenges of ageing and Alzheimer's.

Before migrating to Australia, Rudy worked for the American Government in his home country of the Philippines. "I worked in payroll, collecting wages for soldiers during the Vietnam War," Rudy says. "When I was offered a job in Australia, I moved here with my family. Australia is my home now."

Over the years, Rudy grew accustomed to a busy, active life. Today, as he grapples with memory loss and health challenges, Rudy has not lost the desire to fill his days with activity. "Without Anthony, I would be sitting around at home," Rudy says.

Rudy's son, Peter, notices a considerable difference in his father after his mornings out. "On days when dad isn't active, the side effects of his Alzheimer's are greater. He is more confused and the evenings are a struggle."

Rudy knows that he has hit the jackpot with Anthony as his Support Worker. Their bond transcends the conventional worker-client relationship and has developed into a genuine friendship.

"I come from a manufacturing warehousing background, and this is by far the best job I've ever had," Anthony says. "Instead of spending my days making a company happy, I get to make people happy. To see Rudy's smile when I arrive at his door is so rewarding."

For Rudy's family, it has been a joy to see him engage with the world around him again. "When dad is at home, he struggles to choose what to do, so he will often not do anything," says Peter. "Thanks to Anthony, dad can get out and be active."

Every interaction shared by Rudy and Anthony is marked by mutual respect and warmth. With a shared zest for life, they are a force to be reckoned with.



DAVIKA EMERGES FROM A WEB OF VIOLENCE

Growing up in bustling city of Delhi, Davika never imagined that she would one day call Australia home. Her childhood was humble but happy, with many hours spent sampling street food on the crowded streets with her best friend, Priyanka. As they grew up, the two friends went their separate ways. Davika had settled into life as a single mum in India, and Priyanka had moved to Australia to marry an Australian man. Life, as Davika knew it, changed forever when Priyanka returned to India for a holiday with her husband and her husband's Australian brother, Steve.

"I met Steve when he was holidaying in my hometown and, at first, we were good friends," Davika recalls. "After a while, we fell in love, and he proposed to me in front of my whole family. I applied for a visa and moved to Australia to live with him, along with my two teenage children."

Despite the challenges of adjusting to life in a new country, she was excited about the prospect of life in Australia. "I knew that my kids could get a good education here and I would dream about them achieving whatever they wanted," Davika explains. Her son was diagnosed with cancer at age three, and Davika was hopeful that he would benefit from the medical care in Australia. Davika had managed to

secure employment in Australia, so there were many reasons to be grateful.

Day-by-day, Davika began to see her husband's true colours as his charm wore away. "One day I found out that my Indian money was gone. I asked Steve where it was, and he got angry. He threw his wallet in my face and said my kids probably took it. I felt so scared. I would often go to work with bruises."

CatholicCare Case Worker, Fernanda explains that the abuse was amplified by the fact that Steve's whole family were involved in the violence, including her best friend and sister-in-law Priyanka. "The family were always around making sure that Davika was compliant," Fernanda explains. "Steve's family had found Davika her job, and they all worked there too. So, she was not only being watched and controlled at home but at work too. Steve got Priyanka to apply for Davika's visa, so Priyanka had 100% control over her account. At any time, they could make changes to Davika's application without telling her."

Priyanka, who was studying to be an immigration lawyer, played a key role in keeping Davika compliant. "Priyanka would tell her that if she ended the relationship, she would be deported, there were no

other options. Davika trusted her," Fernanda explains. "When Davika was scared, she would go to her and say, 'I'm so scared, I don't know what to do.' Priyanka would say this is normal behaviour for Australian men, and that her job was simply to please him."

CatholicCare became involved following a referral from her son's school. "Davika's son disclosed his concerns to the school counsellor. The children were worried for their mum, they carried a sense of injustice that someone could treat their mother like that. It was something that they had never seen their father, or any male do before," Fernanda explains.

When Fernanda started working with Davika, she explains that one of the initial goals was for Davika to build her independence and safety. "Davika didn't have her own bank account and she had no control over her phone or email account. This made it very complex to work with her without anyone finding out. I worked with Davika to create a safe email account, a bank account and a safe phone that she left at work. I also got her an SOS device that she kept on her. A huge step in Davika's journey towards independence was gaining her motorbike licence."

In February, Davika decided to leave. She chose to leave at a time when her children were visiting their father in India, because she didn't want to expose them to the situation. Davika stayed with a friend for two weeks, and once her children returned home, they moved into temporary accommodation.

Fernanda supported Davika throughout this process and helped her to get financial assistance. The focus, over the weeks that followed, was to secure a private rental. "I took her to inspections and supported her with applications, but as a single mother with no rental history, she was not having any success," Fernanda explains. "In Davika's mind, whenever her housing application was rejected, it was as if the real estate agent was saying, 'You're not good enough to be able to take those places.'"

She developed depression and Davika was very resistant to getting help for her mental health. There seemed to be a big cultural barrier there and she felt a lot of shame. This put a lot of pressure on me as a worker, knowing we didn't have mental health support services involved."

Fernanda will never forget the day that Davika articulated her plan to end her life. "I received Davika's email at 4pm on a Friday afternoon, which explained her suicide plan. She wrote that she'd arranged for her children to live with their father in India. I knew she was at work at the time, so I immediately called an ambulance, and I contacted her manager and colleagues. This was a huge wakeup call for Davika, and she realised that ending her life wasn't what she wanted."

Fernanda explains that from this day on she entered her own contact details in the housing applications so that she could filter what information was passed onto Davika. "It took 1½ months to secure housing, but she was finally approved for the house she liked most," Fernanda says.

After many months of hard work, Davika and her children eventually had their permanent residency approved. "I accompanied Davika at all of her legal appointments," Fernanda explains. "I helped her to tell her story using a trauma informed approach so that she wasn't retraumatised, and I gathered supporting documentation for the case."

Davika describes Fernanda as her saviour. "She made me feel lighter whenever I was with her and I always felt so free and open to talk," Davika says. "Throughout this whole journey, I felt like I could tell her everything."

Davika's message for other women experiencing violence is to "find CatholicCare and be honest with them. During the process you need to be strong and believe that one day you will start a new life that is free of worry."

CALLUM JUST NEEDED TO KNOW WE WOULDN'T GIVE UP

At 19 years old, with a passion for soccer and a promising career in the army, Callum's life is full of promise. Considered, independent and well rounded, Callum has come a long way since entering Kayla and Josh's care aged 14. "We took in a kid who wasn't able to regulate his emotions and would make spur of the moment, irrational decisions," says CatholicCare foster carer Josh. "We now have an individual who thinks very clearly about what he wants to do with his life. We always knew he was an amazing kid. He just needed someone in his corner."

For Kayla and Josh, their foster care journey began in 2019 when Callum's previous placement broke down. Kayla is Callum's biological sister, and she is 12 years older. A Support Worker had seen the special bond that Kayla and Callum shared at family contact visits, and Kayla's name was put forward as a potential carer for Callum. "Josh and I agreed that we would take him, so we did the courses and Callum has been with us ever since," Kayla says.

"It was a total change of lifestyle for me, but a wonderful one," says Josh. "Welcoming Callum into our home was a very exciting period, but there were also some nerves associated with the 'what ifs.' We just took it day-by-day. When Callum first came to live with us, he had some behavioural issues that we worked on over time. Once Callum realised there was nothing he could do that would make Kayla and I get rid of him, he started settling into the family. The progress he has made since then has been extraordinary, and the journey has been remarkable."

Kayla and Josh have helped Callum to reach his full potential by getting to know him as a unique individual. Over time it became clear that his behaviours were a product of trauma and deeply engrained beliefs about authority figures. "When he first came to us, he was having significant behaviour issues at school and they were all linked to his difficulties with authority and being spoken to in an assertive way," Josh says.



Kayla recalls some of the best conversations with Callum happening cross-legged on the floor. "I learnt not to tell him what to do. I'd talk through what was happening and explain the consequences. I'd work hard to help him understand why he felt the way he did, and we'd talk about what he could do next time to get a different outcome. This worked, and it has been a fulfilling experience to know that we've helped him get to where he is today."

For Josh, his journey as a foster carer has prompted him to reflect on the concept of sacrifice and how society perceives sacrifice as "a bad thing." Yet sacrificing his time, energy and, at times, sleep to become a foster carer has been a deeply meaningful and positive experience. "If I was speaking to someone like me who'd never done this type of thing before, I would say that it is going to be difficult, and you are going to face challenges but it's so worth it. You end up loving the kids as your own. You get to watch them grow, reach milestones and be successful. It's so rewarding knowing that despite all the disadvantages they have faced in their lives, having us as positive role models has helped them through."

Since welcoming Callum into their family, they have taken in two more foster children and they hope for more. "My dream for the future is to have a big family with lots of children, and maybe even grandchildren!" Kayla says.

"Every child needs lots of love," Kayla says, and that is the essence of what Kayla and Josh provide. "At the end of the day, we are opening our home to children in need and giving them our love."

As Callum ventures out into the world and embarks on his career in the army, Kayla and Josh could not be prouder. "I hope that one day he will look back on his life and see how far he has come," Kayla says. "I want him to be proud of himself, because I sure am. He just needed to know he was loved and that we wouldn't give up on him."

TRAIN ADVENTURES GIVE PARTICIPANTS CHOICE & CONTROL

For the day program participants at Disability Futures Waitara, the perfect day out involves a hot coffee and a train adventure. "Many of the participants are fascinated by trains," says Activity Leader, Ashley. "But COVID lockdowns affected their ability to get out into the community and travel on trains."

As life slowly returned to normal following the lockdowns, a few of the program participants and their parents approached the team to suggest the introduction of a train tripping activity. "My daughter, Elizabeth was keen to get back onto trains again and I knew she could benefit from something different to do," says Moira who was one of the parents to suggest the activity.

They pick a station for the day and travel there by train from Waitara. Once they arrive at their destination, they are presented with the places of interest to choose from. "This activity is about bringing choice back to participants," says Area Coordinator, Philip. "Now that life is back to normal, we can diversify the services on offer and let them choose their activities."

"Our first trip was to Lindfield," says Ashley. "It has good wheelchair access and there is a village green nearby with cafes and pretty scenery, so it was a great location for our first trip." The trip to Chatswood was also well-received by participants, with McDonald's being the most popular lunch stop. "Coffee and chips are shared areas of interest!" notes Ashley.

Ashley says that participants have responded very positively to this new activity.

“Families have commented on how wonderful it is to see such happy smiles in the photos,” says Ashley.

“We do the trips fortnightly, and we can see that they are now starting to anticipate the next one.”

For Elizabeth, train tripping has contributed to her overall enjoyment of life. "It's great to see her doing something different that she really loves," says Moira.

When participants and their parents have their voices heard, wonderful things can happen. The words 'choice and control' are bandied about a lot in the disability space, but this story shows how crucial they are to a person's wellbeing and happiness.



MEDIATION LEADS TO SUCCESSFUL NESTING ARRANGEMENT

When Sylvia and Edward decided to separate, they never imagined they would end up in a successful nesting arrangement, where their children stay in the family home and the separated parents move in and out on a rotating basis. It was through mediation with CatholicCare that Sylvia and Edward were able to explore nesting as an option and, ultimately, to devise a parenting agreement to make it happen.

Home was a place of happiness and support for the couple's children, Evie aged 6, and Nicholas aged 10. The children lived next door to both their best friends, and they had a gate built into the fence so they could move between houses as often as they liked. Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) with CatholicCare enabled Sylvia and Edward to come up with an option that involved minimal disruption for their children.

"We spent the first mediation session brainstorming how a nesting arrangement may work," says Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner, Belinda. "The big advantage was that the kids could stay in their own house, which would soften the blow of the separation. It also had the advantage that the parents had 12 months to decide whether they really did want to separate permanently (which would require selling the family home) or whether there was a chance of reconciliation. It was agreed that the parents would rotate between the family home and a studio apartment."

The initial challenge in this case was that studio apartments were not readily available, and the conflict in the family home was increasing. CatholicCare supported Sylvia and Edward to look at how they could live separately under one roof until a suitable apartment became available. Each parent took responsibility for looking after the children on different days and they each took the lead for different extra-curricular activities and household chores.



They were also supported to develop a joint narrative that could be used to explain the situation to their children. "The narrative included telling the children that the separation was not their fault, that they were loved by both parents, and that it was OK for them to feel a range of emotions," says Belinda. "There is a risk for children of this age to fear abandonment and blame themselves for separation, but this was not the case for Evie and Nicholas because we proactively made this narrative for them."

When the parties were able to secure a studio apartment several months later, CatholicCare scheduled a second mediation to allow the parents to work out the logistics of the "nesting" arrangement. The agreement included everything from the cleaning of the house to the stocking of the fridge. "The agreement had to be very specific to avoid arguments," says Belinda. "You want to avoid resentment that can occur when one parent is walking into a house with no milk or muddy floors. Our parenting agreement even mentioned which parent would wash the sheets of which bed."

FDR allowed Sylvia and Edward to separate in a way that was financially viable. Not only are studio apartments more affordable than second houses, but they were also able to avoid the expensive, stressful Court process. "The kids could see that their parents were trying to work things out, and we were able to get solutions pretty quickly," says Belinda. "The alternative may have been years in Court and potentially tens of thousands of dollars wasted."

To the credit of Sylvia and Edward, both parties were very child focused throughout the process, which contributed to the success of the mediation. "Sometimes in a mediation we need to support clients to get over the past and focus on the children, but we didn't need to sell that at all here. Both parents were very much future focused and were thinking about their children the whole time," says Belinda.

As life changes and challenges in their nesting arrangement arise, Sylvia and Edward know that mediation is a process that works for them. "As their kids get older and their needs change, they will probably be back," says Belinda. For Sylvia and Edward, FDR has enabled them to separate in a way that respects and honours the needs of everyone in their household.

NEW SERVICE PROVIDES PEACE OF MIND FOR FAMILIES

For many families at St Gabriel's Castle Hill, which caters for children with additional needs, finding Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) for their children has been a long-standing challenge. Life became a little easier for many St Gabriel's families in May, when CatholicCare opened an OSHC and vacation care service at the school. "It has given parents flexibility in their work arrangements," says Quality Practice Manager, Sarah. "For some parents, it means they can meet the needs of their other children and take them to afternoon sport, knowing that their child who goes to St Gabriel's is safe, secure and comfortable. The service has given families peace of mind."

If you were to walk into St Gabriel's after school care program, Sarah says that it would look like any other OSHC. "There are art stations, dramatic play activities and outdoor equipment. The difference is in how the team understand and support the children. The activities are tailored to the personality, interests and needs of each child," Sarah says. With a ratio of support typically three times higher than a standard OSHC, the staff can adapt and change the program based on the needs of the children on any given day. "Depending on the day they've had at school, some children may need some extra support in settling that day, in which case we will set aside the planned program for those children and focus on helping them feel safe and secure," Sarah says.

CatholicCare made it their mission to open the service after surveys revealed a demand among parents. There were several processes that needed to be worked through, such as registering the service to operate under the Child Care Subsidy scheme. "It was important that parents could access the Child Care Subsidy rather than using their child's NDIS funding, and forgoing other vital supports," Sarah says. It soon became clear that there was a demand for secondary school students to access the service, and enabling this was another process that took two months.

There is no doubt that those months of perseverance were worth it. "It has been so rewarding to see the confidence of the children grow and the families develop their trust in us," says Sarah. "It is a privilege to be able to make life a little easier for these families so they can do what they need to do, knowing that their children are safe. For the high school children, we fought to have them in this space so to see them flourish is very rewarding."

Tracey, whose children attend the vacation care program, describes her experience of the service as incredible for her entire family.

“**The program is exceptionally well run, with a compassionate and skilled staff that ensures every child feels included and cared for,**” she says.

“One of the standout features of this program is its inclusivity towards siblings. Having both of our children participate together is wonderful, as it promotes bonding and understanding between them. This program has provided us with much needed peace of mind during vacation times, knowing that both of our children are in a safe, nurturing and inclusive environment.”

As the service enters its second year, Sarah says that the skill and passion of the staff have been integral to its success. "We have a mixture of people with a disability background and a children's services background, so we are always learning from each other and building on our knowledge. We are very lucky with the team." And, by all accounts, the team are thrilled to be embraced by the St Gabriel's community.



PILOT BABY GROUP EMPOWERS NEW MUMS

When CatholicCare Counsellor, Stefanie became a mother she felt very prepared for the pregnancy, the birth and the first few days as there seemed to be an array of information about these stages. However, she felt like there was a missing piece in the support available for new mums.

"There is plenty of practical information and support during pregnancy and birth, but then mums find themselves home alone with their babies and the flurry of questions begin ... how do I connect with my child? Am I correctly interpreting their needs? How do I play with my baby?" she says.

Determined to fill the gap in support for new mums, Stefanie piloted a four week group in Brookvale this year for mothers and their babies. The aim of the group was to provide a nurturing environment for new mums to strengthen the bond with their baby, while learning about the principles of secure attachment whilst connecting with other mums.

Stefanie explains that a key driver for the group was the need for new mums to build connections. "Since COVID a lot of parents have been speaking about the struggle to connect with community, and we know that isolation can affect their connection with their baby."

According to the National Mental Health Commission post-natal depression affects 16% of new mothers in Australia and can have impacts on an infant's cognitive, behavioural and social development. By arming mothers with a community of other women and skills to connect with their baby, the goal was to empower them to embark on their motherhood journey with confidence.

"Week one of the group was all about infant massage," Stefanie says. "We spoke about connecting with our babies through touch, and the mums got to practice infant massage on their babies. It was a big hit!"

The second week was all about attachment, connecting with baby and recognising their needs. We cover the changes that come with having a baby, particularly when it comes to our relationships and looked at ways we can care for each other and ourselves.

Week three was a popular one as the mothers and babies engaged in sensory play. "We wanted to show parents how easy sensory play can be," Stefanie says. "If you look on social media it can be intimidating to see all the fancy activities that parents are doing, but we wanted to showcase how easy it can be. Sensory play is so important for a baby's development, and you don't have to buy anything specific. We spent the session playing with scarves threaded through balls, playing with mirrors, singing, and reading books."

The goal of the fourth week was to tie everything together. "We made shaker bottles for the babies, and the mums opened up about their journeys from birth to now," Stefanie says.

Kelly, who attended the group with her 7 month old daughter was grateful for the opportunity to share her thoughts and emotions in a safe place. "My child could just crawl around and explore while I took everything in," Kelly says. "Baby massage gave me a new tool to interact with my baby and I appreciated the opportunity to hear from others."

Stefanie says that programs like this are rare. There aren't many groups that take mums through an experiential journey where they can connect with their baby in different ways and have someone available every week to answer questions.

Participants really benefited from the opportunity to normalise the struggles of new parenthood and talk through the emotional ups and downs.

We know now, more than ever before, how crucial those first 2000 days are to a child's development and lifelong wellbeing. Moving forward, Stefanie and her team look forward to empowering more mums to create solid connections and healthy foundations in those deeply challenging and chaotic, but very precious days.





OUR CENTRAL SUPPORTS

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Reviewed our recruitment process, implementing a new recruitment structure and JobAdder platform which has automated key functions, enhancing efficiency and improving the candidate experience. The new structure, which assigns dedicated recruitment specialists to each business unit, has led to quicker placements, higher quality hires, and better alignment with business needs.

Prioritised the development of our middle managers with the launch of capability and resilience training programs focused on crucial conversations, resilience building, effective communication, mental health awareness, and fostering a psychologically safe workplace. Our managers are now better equipped to lead with empathy, maintain high levels of team engagement, and support a resilient and mentally healthy workforce.

Introduced Bob, a new Human Resource Information System (HRIS), which has transformed our HR functions, providing real-time data and insights, and a user-friendly interface for employees. This system has streamlined HR processes, enhances the employee experience, reduces administrative burdens, and allows our People & Culture team to focus on strategic initiatives.

COMMUNICATIONS & ENGAGEMENT

Went live with a new website in January, overhauling the visitor experience with very positive feedback.

Partnered with our ICT team and an external vendor to successfully implement a CRM platform in June, drastically improving our lead management and nurturing processes.

Ensured a visible profile, clear purpose and trusted brand in the community.

Increased community, school and parish engagement opportunities across the Diocese.

In partnership with our Executive Team, we organised our first All Staff Awards Night in October, celebrating the incredible work across our teams.

INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

We moved away from our Managed Service Provider (MSP) to a new provider, dramatically improving service quality, significantly reducing costs, and enforcing contract flexibility.

Implemented Bob, the new HRIS system closely collaborating with our People & Culture and business teams using new delivery methodologies. We successfully delivered the project on time and on budget and employed change management strategies to ensure smooth adoption.

Implemented a state-of-the-art AV solution at Head Office. The solution features intuitive one-touch meeting participation and seamless content sharing, significantly enhancing meeting efficiency and collaboration and receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback from staff and visitors.

SAFEGUARDING

The Safeguarding Office is committed to ensuring that our staff deliver services to the people who seek our support in a safe way.

In September we undertook an all staff survey, to evaluate the current knowledge and awareness about safeguarding. Pleasingly, the results of the survey indicate a strong safeguarding culture within CatholicCare and a good awareness of safeguarding matters.

The Safeguarding Office continued to run training for staff in how to report incidents of concern.

During Elder Abuse Awareness Week in June we worked with our Seniors Services team to share resources and shine a light on this important issue.

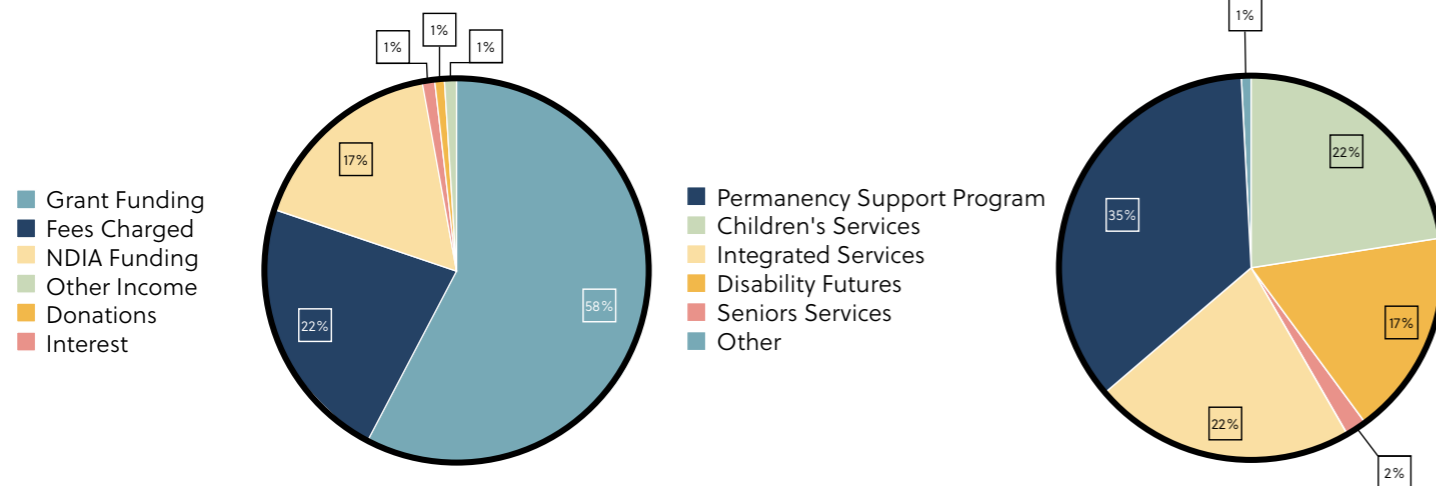
An internal audit was undertaken alongside our Integrated Services programs to ensure compliance with the Catholic National Safeguarding Standards and the Child Safe Standards. As part of this process, it was wonderful to see our respectful and inclusive services, with a strong focus on the safety of children and vulnerable adults in action.

FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT

- CatholicCare experienced another year of significant growth with income increasing by \$10m (or 15%).
- We continue to receive great support from State and Commonwealth Government along with a host of non-Government donors. We remain grateful for their support.
- The Permanency Support Program expanded their existing contract with an additional three care homes in Northern Sydney whilst also undertaking several emergency placements during the year. Unfortunately we continue to struggle to attract new foster carers (a sector wide issue, not unique to CatholicCare) with placement numbers reducing as a consequence.
- Our Integrated Services suite including domestic violence, homelessness, emergency relief and financial counselling programs, benefited from continued Government funding allowing us to operate these much needed community services.
- Support in the form of fundraising donations allowed us to maintain the financial stability of the unfunded drop-in services at Mary Mac's Place in Woy Woy and Dom's Place in Hornsby.
- Our Children's Services operations continued to grow with the expansion of OSHC services late 2023. We also saw stabilised performances in our ELCs.
- Our Disability Futures day programs at Waitara and Brookvale continue to show slow improvement whilst navigating the ongoing challenges of the NDIS. We continued to grow our Supported Independent Living service with the opening of two new sites in Toukley and Point Frederick, bringing our total number of SIL sites to five. The service however continues to operate at a deficit.
- We operated at a small surplus of \$1m for the year, ensuring our financial viability and allowing us to continue with our important work.
- Whilst we continue to manage our costs in this challenging environment, we still recognise the need to also continue to invest in areas that will keep the agency viable in the longer-term. A significant investment was made during the year with the acquisition of a semi-rural property at Wyong on the Central Coast which is being readied to provide accommodation and other supports in our Permanency Support Program and family support operations.

INCOME BY SOURCE

INCOME BY PROGRAM



FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE (000's)

| | 2023/24 | 2022/23 |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| REVENUE | | |
| OPERATING REVENUE | 71,653 | 61,657 |
| OTHER INCOME | 1,523 | 1,958 |
| INTEREST INCOME | 908 | 516 |
| TOTAL REVENUE | \$74,084 | \$64,131 |
| EXPENSES | | |
| STAFF AND AGENCY COSTS | 57,412 | 46,949 |
| PROGRAM AND ACTIVITY COSTS | 4,122 | 3,848 |
| OCCUPANCY COSTS | 1,324 | 828 |
| DEPRECIATION AND AMORTISATION | 3,440 | 3,502 |
| OTHER EXPENSES | 6,781 | 5,827 |
| INTEREST EXPENSES | 266 | 261 |
| TOTAL EXPENSES | \$73,079 | \$60,954 |
| NET SURPLUS/(DEFICIT) | \$1,005 | \$3,177 |

BALANCE SHEET (000's)

| | 2023/24 | 2022/23 |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| TOTAL ASSETS | 33,345 | 31,271 |
| TOTAL LIABILITIES | 19,558 | 18,489 |
| NET ASSETS/TOTAL EQUITY | \$13,787 | \$12,782 |

A full copy of our annual financial report is available on the ACNC website.



WE SERVE IN JUSTICE & LOVE

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