

# Building better lives together



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

*Building better lives since 1930*

## David Scott School inspires young people to achieve

**Sowing the seeds for young people to flourish begins at school. But for some young people experiences of mainstream education can be demoralising.**

In response to the challenge, the Brotherhood has stepped up this year in the education space by establishing a new school in Frankston, in Melbourne's south-east. The school has already enrolled 48 students aged 15 to 19 who have grappled with personal challenges from family violence to bullying and learning difficulties. Others just need a fresh start.

The David Scott School teaches the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), an alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), and employs a dedicated team of teachers, counsellors and youth workers who work in an individualised way with students to overcome their barriers to achievement and develop key skills for life and work.

'Our students can all articulate their goals – while they don't want to go to university, they want to get apprenticeships, enrol in TAFE or go straight into jobs', says principal Catherine Arnold, an award-winning teacher who has long specialised working with disadvantaged high school students.

The key to re-engaging each student's interest in education, she says, is to find the hook. For one 15-year-old boy currently at the school that hook is music – he is an avid guitarist. For another teenager it is cultivating his untapped leadership skills – apart from hitting the books he is now fundraising for a local cancer charity.

'Our students have not been able to experience success in mainstream schooling but we can offer them personalised project-based learning where they can demonstrate their skills and competencies based on strengths. There is a strong vocational basis to our curriculum.'

Catherine Arnold and her team are passionate about building the capability of their students so they can take up mainstream opportunities. 'The school is an extension of the Brotherhood of St Laurence mission', she says.

'If we want our young people to leave school and be ready for the complex challenges of our society then it is our responsibility to equip them with life skills as well as "book



David Scott School Principal  
Catherine Arnold

**'I believe in the potential of all young people'**

skills". I believe in the potential of all young people and our job at the David Scott School, as an initiative of the Brotherhood, is to help provide opportunities to youth who might otherwise miss out.'

Appropriately, the new school is named after a former executive director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, David Scott, who was a nephew of founder Father Gerard Tucker.

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## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Education and training is vital to develop the capacity of people to fully participate in mainstream society, opening pathways so they can build hopeful futures for themselves.

The David Scott School, which we established this year in Frankston for students whose needs were not being fulfilled in traditional school settings, is already full of ambition. I am not surprised to read on these pages that every student enrolled there can articulate their personal goal for the future.

In more than 30 years working with disadvantaged people of all ages, I've found that people, no matter their circumstances, largely share goals to have a home, to connect to family and work. They aspire to belong to a community.

However, in the past three decades or so, the job market has changed markedly and, like all of us, disadvantaged people must negotiate a more complex world.

Long-term unemployment and part-time work have become more commonplace with resulting job insecurity.

I am concerned that Australia's social security arrangements are not in step with these profound shifts. For a single unemployed person, aged 22 or over, the Newstart Allowance is just \$535.60 a fortnight or \$38.25 per day. Younger unemployed people receive an even lower payment.

Such low payments hinder unemployed people's ability to find work – the cost of living is rising, including transport and clothing to attend job interviews. Our social security system should be fair and free of stigma, offering a reliable safety net when people need assistance. Most unemployed people require help for short periods to get back on their feet.



Tony Nicholson

We need to come together to find a fair solution to the challenge of inadequate payments.

I hope you will find much to think about in this edition of *Building better lives together*.

Best wishes,

Tony Nicholson

# Newstart Allowance inadequate

**There is a growing consensus that the payment rate of the Newstart Allowance is inadequate. When unemployment benefits were introduced in Australia in the 1940s they were designed as a short-term payment to support full employment. The rate of payment was lower than that of pensions and tight conditions were attached to them, including a willingness to work.**

Over the past thirty years or so, the labour market has changed dramatically, with a decline in manufacturing, technological and demographic change, and an increase in part-time jobs. The cost of housing and energy has risen sharply, while wages growth has stagnated. Long-term unemployment has also grown, especially for mature-age job seekers who tend to remain unemployed for twice as long as those aged 25–54.

Yet, the base rate of the Newstart Allowance has not increased in real terms since 1994. It was excluded from the increase to pensions in the 2009 budget, and is indexed to prices only, unlike pensions which are indexed to wages. This means that over time the gap between Newstart Allowance and Pensions has widened.

For a single unemployed person, with no children, aged 22 or over, the Newstart Allowance is just \$535.60 a fortnight or \$267.80 per week. If they are renting privately they can also receive Rent Assistance of up to \$132.20 per fortnight but this is only available if their rent is more than \$294.07 a fortnight. This means that they have just \$373.73 per fortnight or just \$186.56 a week to cover all other costs.

Such a low payment undermines the ability of unemployed people to effectively seek work or to live with dignity. Importantly, inadequate income support payments undermine social cohesion, which affects all of us.

# Decades of dedication to the Brotherhood

One of our longstanding volunteers is Val who has been with the Brotherhood since 1979 and works in our Eltham store.

Val joined the Brotherhood when the organisation was seeking volunteers to help establish a community store in Eltham. She saw the role advertised in the local paper and was looking for something new to do as her four children had all reached school age. Val had experience working in retail as she ran her own gift shop before having children. She decided to contribute her valuable skills to help set up the new store.

The original store was situated down a quiet laneway and did not get many customers. The volunteers had to get creative to make it visible. 'The shop was tiny and I mean tiny', Val says. 'Volunteers were kept busy doing whatever we could to get our shop on the map. I remember visiting local businesses, delivering letters suggesting any unsold goods would be very much appreciated.'

In the early days, there were no printed tags and volunteers would cut up pieces of cardboard to attach to garments using safety pins. Val's husband Ray also helped out repairing toys. 'Every little toy that came in the shop that needed fixing I would bring home', says Val.

Val has fond memories of the shop, 'We did have a wonderful cash register. Beautiful old fancy silver model, probably worth a fortune today!' Keeping records was challenging though, 'We had to write every sale in an exercise book. We would ring it up on the



One of Val's achievements included getting an anonymous laneway in Eltham named St Laurence Lane

## Val's tenacity really did put the tiny shop on the map

till. It was far more complicated than what we do now.'

Val's tenacity really did put the tiny shop on the map. Talking with her local councillor in the shop one day they discussed the shop's hidden position and by working with the council Val managed to get the anonymous laneway named St Laurence Lane creating a real piece of Melbourne history.

Eventually the shop moved to better premises away from St Laurence Lane into its present position in Eltham Mall. This meant more customers and donations increased considerably. Val has enjoyed working in the shop over the years and recognises the value it brings

to people's lives, 'They come in and are lonely sometimes. They just need a connection and know they will get it at the Eltham Store. Some of the same people come in week after week, they may buy some little thing but sometimes they will just sit for a chat'.

Of volunteering over the years Val says, 'There is definitely a sense of satisfaction that the end result is actually going to help somebody'. Val still volunteers at the store and says, 'I might make forty years. I have enjoyed it. You meet so many different people and friends over the years'.

To find out how you can volunteer at the Brotherhood go to [bsl.org.au/volunteer](http://bsl.org.au/volunteer)

# Education key to a brighter future

**Overcoming her own struggles with dyslexia, Skye is ensuring her children benefit from the Brotherhood's Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) in order to build a better future for her family.**

Skye, 28, is a single mother caring for her four children. Recent years have been difficult with a family break up and financial stress contributing to Skye's anxiety and depression. Life, however, is improving for the family since daughter Amelia joined HIPPY this year.

'I lost a lot of confidence over the last few years', says Skye. Before joining the program Skye moved to Frankston North, where she had no support or networks. She felt isolated and rarely left the house except to take her children to school.

Times have been hard and keeping everyone properly fed, healthy and warm over the winter is challenging. 'I struggle financially to keep up', says Skye. The only luxury is the internet for her eldest child who needs it for homework but it has been cut off a few times.

Skye found out about HIPPY through her health nurse. It is a fun, free, early-learning program that empowers parents to be their child's first teacher with the support of trained tutors. Skye's own experience at school was very difficult and there was not a lot of support for her. Her children have displayed learning difficulties and she wants to make sure they have a head start. 'I am hoping that my kids won't have to struggle like me', she says.

The family's experience of HIPPY has been rewarding especially with the help of Skye's tutor, Sherrie, who has become a good friend. The children love it and although only

Amelia is enrolled in the program it has become a whole family activity. Sherrie's visits have given Skye someone to talk to and improved her confidence and reading skills. Skye says it has also been a positive distraction for the children from the difficulties the family have faced, 'It has been great. It is a good program, lovely people'.

Skye meets with other HIPPY parents at the Frankston North Community Centre which is helping her to make connections and build support networks. She has also started a budgeting course to help manage the household finances.

She hopes to complete literacy and training courses to enable her to enter the workforce as she wants to show her children that, 'Even if you have dyslexia working is a good thing'.

Skye understands the importance of a good start in education and will continue using ideas she has learned in the program with her younger children too. 'I want them to have a better chance in life. They are all bright in their own little ways'.

To find out more go to [bsl.org.au/services/children-and-families/hippy](http://bsl.org.au/services/children-and-families/hippy)



Being part of HIPPY has benefited the whole family

# How are low income households coping with financial uncertainty?

**Many people are finding it hard to cope financially with rising underemployment, unaffordable housing and increasing energy costs.**

The Brotherhood's Spinning the Plates study is unique in Australia. In 2016, we asked seventy-five households, over a four-month period, how they cope with irregular incomes and the challenges of unexpected expenses. Most were doing it tough.

Jennifer, a single mother with two dependent children, works casually in a school canteen and earns about \$1000 a month during the school term. She relies on Newstart Allowance during school holiday periods. She reported in the first fortnight of the study things were pretty much on track:

'We get paid monthly and buy basics. When we reach the end of month we make ends meet by dividing food in five-week slots: fish, chicken, meats, veg, bread and milk, cereals. If I find that we are running low I miss a meal daily so the children can eat.'

By the third month of the study Jennifer reported that Centrelink had sent a letter saying her child support payments had stopped and the \$6000 still owing to her was cancelled. After a month of calls and visits it was a huge relief that Centrelink's assessment was incorrect. Her payments then resumed and this allowed her to pay \$430 for a special inner sole for her son's shoe.

In the following fortnight Jennifer's car broke down,

which she says 'crippled' her bank balance. Jennifer explained the result of this was more than just financial:

'The impact this has had on our household is depressing. 1. Anger – no money. 2. Can't do anything – no money. 3. No repairs made – no money.'

Yet Jennifer doggedly ended her list on an up note:

'6. My determination to not let this beat us. Teach younger members how to survive, be grateful for what we have, and for each other. 7. Never give up.'

Other households had very similar stories – that it took just one financial shock, often as little as \$20 dollars for an unexpected school excursion, to throw their fortnightly finances out. For many people, these events had far more serious health, work and relationship consequences than the ones Jennifer shared with researchers.

A greater understanding of how low-income households cope with income and expenditure uncertainty will help inform more innovative policies and programs. Through its valuable research and advocacy work the Brotherhood aims to create greater economic security for low-income households and ease their struggle to make ends meet.

Find out more, go to [bsl.org.au/spinningtheplates](http://bsl.org.au/spinningtheplates)

## Thank you

We are extremely proud and honoured to have such generous and loyal supporters of our organisation. You responded generously to our Winter Appeal, exceeding all our expectations.

Our Winter Appeal's theme this year focussed on asylum seekers and showcased the Given the Chance program. The case study featured Iranian asylum seeker, Reza, and his positive experiences in the Given the Chance program with his employer, Perfection Fresh.

Your generosity is enabling us to help many more asylum seekers like Reza.



Reza

# Preventing poverty: Brotherhood's founding principle

Poverty in a prosperous country diminishes us all. Our founder, Father Tucker, recognised prevention and support of those in need as the most effective way to tackle the challenge of poverty in Australia.

'Better to fund and maintain a fence at the top of the hill than ambulances at the bottom of the cliff', he said. The world we live in today is more complex, but 87 years after the Brotherhood was founded amid the Great Depression, this principle continues to guide our work.

Today's economy presents many new risks, and we aim to build the capacity of disadvantaged people to find secure work, for their families to be more resilient and to be able to participate in mainstream society.

Father Tucker was an eye witness to the pre and postwar slums of Melbourne and the conditions poor people were subjected to. Landlords charged rents despite properties being deemed uninhabitable. Children did not have enough food to sustain

themselves and families struggled to stay together amid unemployment. Meanwhile, huge sums were spent on punitive measures such as jails and reformatories. But with sustained effort – including his memorable campaigns – he saw change was possible. 'I see those filthy slums being gradually but surely eliminated. I see those poor youngsters of ours being given the opportunity worthy of the country that gave them birth', he said.

Today, at the Brotherhood, we continue the work Father Tucker began by assisting those most in need, and recognising that, with effort and proper investment, together we can tackle the challenges of poverty and disadvantage in our country.

## Snapshot from the past



Volunteers packing a bike trailer with meals ready to be delivered (circa 1940s - 1950s)



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