

# Building better lives together



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

*Building better lives since 1930*

## Homework Club offers a helping hand

The Brotherhood's Homework Clubs help young people with homework, exam preparation and pathways to further education and employment. Originally from Afghanistan, 19-year-old Awis has been attending our Homework Club for over five years.

Awis did not attend school because of the conflict and unrest in Afghanistan. He says, 'I couldn't afford school. The government didn't let us go.'

Due to the war his family fled Afghanistan and moved to Pakistan when Awis was a young boy. There was little structure in his life and he did not start school until he was much older. The instability of life meant Awis was not motivated to learn and he truanted from school in Pakistan.

In 2000, with hope of creating a better and more stable life for the family, Awis' father arrived in Australia. Eleven years later his father called to say the family's visas were ready. The family of nine were finally reunited.

When Awis, who can now speak three languages, arrived in Australia he could not speak any English. He attended English language school for a year in 2012 then started at Collingwood College in 2013. Due to his experiences in Afghanistan and

Pakistan he found school in Australia difficult. 'I wasn't interested because I wasn't sent to school back in the day, so I was nervous all the time', he says.

As a result, he repeated Year 9 twice. It was then, at 14, that Awis joined our Homework Club which he found out about through a family friend. It has been a source of great stability and support for Awis and he has attended five days a week for five years. 'Since I remember, I have never missed a day.'

Homework Clubs are open during term time to secondary school students and offer the assistance of volunteer specialist tutors. Specific support is provided for students with English as an additional language. Awis says he loves 'the friendly environment and how they welcomed me.' He has found it to be a supportive community where he can see his friends and have some fun. 'In the last five years, I have done a lot of cool stuff', he says.

Awis' commitment to his studies has helped him transition into the



Awis has found the Brotherhood's Homework Club to be a friendly and supportive environment

Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) which focuses on future career pathways. 'VCAL is more practical because I want to become a mechanic. Since I was young, I have loved cars.' Awis has found himself work experience at a local mechanics that one day he hopes to work for.

Awis is thankful for the support he has received from the Brotherhood. 'I do love Homework Club so much and I cannot repay all the tutors and coordinators that helped me a lot over the past five years. They are so supportive.'

The Brotherhood's Homework Clubs are continuing to help young people improve their lives through education.

Visit [bsl.org.au/services/young-people/homework-club/](http://bsl.org.au/services/young-people/homework-club/) to find out how you can get involved in the Homework Club.

**Invest today, be a part of lasting change.**

Visit [bsl.org.au/donate](http://bsl.org.au/donate) to donate online or call us on 1300 DONATE (1300 366 283)

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

As the world contends with the biggest refugee crisis since World War Two, welcoming strangers into our midst is an important value to assert. The Brotherhood of St Laurence has been helping refugees and vulnerable migrants settle in Australia for more than half a century, and we are proud of our inclusive traditions.

The story of refugees in Australia involves people who have to overcome many barriers, from the trauma of being forced out of homelands by conflicts to facing language and cultural hurdles, and having to adapt to new ways of doing things in an adopted country.

In this edition, we focus on the pathways being forged for refugees and asylum seekers by the Brotherhood in local communities, and how employment is critical to people successfully settling and integrating into the mainstream of our society.

We have nurtured many success stories, for example from our Stepping Stones program aimed at aspiring female entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds. Benefiting from mentoring, training and support offered by the program, Asifa from Afghanistan developed a business plan and is now importing and selling handwoven rugs in markets around Melbourne. Her story is particularly resonant because in her country of origin she and her husband ran a thriving carpet business. Amid adversity, she started again from ground level.

The dreams that people like Asifa bring with them are crucial to Australia's success story.

At the Brotherhood, our supporters are committed to our work for an Australia free of poverty and prepared to invest in helping disadvantaged people—including



Tony Nicholson

refugees and asylum seekers—reach their potential, and fulfil their dreams for a better life.

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

Best wishes,

Tony Nicholson

## Snapshot from the past

### The Espresso Bar: conducting outreach work in a casual environment.

In 1962–1963, the European Australian Christian Fellowship (EACF) opened the Espresso Bar and Club Centre. The Espresso Bar provided coffee, companionship, acceptance and recreation for newly arrived migrants.

The legacy of the Espresso Bar lives on today, with the Chancez café at the Epping Hub providing a gathering place for clients, volunteers, staff and the general public.

Top: Espresso Bar manager Johnny Kalisperis serving clients, Espresso Bar opening night, 1963. Photograph: Hamilton Aiken

Bottom: Chancez café at the Epping Hub





# Brotherhood sparks hope for asylum seeker

Reza, 36, fled Iran in 2013 travelling through Malaysia and Indonesia. He spent two months in detention centres before arriving in Australia as an asylum seeker. 'Every day was like a year because you don't know what is going on, what is going to happen to you.'

Leaving Iran was difficult. 'I was forced to leave my family and friends. I left everything back in my country. No one wants to leave family, but sometimes you don't have a choice. You don't know what's in front of you in your life. What you have to face in the future. That is a part of my life', says Reza.

Like many asylum seekers Reza found life in a new country and culture hugely challenging, particularly with no family or networks for support. 'For the past three years I have had a very stressful life', says Reza of his time here.

Although he is a qualified electronic technician, his qualifications are not recognised here and he has experienced many challenges trying to find a job. However, Reza now looks forward to a more positive future thanks to the support of the Brotherhood's Given the Chance program. The program works with businesses to create employment pathways for asylum seekers. Tony Nicholson, Executive Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, says, 'We see employment as being critical to people successfully settling into Australian society.'

In 2016, within two months of joining Given the Chance, Reza secured a role at Perfection Fresh, a produce business that services many supermarket chains across Australia. 'Given the Chance was very quick to find me the job', says Reza.



Reza has made a new life in Australia and with the Brotherhood's help has found employment

He now works full-time in a distribution centre and is a valued staff member. 'Reza has proven to be a bit of an all-rounder. He's a bit of a star and he's fitted into the team so wonderfully', says manager Brett Collins. 'He's not like a boss, he's more like a friend', says Reza about Brett.

Reza has always been determined. As a child, he taught himself English through music, books and American TV shows, 'Thanks Hollywood!' he laughs.

Although he enjoys his current role he misses working as an electronic technician. 'Reza wants to go back and study again in an area he loves', says Brett, 'we will be flexible around hours, and work with Reza to support his studies.'

'It is a big challenge,' says Reza of working and studying, 'but I think I am tough enough to win. I have to be'.

Please support the Brotherhood's Winter Appeal – go to [bsl.org.au/donate](http://bsl.org.au/donate) or call **(03) 9483 1301**.

# Refugees and asylum seekers are pushed to the margins of the labour market

Census data shows that humanitarian visa holders have higher rates of unemployment and lower earnings than other migrant categories. They are often long-term unemployed or left in entry-level, low-paid jobs due to lack of English language skills, unrecognised foreign experience and qualifications.

Asylum seekers typically have fewer social networks than other migrants, and may be dealing with trauma related to their forced migration experiences. Asylum seekers also face complicated and uncertain visa processes, combined with frequently-changing conditions on their service eligibility, work and study permissions.

Our research with refugees and asylum seekers has examined the factors that help or hinder their economic security. Research interviews with participants in the Brotherhood's Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers program have provided valuable insights into their labour market experiences.

## Building knowledge and awareness amidst uncertainty

Asylum seekers have to cope with persistent insecurity. Ebo\*, a man in his mid-30s from Sub-Saharan Africa told us that, as an asylum seeker,

*'[Y]ou are stressed, you are thinking about immigration—we are not safe. Every time you are thinking about immigration it is like a pistol—every time you fear.'*

For people seeking asylum, a job is a step towards security. Eshe, a woman in her late 20s from Sub-Saharan Africa who had found work as a catering assistant, told us,

**Since 2013, 385 asylum seekers have found a job through the program**

*'Work—it's important. That's the only thing that gives me drive, because I feel like [...] I'm starting from zero, you're surrounded with so much uncertainty.'*

Programs such as Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers aim to build Australian labour market 'know-how'. As Tuan, a man in his early 20s from Southern Asia who was working in customer service explained,

*'The best part is that it familiarises us about the nature of jobs in Australia [...] It's the process that matters, the awareness that really matters.'*

Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers assists asylum seekers with job applications, interviews and selection processes, and facilitates workplace inductions. Since the program was launched in 2013, 385 asylum seekers have found a job through the program.

## Research and advocacy needed to ensure sustainability of outcomes

Our research continues to investigate questions of how

place-based employment programs can act as a 'bridge' to the mainstream for new migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. However, while tailored support delivered by local organisations such as the Brotherhood is necessary to assist many individuals, such programs are not sufficient to address the wider obstacles to economic security.

Factors contributing to uncertainty and insecurity for refugees and asylum seekers—such as visa conditions, lack of access to mainstream services, or restrictive recruitment practices—need to be addressed. By providing insights from migrants' lived experiences, Brotherhood research continues to play a critical role in informing policy advocacy and in shaping public opinion.

\* Names of interviewees quoted in this article have been changed.

**John van Kooy, Research and Policy Centre**

For more information about our research and policy work email John at [JvanKooy@bsl.org.au](mailto:JvanKooy@bsl.org.au) or visit [bsl.org.au/knowledge/](http://bsl.org.au/knowledge/)



# Employment program provides a smooth transition to a bright future

One year ago, 22-year-old Kinda was a few weeks from completing her Civil Engineering degree when she had to abandon her studies to escape the war in Syria.

When Kinda arrived in Australia, she looked for ways to integrate into the community and build a social network. She enrolled at RMIT to recommence her degree as her university credits are not recognised in Australia, and through a friend's suggestion, she joined a youth program.

However she found it extremely difficult to find part-time employment to support her studies. Then Kinda met Georgina, the Youth Pathways Coordinator at Banksia Gardens in Broadmeadows. Georgina introduced Kinda to the Youth Transitions Program—a program that helps refugees and vulnerable

migrants, aged 15–25, to get the skills they need for a job, and take part in the community through work, education and sport.

Since joining, Kinda has successfully progressed through the program, completing a leadership camp, work and learning plans, mock interviews, CV writing and placement support which led her to obtain a part-time role assisting with the promotion of the Hume City Hub Cohesion Festival.

'As a new arrival, it was a great opportunity. I have met very good people and made great networks', says Kinda. 'This is my first job in

Australia and I feel very lucky to get this kind of job.'

Georgina says the program is very flexible. 'We meet with young people and link them up with the programs they are interested in. The best thing about the program is that people want to be part of it.'

Kinda is grateful she has the support of the program as she transitions into study and work, and is excited and confident about her future in Australia. 'You can plan for your future here, and achieve what you want because the Australian community is very supportive. This is not a very common thing in Syria. I feel very comfortable and safe.'



Kinda (left) and the Brotherhood's Youth Pathways Coordinator Georgina

# Carpet dreams fly with the help of Stepping Stones

**Asifa is an inspiring woman. She arrived in Australia seven years ago as a refugee fleeing war-torn Afghanistan. During that time Asifa has achieved a Bachelor of Business Studies, gained full-time employment in a bank and set up a Dari language school—all while raising four children. ‘People think I am mad, it is not easy to manage everything’, says Asifa of her busy life.**

Asifa is proud of her Afghan culture and she became concerned when she noticed her children were losing the ability to speak their native Dari. Asifa says, ‘I didn’t want my children or others to lose the language.’ With help from the Brotherhood’s Refugee Action Program, Asifa opened a free Dari language school in her home suburb of Craigieburn. Asifa teaches voluntarily every week. She says her students, ‘Are amazing, I really love working there.’ The program aims to help refugee communities develop skills to create their own independent organisations. Asifa hopes to expand the school and has obtained funding to start a computer literacy class.

Asifa’s contribution to her community does not stop there. ‘I wanted to do something for Afghan women’, she says. Through the Refugee Action Program she learned about Stepping Stones—a program offering business mentoring, training and support to women from refugee, migrant and asylum seeker backgrounds. In 2015 Asifa joined the program to workshop her idea of importing hand-woven rugs to Australia. The rugs are made by women who benefit directly from sales—creating incomes and jobs in Afghanistan. Stepping Stones is supporting Asifa to create a social enterprise that she is passionate about and helping turn her dream into a reality.

Program Coordinator, Helen Sartin says, ‘The outcomes sought aren’t just about the creation of a business but how they can utilise their other skills along the way’. Asifa had experience of the Afghan rug industry. ‘As a child, I made rugs. I went to school, I would make rugs part-time’, she says. Asifa and her husband ran a carpet business in Afghanistan. It is through Stepping Stones’ ongoing mentoring that Asifa has developed her business plan and been able to transfer her entrepreneurial skills to the business environment in Australia. The program has enabled her to secure avenues to sell products at markets around Melbourne. ‘This is a real stepping stone for me’, she says.

Asifa’s real hope is that the money generated will not only create jobs but also improve healthcare for marginalised Afghan women. ‘My dream is actually to use the income to open a maternity clinic for disadvantaged women. Many women give birth at home because they cannot afford to go to a hospital.’

‘Stepping Stones is doing a brilliant job at polishing the ideas of people like me. My dream would have remained a dream without them.’

Visit [bsl.org.au/steppingstones](http://bsl.org.au/steppingstones) to read more about our Stepping Stones program.



Asifa’s business dreams are bringing empowerment and hope to her community here and in Afghanistan



# Putting a face to the refugee experience

There is much misunderstanding in the community about asylum seekers and refugees. The Australian public is heavily divided on the issue. However, young people attending the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Urban Camp program gain a deeper understanding of the issues by casting out stereotypes and putting a face to the refugee experience.

When our Urban Camp students meet children and young people from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds, all politics and negative misconceptions melt away as the human story is brought to light.

These special moments occur at a number of the Brotherhood's programs such as the Breakfast Club. Children attending our programs are from a range of cultural backgrounds and many come from families that arrived in Australia as refugees. Our students are often stunned to learn that many

children have only been here for one month or less.

One of the most powerful activities in the Urban Camp program is our visit to Melbourne Polytechnic's Young Adult Migrant Education Course (YAMEC). Students visit young people aged 15–26 to support them in practicing their English language skills, build confidence and hear stories of resilience and hope. Listening to personal stories creates an opportunity for the students to cultivate empathy and learn from people whose experience may be drastically different from their own.

One student commented after camp that they 'learned that refugees from countries all over the world...all had dreams and ambitions of their own, [and] they also shared a lot of interests with me.'

After meeting other young people from diverse backgrounds the students feel engaged and empowered to advocate for the rights of people seeking asylum, which is key to making social change.

Read about the Brotherhood's work with schools at [bsl.org.au/act/school-engagement-programs/](http://bsl.org.au/act/school-engagement-programs/)



## Interested in becoming a Stepping Stones mentor?

**We are currently seeking enthusiastic women interested in imparting their knowledge and skills to support refugee and migrant women wanting to start small businesses in Australia.**

**Find out more:** [bsl.org.au/steppingstones](http://bsl.org.au/steppingstones)

**Phone:** (03) 9422 5650

**Email:** [mct@bsl.org.au](mailto:mct@bsl.org.au)

# Volunteering opens new worlds for everyone

**Busy grandmother Karolina has been involved with the Brotherhood's Brain Bank program for over five years volunteering her time and expertise to support those in need.**

'Volunteering is important because you give a lot but you get a lot back. It is fantastic, a lot of love and a lot of respect', says Karolina. An avid volunteer for years Karolina made time to help others while raising her own four children. She has also spent time working in the slums of India. Now she uses her years of experience to support and empower women's groups.

Karolina is currently working with an Afghani women's group through the Brotherhood's Brain Bank program. The program's volunteers provide information and advice to refugees and migrants. They offer guidance and encouragement—building relationships that help community members overcome cultural barriers, isolation and a lack of confidence. Karolina meets with the group of refugee women once a month but is also available to help if individual support is needed. Karolina explains she volunteers to help because, 'That could be you or me. We would hope that somebody would help us on our journey to establish a life in a new country. It is not as easy as people think.'

Many people arriving in Australia do not understand their rights or the systems here. Karolina helps the group in a variety of ways including accompanying them to hospital appointments and family court. These experiences can be intimidating for new migrants. Karolina says, 'If you have someone with you it makes things a bit easier. You can feel that you are not all alone in this country.'

Another vital role Karolina plays is simply being there to listen and offer advice to women who may not have anyone else to reach out to. She hears concerns and encourages the women that they are doing their best. 'It is very hard for them, especially if they are on their own. Sometimes all they need is reassurance that they are doing things right.'



Brain Bank volunteer Karolina

Volunteering brings benefits and enrichment to everyone involved. 'When you are a volunteer you learn so much about life. It opens up a whole new world when you embrace multiculturalism', says Karolina. She believes her generation 'took from the community and gave to the community' and she thinks that the younger generation are now catching on to volunteering as well. She says it is, 'Very encouraging. They want to be part of it.'

Last year Karolina took the women and their children on trips to Alexandra, the Dandenong Ranges and the Mornington Peninsula—places they had never been to before. 'They don't have access to those things sometimes,' says Karolina. 'We had fish and chips for lunch at the beach, they thought it was absolutely fantastic.'

Karolina says working with the Afghani Women's group is lots of fun and has been fabulous—it shows that volunteering with the Brotherhood can bring new and enjoyable experiences for everyone.

If you would like to know how you can volunteer at the Brotherhood visit [bsl.org.au/act/volunteer/](https://bsl.org.au/act/volunteer/)



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