

Building better lives together



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Building better lives since 1930

Our programs for young refugees lay the path for a new life in Australia

With hard work, determination and support from the Brotherhood, Michael has embarked on a new life with his family, after fleeing war-torn Syria.

Life there was dangerous and his family tried to escape when war broke out. After a lengthy process to be accepted as refugees, Michael and some of his family arrived in Australia four years ago, when he was 20-years-old. But the war had a devastating impact. 'Everyone went different ways', says Michael, who hasn't seen one of his brothers for over 10 years.

Once settled in Melbourne, he enrolled in an English course as he was determined to pursue his interrupted education. At 13, he had left school to work as a cleaner to support his family, as his father had been injured in an accident. 'I used to work to feed my family', he says. 'I wasn't happy but you need to survive.' Through his English course, he was introduced to the Brotherhood and took part in two of our programs; the ReSource Youth program which works with young refugees and migrants to make decisions about

their employment and education, and our Youth Transition Support Pilot program which helps refugees to get skills for work and make links with employers. Michael set a goal to pursue his dream of becoming an engineer, made valuable connections with an engineering company and learned local skills.

Michael is now studying an Advanced Diploma of Engineering at RMIT University in Melbourne and plans to complete his Bachelor degree. 'I got a high distinction in one subject. I couldn't believe it myself!' he says.

He recognises the important role his experience with the Brotherhood has played in establishing a path to a career and a new life. 'I am a dreamer', he says. 'They are helping me to find the job I want. They do a very good job of helping young people like myself who don't have any idea about the Australian systems of getting work.'



Michael is working towards becoming an engineer after taking part in our programs for young refugees.

As well as studying, Michael works two days a week in a factory. He says his parents are happy knowing their children are safe. 'When I leave my house, they know I am coming back.'

Find out about how the Brotherhood assists refugees and migrants at bsl.org.au/refugees

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

I trained as a social worker, and over my working life, have met thousands of people who are disadvantaged and receiving some form of social support from community agencies. One thing I have always been struck by is that whether we are receiving support or offering support, as people, we do share core human aspirations: the desire for a home, a paid job if capable of working, and a sense of family and connectedness to others. However modest people's circumstances may be, we all yearn to be recognised as having potential and talents to contribute, and above all, to belong somewhere.

Appropriately, this edition of *Building better lives together* takes up the theme of education, skills and youth.

At the Brotherhood, we are acutely aware of the risks all our young people face in a globalised economy that is demanding more of every one of us. As demonstrated by the fading fortunes of the once thriving car manufacturing industry which used to provide reliable opportunities for work in our outer suburbs, the certainties that we counted on have been swept away. New opportunities have emerged, exciting ones if you possess the skills and qualifications the 21st century values, but new risks also loom – especially for the most disadvantaged Australians.

The acquisition of skills and education is now more critical than it was when earlier generations were starting out in the world of work. The hurdles young people face today in acquiring and retaining work – even tertiary graduates who are more prepared – look very different from those negotiated by their parents and grandparents. If you are an early school leaver and lack skills, let alone qualifications, you face many more vulnerabilities in this, one of the most prosperous countries in the world.

We could not provide our life-changing programs without the generosity of loyal supporters in the community.

The Brotherhood's practical efforts highlighted in this edition – through our recently launched school, our Education First Youth Foyers student accommodation for young people facing homelessness, and youth employment programs – are focused on building capability and



Tony Nicholson.

resilience so young people at risk of poverty and exclusion can build good lives for themselves.

From the days of our founder Father Gerard Tucker, who established the Brotherhood in 1930 amid the threat of the Great Depression, our organisation has always strived to tackle the causes of poverty and disadvantage as well as ameliorate its effects. This is a vocation for those at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, but we could not provide our life-changing programs without the generosity of loyal supporters in the community.

On a personal note, after 13 years as Executive Director, I will step down from this role at the end of December. I thank our supporters for being in step with our organisation's goals during my tenure. It has been an honour for me to work with you all towards our aspiration for an Australia free of poverty. Our important work together carries on under my successor, Conny Lenneberg, who will have the privilege of the stewardship of our organisation from next year.

Best wishes,

Tony Nicholson

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Youth Foyers foster path to brighter future

Our Education First Youth Foyers help young people, who cannot live at home, by providing them with a safe place to live and work as they study towards their career. Paul and Jess, who live at the Foyer, are building new lives and friendships together.

Paul, 18, is completing his intermediate year of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) at Kangan Institute and is training to be a barista.

Paul was raised by his grandparents due to his mother's tragic death in a car accident when he was 15 months old. However, by the time Paul reached 12 years of age he says 'it got a bit much' for his grandparents to care for him properly. 'When I was 12 my grandpa was 68', he says. Paul was then placed into residential care followed by four years in a foster family. The family were supportive but Paul lacked independence as it was a very strict environment. Paul knew when he turned 18 he had to move out and it was a scary and uncertain time for him. Paul says, 'I moved here because I was going to be homeless without any money.' He says the support offered by the Foyer means, 'I have a roof over my head and that is what I want.'

Since moving to the Foyer, school is going well for Paul and he plans to continue Senior VCAL. He loves horticulture and has two career pathways he is considering, including becoming a barista. He works on the Crepes for Change food truck, with Jess, and says of their friendship, 'I treat her like my sister. We are really good friends and have a good bond with each other.'

Jess, 21, is studying a Bachelor of Sports and Exercise at Victoria University.

After completing Year 12 in Townsville Jess could only find casual work, and life at home with her mother became difficult. She moved to Melbourne to live with her sister but their relationship started to deteriorate. 'I was really down. I wasn't happy', she explains.

Jess felt lost and isolated in Melbourne and says, 'I was at risk of being homeless.' Since moving into the Foyer, in November 2016, life has changed for the better. The staff offer help with finding work, support with studies and life skills. Jess also works for the Crepes for



Paul and Jess are building new lives.

Change food truck, and is involved in volunteering. The experience has afforded her the opportunity to develop independence and her confidence has, 'grown heaps in the last nine months!' says Jess. 'I have connected more. I am not putting a mask on all the time.' Her relationship with her family is now going 'amazingly well'. Starting university has been Jess' greatest achievement and encouragement from people at the Foyer has helped her. 'I was always looking at going to university but I procrastinated.' Now Jess hopes to design an after-school fitness program for kids. She is looking forward to the future and says, 'The positive thing is they help you find a house when you move out.'

Jess and Paul's experiences at Youth Foyers have enabled their friendships, independence and skills as young adults to grow. 'Look where I am now', smiles Paul. Jess adds that her time there has, 'made me a better person. I am more able to be myself. I love the place.'

Find out about Youth Foyers at bsl.org.au/youthfoyers

Volunteer believes in the joy of giving

Whatever your vocation, Sally Heath believes in the joy of giving. Three years ago, having moved to a new neighbourhood, the publisher and former journalist wanted to get involved in her local community.

What better way, she thought, than to volunteer with the Brotherhood's Breakfast Club. At 7.20am on Thursdays during school terms, Sally arrives at the club, next door to a large public housing estate.

'A nutritious breakfast is a good start to everyone's day, so all the children and any parent who wants breakfast has that opportunity', she says.

Sally is part of a team of volunteers and staff coordinators who ensure local students get a well-rounded meal every weekday before school.

As the executive publisher at Melbourne University Press, Sally also dishes up her love for words. She occasionally reads with the younger children, and enjoys asking the older children about what they are reading at school. 'All the kids and other volunteers often talk about the books we are reading', Sally says.

The club mostly hosts local primary school students. It builds a sense of community, drawing together a mix of people who might not otherwise



By volunteering at the Brotherhood's Breakfast Club Sally is more involved in her community.

get the chance to mingle. High school students often eat breakfast and play with the kids, as do police from the nearby station.

'Volunteering is a valuable thing to do personally and for the community', she says. 'We set up, cook, play games and talk with the kids and parents, clean up and head off to work knowing lots about the lives of the kids in the community.'

Executive Director: leadership transition

After 13 years steering the diverse work of the Brotherhood, Tony Nicholson will step down as Executive Director at the end of the month.

His replacement is Conny Lenneberg, who has 25 years' experience in the development and social justice sector. Until recently, she led World Vision International's development and advocacy programs in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Conny makes Brotherhood history as the first woman to lead the organisation since it was founded by Father Gerard Tucker in 1930. Her experience ranges from field work to leading large teams, and senior executive and board roles in Australia and overseas.

Transition is part of the Brotherhood's 87-year story of evolution and growth. Past leaders include Geoffrey Sambell, David Scott, Peter Hollingworth, Michael Challen and Nic Frances.

Chair of the Brotherhood's Board, Dr Philip Freier, who is Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, said Tony had provided outstanding leadership, and enhanced the organisation's voice for an Australia free of poverty in the best tradition of Father Tucker.

'Tony will always be part of the Brotherhood's broader "family", whatever challenges he takes up in the future', Dr Freier said.

The Board undertook a rigorous search, he said, and found that Conny 'had the leadership skills, knowledge and values to drive the next chapter of the Brotherhood's work.'



The Brotherhood's next Executive Director Conny Lenneberg.

David Scott School plants seeds of change for struggling youth

Brad's life has changed immensely since he began attending the David Scott School and he now feels more optimistic about his future.

When Brad, 18, started at the David Scott School two years ago he had severe anxiety and had experienced relentless bullying at his high school. The circumstances reached a point where Brad lost all confidence in himself and had few social connections. His crippling shyness contributed to a deterioration in his school work as he became too afraid to participate in class. 'I didn't want to ask for help. I didn't want to put my hand up', he explains. Brad never imagined he would complete school and felt hopeless about his future, after only passing two of his subjects in Year 10. 'What do I do?' he lamented at the time. 'The teachers aren't helping me, I am not doing the work. I have no friends to support me.'

Brad was referred to the David Scott School by a family friend and thankfully things have vastly improved for him. He finally received the support that his previous school could not provide. The new school provides a flexible curriculum, supporting students to overcome their barriers to learning. Each class has a teacher and an Education Support Officer. 'It has really helped out a lot. If the teacher is busy, I can go to the Support Officer.'

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 with students to overcome their barriers to achievement. Students access industry training, work experience, and personal development to help complete their schooling while on the path to employment or training.

Brad has made great leaps since joining the David Scott School – he has almost completed Year 12 and is excited about the future. Brad is slowly overcoming his anxiety, has begun to speak up in class discussions and is part of the leadership group at the School. He now feels more optimistic about his future.

'I have come a long way. My dad is proud of me.'

Thanks to this support Brad is enjoying life again, and his self-confidence is growing. 'The David Scott School has made me grow as a person', he reflects. 'It has made me realise I am capable of things I previously



Brad has come a long way since joining the David Scott School.

thought I wasn't able to do.' Brad studies at the school three days a week, undertakes one day of work experience at the Brotherhood's Urban Camps program and spends one day studying for his TAFE certificate in Community Services. He wants to continue studying in the future and is considering working as a counsellor to help young people like himself who have struggled. 'I think I would do well in that field', he says.

By investing in programs such as the David Scott School the Brotherhood is improving the life chances of young people by helping them re-engage with their education and opening doors to brighter futures. Brad says, 'I have no clue where I would be now if I didn't go to the David Scott School.' The School has not only helped Brad with his education, but importantly, he says, 'They give me lessons in life.'

Read more at bsl.org.au/services/young-people/david-scott-school/

Key challenges for students experiencing disadvantage

The Brotherhood has gained first-hand insight into the experiences of school-aged children and young people who are faring poorly in the traditional school system.

Participants in the Brotherhood's youth programs have typically faced a number of challenges to continuing their education.

Many are living in very poor financial circumstances, with mental health issues, disability, learning difficulties and issues with health and addiction being common. Some reside in out-of-home care, live in precarious housing or are experiencing homelessness.

Frequently, they have started disengaging in their primary school years and struggled with the transition to secondary school. They may have barely attended school for a number of years before finally exiting. We see, for example:

- 16-year-olds who have few basic literacy skills attending the David Scott School
- 20-year-olds signing up for our Education First Youth Foyers after experiencing a lifetime of disruption because of family violence, insecure housing and interrupted schooling
- 21-year-olds who have commenced our Youth Transitions Program after years of being disengaged from school and work.

Although the cause of educational disadvantage often lies beyond the school gate, the education system must provide structured interventions and support to enable children and young people to successfully engage with learning.

For some young people the desire to get a job and earn an income may make leaving school attractive. However, the Brotherhood's experience is that most vulnerable young people have been pushed out of school by factors that discouraged their continuation or

Schools are often ill-equipped to offer the high level of support needed to support those who face challenges.

they have failed to get the support they needed to stay at school.

While it is acknowledged that schools work hard to engage and retain more difficult students, we understand that schools are often ill-equipped to offer the high level of support needed to support those who face challenges.

For young people for whom participation in a traditional school environment is no longer viable, there is a scarcity of high-support flexible learning options where they can complete their secondary education.

The Brotherhood recommends that measures to encourage evidence-informed approaches to tackle disadvantage and disengagement be embedded into future reforms.

There are instances of extraordinary work in Victoria and elsewhere that are proving highly effective at supporting young people at risk of disengaging to succeed at school.¹ However, there is an urgent need to document, share and scale up successful approaches² in areas like building teacher capacity, strengthening leadership, and engaging parents and the broader community.

1 See for example McKew, M 2014, *Class act: ending the education wars*, Melbourne University Publishing.

2 Glover, S, Hinz, B & Ross, M 2014, *New approaches to persistent problems in Australian schools: Forum report No. 01/2014*, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne

