



Helping Donna and Shayne make ‘a contribution beyond our caring’

Donna and Shayne’s 23-year-old daughter, Jasmine, has autism and associated mental health and mood problems – frequently experiencing anxiety, particularly when life lacks structure and order.

“Unfortunately, most people don’t understand her challenges,” said Donna. “It’s a real issue.”

Donna and Shayne’s fulltime role as carers to Jasmine saw them nominated for the lived experience reference group for Western Metro Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect – our recently launched resource and support hub for carers of those experiencing mental health or substance misuse issues.

The 2021 Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System recommended that Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect hubs be established to provide free services and a warm and welcoming space to the estimated 60,000 Victorians providing care.

“The hub’s approach is an extension of the way Jesuit Social Services works,” said Leanne Acreman, General Manager – Housing and Complex Needs, whose team has helped lead the establishment of the Western Metro Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect.

“Therefore, our approach is different to suit the needs of this particular group we’re supporting.

“It’s about tailoring a service that meets the needs of individuals, rather than an existing model that people access. It’s the way we treat and respect people and listen to them on that journey.

“It’s not just about what we deliver, it’s how we go about doing that.”

The involvement of those with lived experience of care is a key feature of each hub.

[Continued on Page 3](#)

Trusting relationships underpin mental health support



I'm encouraged that in all seasons, Jesuit Social Services staff, volunteers and supporters continue to accompany and stand in solidarity with people in need.

This is a time of great uncertainty and despair around the world. The senseless loss of life in Israel and Palestine, and the escalating conflict there is devastating. Closer to home, like so many of you, I am deeply disappointed by the outcome of the recent Referendum on a Voice to Parliament. As you may know, Jesuit Social Services advocated strongly for a 'yes' vote and through the people and communities we work with, we saw first-hand the detrimental impact that elements of the campaign had on the wellbeing of many. We will continue to advocate for genuine change so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have every chance to flourish.

These grave moments bring to mind, now more than ever, the importance of reconciliation and peace building; and as we approach the end of the year, and the seasons of Advent and Christmas, the value of taking time to pause and reflect, and to find points of gratitude is reinforced.

This newsletter highlights the importance of ensuring people have access to effective, timely and evidence-informed mental health programs and support as needed. You will read about some of Jesuit Social Services' work in this area, including the new Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect hub to the western metro Melbourne region; and our art therapy workshops for men who have experienced isolation and want to feel a closer connection to culture. Our Support After Suicide program, which will mark its 20th anniversary next year, will shortly launch a program aimed specifically at helping LGBTQIA+ people who are bereaved by suicide.

Our mental health work often supports people who either find it difficult to engage with mainstream services or have been let down by the service system before. Many of these participants are experiencing multiple and complex challenges. Our focus is on building trusting relationships, and by listening to and understanding their unique needs and experiences so we can tailor our responses to their particular concerns. The voice and perspective of the people we work with are essential in developing approaches that make a difference.

I thank you for your ongoing support of our work towards building a just society and wish you and your loved ones a safe and happy Christmas.

Julie M. Edwards

Julie Edwards
CEO, Jesuit Social Services

Helping Donna and Shayne make ‘a contribution beyond our caring’ (continued from Page 1)

Alongside seven other carers, Donna and Shayne attend monthly meetings, where they advise staff on everything from program design to the design of the walls. This ensures that the hub is a welcoming, non-clinical space, providing services which will be genuinely useful to carers.

Though Donna and Shayne aren't users of the service – their involvement in the hub is with its reference group only – they say the hub has given them new value and purpose.

“The thing is, when you're a husband and wife, you look after each other; that's just our responsibility,” said Shayne.

“But when we come here, we're stepping out of that role, and we're looking at how we can help other carers. It's given us the opportunity to contribute beyond our family.”

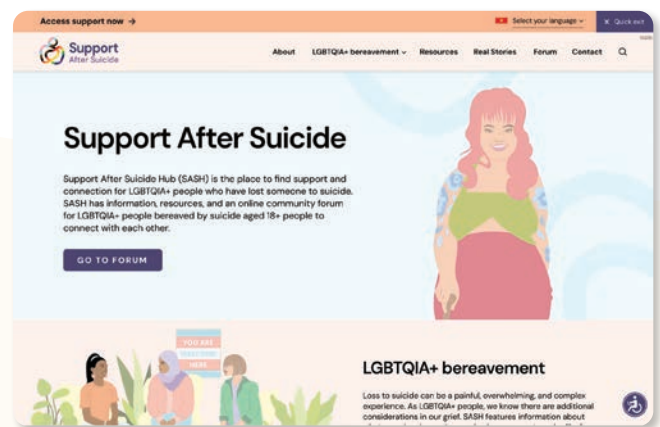
Connecting with someone who gets what it's like

“When I was bereaved by suicide, I was not just grieving the loss of a friend but grieving for all LGBTQIA+ people who face a transphobic and homophobic world each day,” says Immy Money, Project Officer at our new Support After Suicide Hub (SASH). “I was realising just how many in our community are suicide bereaved.”

Four years ago, Support After Suicide's General Manager, Louise Flynn, and Switchboard Victoria's CEO, Joe Ball, came together for the first time as part of broadcaster Joy FM's “Let's Talk About Suicide” podcast. This has become a strong partnership between the two organisations supporting LGBTQIA+ people bereaved by suicide.

“Through our collaboration with Switchboard Victoria, we recognised there was a need to have more support available and saw the opportunity to develop an online support forum for LGBTQIA+ people,” explains Louise.

SASH will be a place for LGBTQIA+ people who have lost a loved one to suicide to find support and connection. SASH will have information, resources, and an online



community forum for members to connect with each other. It will be available nationally.

For the success of the SASH project, it was critical to establish a Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG). “SASH was made by and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people who live with loss by suicide,” explains Immy.

“Through the LEAG's guidance, I hope that the Hub can help people feel connected, heard and seen. I hope that this space will feel like it belongs to those who engage with it.

“It sets a good example for what a peer support forum can do. It's an honour to work with the LGBTQIA+ community. I'm always in awe of our collective resilience and the way we show up for each other.”

SASH launches in December 2023. Find out more at www.sash.org.au.

Evidence shows flexible mental health and wellbeing supports essential



Jesuit Social Services has a decades-long history of working with people to improve their mental health and wellbeing so they can then build healthy social connections and be more engaged in their community. We offer a range of mental health and wellbeing programs, and take pride in our individualised and person-centred approach.

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that demand for high quality, supportive mental health services like ours remains high. The National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that in 2020–2022, 21.5% of people in Australia had a mental health condition. Anxiety was the most common.¹ This was much higher for young people: the study found that 38.8% of people aged 16–24 had a mental health condition. These findings highlight the critical need for mental health support services, particularly for children and young people.

The National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing also found that rates of mental health conditions were much higher among

certain groups. They included LGBTQIA+ people and people who had experienced homelessness. This showed the importance of mental health services that are holistic, and that consider the multiple and complex needs of participants who need support. Jesuit Social Services provides this kind of tailored and targeted support through a variety of our programs.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System highlighted a need for reform of mental health services. It also emphasised the need for a mental health and wellbeing system that supports and recognises the family members, carers and supporters of people living with mental health conditions.² Our programs, particularly the Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect space in Melbourne's west, are designed to provide this support. Other programs of this kind that we offer include Support After Suicide, Connexions and Artful Dodgers Studios.

Our mental health and wellbeing programs are distinctive because they are built on the foundation of respectful relationships, patience, trust and persistence.

Our programs are flexible (offering flexible time frames and locations), include after-hours services, and adopt an approach to support the whole person. These and other features make our programs personalised and effective.

Our approach acknowledges that mental health and wellbeing do not exist in isolation to issues such as homelessness, the availability of social and public housing, housing affordability, income support payments and the cost of living.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). Latest Release: National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing.

² Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (2021). Final Report.

Art classes ‘helped me to feel pride in my culture’

At our Willmot Community Hub in Western Sydney, up to a dozen Indigenous men have been gathering. Here, they paint canvases and Indigenous artifacts, and talk about their lives.

Delander Hayes, an Indigenous woman and coordinator of Jesuit Social Services’ Western Sydney programs, describes the classes as, “a therapeutic space – kind, soft and gentle”.

The classes offer a place where men who have led challenging lives can connect to culture and each other through artmaking. They enjoy the support of an Indigenous facilitator – Delander’s colleague, Leon – and a social worker.

The idea came from the community.

“This is a part of Sydney where a lot of Indigenous people are disconnected from culture and identity in some way. A lot of nations were moved from their country lands to this area and displaced on missions. There are a lot of people from different mobs and tribes living here,” Delander explains.

“People were saying they wanted to connect with community and get better at cultural painting. It was really driven by community.”

People who are isolated from culture and community are likely to have poorer levels of mental health and wellbeing.

“When men have the opportunity to connect to culture and community that’s good for the whole household – it benefits families and children too,” Delander says.

The classes have attracted men who otherwise would not have had such close contact with the Hub.

“We know the families of some of these men but haven’t been able to build deeper relationships, until now. I’ve gotten to know the men better in the last ten months than I have in the past several years.



A men’s art class participant practices painting at the Willmot Community Hub

“Now if things get rough they have a connection to us and an expanded social support network of other Indigenous men,” Delander says.

The men’s art classes are part of a bigger project which aims to connect people to culture and community.

The team has coordinated children’s activities including a number of storytime events, dance workshops, and art activities based on Indigenous cultural stories and knowledge. Children dot-painted a six-metre snake and used tiles to create a rainbow serpent mural. The team has also coordinated dance classes, bush tucker gardening workshops, and women’s art classes.

Delander says there has been a lot of interest and excitement about the range and focus of the programs offered at the Hub, and engagement is high.

“We’ve had people say, ‘This has helped me feel pride in my culture’.”

School work that's out of the box

Ignatius Learning Centre students wrap their hands before boxing class. Teacher Nick Porter describes this as a "beautiful moment".

"It is a calming place – a time to clear their heads and set goals for the session."

The Ignatius Learning Centre is a small Catholic specialist secondary school for boys aged 15–17 who are in contact with the criminal justice system. Jesuit Social Services opened the school in 2021 to help these boys get their lives on track.

For young people who've spent time in detention, staying motivated to go to school and paying attention in class can be a challenge, but out-of-the-box approaches can have a surprising impact.

"Full-time schooling can be a stretch for our students, but we've actually seen a huge improvement in school attendance by offering activities like the boxing classes," Nick says.

Boxing has a range of benefits that might not be appreciated at first. It can increase discipline, focus and self-confidence, and help the boxers to process their emotions.

The idea for the classes came from the students themselves. They participate in a personal development unit, which allows them to pursue a goal outside of work and study as part of the school's curriculum.

Nick worked with students to land on a goal they were passionate about. He says giving students agency in how they spend their time pays off.

"We've got so much more buy-in from the students now and we've noticed it trickle into our literacy and numeracy classes too," Nick says.

"The boxing program teaches attention to detail, discipline and emotional regulation – all qualities that we are starting to see them apply in the classroom in other subjects and with their fellow peers and teachers."

At the Ignatius Learning Centre, teachers weave the students' interests into their classes. They might encourage them to research their favourite boxers or investigate their own boxing statistics.

The classes have even sparked career aspirations.

"A couple of weeks ago, some pro fighters came to train at the same gym where our students attend their classes. Each boxer did a twelve round, three-minute spar – a huge amount of sweat, focus and professionalism. Our boys sat there watching like, 'Oh my God, look at this'. They started to see boxing and coaching as a work-related skill.

"Amazingly, one of our students has now decided he wants to join the amateur boxing circuit, and he's attending the boxing gym multiple times a week, including on the weekend."

Nick is excited to see the impact of these classes go far beyond increased fitness and ability.

"I think the boxing program is the best thing I've been involved with in my one year at the Ignatius Learning Centre," Nick says.



Ignatius Learning Centre students practice drills during weekly boxing class

A reflection on the times by Father Andy Hamilton SJ



Father Andy Hamilton SJ

These have been hard days in a hard world, haven't they? They favour hard people who wear masks and helmets, carry clubs, and lock their purses.

We had hoped that the Referendum on the Indigenous Voice would be a celebration of peace and reconciliation, a gentling of the community. Instead, it was a bitter time with the bitter fruit of rancour and division.

We had hoped that the war in Ukraine with its daily news of bombing, shelling, and people dead or made homeless would soon end. Then came the hard men killing and snatching hostages in Israel, and bombing civilians in Gaza. In the face of such hard news, it is difficult not to harden ourselves, shut out the world, and bolt closed the gates of our castle. We are tempted to withdraw into ourselves.

And yet we do not do this. We allow the suffering and anger of our Indigenous brothers and sisters to reproach us and to touch our own hearts. We imagine the outrage and terror of people fleeing from men with guns, the distress of cowering under a rain of bombs in a block of flats, and the despair when hearing helplessly the crying of children calling out for water that we are prevented from giving them.

Allowing ourselves to feel, opens our hearts in compassion.

In doing this, we encounter people who also carry bruises like our own and do not lose heart. We ask how we might accompany people who are hurt, help open hearts that are closed, plead the cause of those at risk of death and hunger, and soothe the wounds of those who are rejected.

As we come close to those who are denied respect, perhaps we might also glimpse a harder truth: that we must also respect people with whom we differ, listen to people whose opinions we loathe, and reach out to our natural enemies.

In hard times, the path to reconciliation is one of taking off armour, of unclenching fists.

It begins with hope and sees it spread.

Save the date

We're delighted to ask you to save the date for our **2024 Annual Dinner**.

Date: 1st March 2024
Venue: Jim Stynes Grill, MCG

Our annual dinner is a chance to come together around our shared vision of building a just society. Sign up to receive updates at jss.org.au/annual-dinner-2024



"Our community is only as strong as its most vulnerable members."

- Nick, one of our Jesuit Social Services staff

Want to help Jesuit Social Services?

Together we can build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the wellbeing of disadvantaged people, family and communities.

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