

# Women Matter

News from McAuley Community Services for Women



McAuley Community Services for Women  
A ministry of the Sisters of Mercy

## A message from CEO Jocelyn Bignold

The continued Victorian government support of our work supporting women and children escaping family violence is welcome news. This support will enable our 24/7 crisis care to continue and expand. We will also be able to extend our specialist children's work, which responds to the experiences of children in their own right. It will now be available seven days per week.

Our earliest attempts to operate a 24/7 safe house started years ago with a largely volunteer workforce. In those early pioneering efforts, women staying at our safe house had to leave the house at midday and then return at 4pm; the service was operating on a \$55,000 one-off grant. In 2008 we began a 'round the clock' service which has been a continual challenge to fund. But we were determined to keeping it going, as we knew how important it was for women and children leaving violent situations at 3am to arrive at a welcoming safe haven instead of an impersonal hotel room — or to spend the night, as so many have, in a car with their children.

Up until this year our capacity to operate 24/7 has been wholly dependent on our own efforts in fundraising, goodwill and philanthropy. It could not have happened without the generosity of donors and the phenomenal fundraising efforts of our 24/7 Special Event Committee for over 10 years.

I can't say how grateful we are to this committee for their hard work, perseverance and focus. Their commitment and passion have never flagged. They have donated their time, skills and energy, and recruited new supporters. As well, they increased awareness of the issues surrounding family violence and have been wonderful ambassadors for women and children who are in distress, and for the work of McAuley in general.

It is also a tribute to all who have worked so hard over the last decade, whether as staff, donors, Board members or volunteers, to enable this essential work to continue, despite the precarious funding environment. Thank you to all for the amazing support which has helped thousands of women and their children have a chance to heal, rest and recover in a safe environment.



Jocelyn Bignold  
Chief Executive Officer



Images: Some of the 24/7 committee members over the years. Credit: Jewel Chic, Megan Castran.

# Social inclusion:

## what's it all about?

The women supported by McAuley have typically survived, and continue to overcome, many challenging life events. Often they have drifted away from, or lost, family and friendship connections due to trauma and family violence. Being homeless and being stigmatised can be overwhelming. Constantly uprooting your life and making decisions based around immediate safety needs, while trying to become financially independent and get a job, takes its toll and often leads to a deep loneliness and sense of isolation.

Add in — as is the case with many of the women we support — language barriers, physical disabilities, addiction, acquired brain injuries, mental health challenges, and difficulties with literacy — and you will find women who have few connections. Inevitably, the woman's confidence, self worth and purpose have been shattered. Many are simply exhausted. Yet they remain resilient.

From what the women tell us, we know their recovery will involve much more than simply a roof over their head. The women tell us that to recover, and become independent, they need to be part of a community; they need to belong. This is where the concept of 'social inclusion' comes in.

A range of programs and activities are run at McAuley House and are also available to former residents of McAuley House now living in the community. They are designed to rebuild or create connections, friendships and networks, promoting wellbeing and independence as well

as skills that can be used throughout the women's lives.

'We start by looking at what women are interested in: it might be music, sport, or art,' says Shivani, our Social Inclusion Support Worker. 'We ask the women what they see as their strengths, and take it from there, working collaboratively with the case managers.'

The first step may be about feeling good about themselves. Volunteers from the Young Mercy Links program provide 'pampering' sessions, which provide pedicures, massages and facials. The pampering sessions are not only fun; volunteers are connecting with the women, and the women are connecting with each other. Sometimes it's the little things that can make a big difference in someone's life.

A recently developed conversation group facilitated by a volunteer with a social work background, has also been popular by the women. These low-key

chats in the kitchen are more about listening and sharing experiences than heavy topics. They have been especially appreciated by women who are getting ready to transition from McAuley House into the community and may be feeling anxious.

While we offer programs onsite at McAuley House, we also use existing community supports, through partnerships with local services, for example the local fitness centre. This is another way that women can build connections and make new friendships. Many women have begun to attend fitness groups there; initially we help with transport, but where possible women are encouraged to get there independently. Other programs include yoga, English, computers, swimming and art.

The skills developed can lead to some wonderful transformations. One woman who herself used to live at McAuley House returns every week as a volunteer, and with growing confidence, now runs a Zentangle program of mindfulness through art.

We have also partnered with the Western Centre Against Sexual Assault on a pilot program called: 'Gaining Ground' for women who have experienced trauma. It helps women understand some of the impacts of trauma through a psychoeducational component in each session, together with art activities and mindfulness techniques.

“One woman who herself used to live at McAuley House returns every week as a volunteer, and with growing confidence, now runs a Zentangle program of mindfulness through art.”



Image: Our expressive art program.

# Untangling the law:

## our partnership with WEstjustice

**Many women who experience family violence feel trapped and unable to leave because they have been denied access to their own money, and have been saddled with their abuser's debts and fines.**

Economic and financial abuse – often called sexually transmitted debt – is yet another layer of power and control, and affects up to 90% of women seeking help with family violence.

Our partnership with a western suburbs community legal service has been addressing this issue and achieving excellent results in alleviating the financial stresses that burden women who are escaping family violence. In just four months, 23 women have had debts totalling \$65,000 waived, due to the skills, expertise and advocacy of WEstjustice lawyers.

Many women coming to the weekly outreach service had no idea their debts even existed, let alone the extent of them. In the struggle to keep themselves and their children safe and deal with a myriad of other problems, women are frequently overwhelmed. It's common for them to be confused about how to even start to unravel what's been going on; it can be



Image: WEstjustice Principal Lawyer Stephanie Tonkin.

hard to find the energy to locate the right support service.

Our case manager Keren says that the partnership has helped McAuley's workers be more attuned to asking the right questions, and alert to the likelihood of financial problems. 'Many women feel a lot of shame and embarrassment about their debts and find it hard to talk about.

'It's been part of the cycle of violence, and many have been pressured and threatened, signing documents they don't understand; they don't really

have a choice. Frequently documents have actually been forged.'

Westjustice Principal Lawyer Stephanie Tonkin explains: 'Just getting one or two of these debts resolved will not lead to financial security. For many women, there have also been issues with Centrelink, the Office of Housing, and banks.

'Fines and traffic offences which are in the woman's name but have often been racked up by the abuser are another problem. Sometimes personal loans or credit cards have been used to pay fines and other bills, which only complicates things further.'

The circumstances of the family violence make it even more difficult to sort things out, as it may be unsafe or impossible for a woman who has left her home to provide the required documentation and paperwork to 'prove' what they say has happened.

McAuley and WEstjustice are now collaborating further, with Keren spending a day at WEstjustice's Werribee office each week. She is able to assist WEstjustice clients with family violence casework support, such as safety planning and links with other support services.

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## Tamara's story

*Tamara and her husband were married for 17 years and had two children. Tamara's husband was extremely abusive and controlling over Tamara and the family's finances; she wasn't allowed to have friends, a driver's licence or buy clothing. Throughout their marriage, Tamara was forced into slavery, working on her husband's farm from early morning to late evening doing housework and manual labour.*

*After the tragic loss of their youngest son, Tamara's husband refused to pay the funeral expenses and continued to use her Centrelink benefits to fund his gambling habit. Tamara paid for her son's funeral as well as all the family's bills, rent, husband's fines, children's*

*school fees. Her husband took the entire crisis payment they received for their son's death but he still lost the house and farm.*

*Tamara incurred more than \$25,000 in debts for unpaid utility bills, credit cards, a Centrelink debt and a personal loan she used to pay for her son's tombstone.*

*Tamara came into contact with McAuley soon after she separated from her husband. She was skipping meals while living in a safe house to*

*make ends meet. McAuley arranged for her to attend the WEstJustice legal service.*

*In just five hours, WEstjustice sought and obtained a full waiver of Tamara's \$10,000 personal loan thanks to their contact at a major bank. That loan was causing Tamara enormous stress and tipping her into destitution.*

*In just one week WEstJustice also obtained full debt waivers on Tamara's telephone, utilities, other banking and debt collection debts.*

**"Tamara incurred more than \$25,000 in debts for unpaid utility bills, credit cards, a Centrelink debt and a personal loan..."**

# Our family violence services:

January – April 2018



**42 women** and **47 children** supported in our **24/7 safe house**



**12 women** came from a **culturally diverse** background

## IVO

**18 women** were granted an **intervention order**



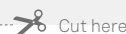
**55 women** and **65 children** were supported by **outreach case management**



**12 children** were aged **under two**

## ICE

**19 women** said the perpetrator had used **ICE**



## Yes, homelessness shouldn't be the safest option

### My details

Title: \_\_\_\_\_ First name: \_\_\_\_\_ Surname: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Suburb: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**I would like to donate** (All donations over \$2 are tax deductible)

\$25  \$65  \$150

\$550  My choice \$ \_\_\_\_\_

### Monthly gift

I would like to donate \$ \_\_\_\_\_ each month (min \$15)

(Charged to credit card on 1st day of each month)

Cheque (Made out to McAuley Community Services for Women)  Visa  MasterCard

Card number:

□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□

Expiry date: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Name on card: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

### Please send me information on:

Workplace Giving  Remembering McAuley in my Will  Becoming a volunteer  Catherine Circle

### Please send to:

McAuley Community Services for Women

Reply Paid 91406, Footscray, Vic 3011

T: 03 9362 8900 E: fundraising@mcauleycsw.org.au

I do not wish to receive information from McAuley Community Services for Women

Thank you for your generosity



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## Good fellows!

Our McAuley Works program has achieved impressive recognition with the awarding of two Victorian government fellowships for research and study. The awards will enable case managers Lorraine and Victoria to travel overseas to learn from best practice in supporting people from disadvantaged communities into sustainable work.

McAuley Works Program Coordinator Justine is thrilled that the skills and dedication of the team-members have been acknowledged in this way. 'It shows that our work is held in high regard. Lorraine and Victoria have done outstanding work with a very disadvantaged and challenging cohort.'

Justine says a recent example of the commitment and patience of her team was in seeing a woman finally start work this month. Despite her skillset the woman, a single mum from outer

Melbourne, just couldn't catch a break – largely because of her cultural background.

'She faced racism, daily vilification and public insults,' says Justine. 'The team's work with her in maintaining her motivation was incredible. They spent many hours, clocked up many miles, and it is her own commitment and their support that helped her succeed eventually.'

As part of her fellowship, later this year Victoria will be travelling to the



Images: Lorraine and Victoria.

United States of America, while Lorraine is heading to the United Kingdom. In each case they will be looking at what's being trialled in diverse and disadvantaged cities and what's considered best practice, bringing fresh and new ideas back to our own workplace. Congratulations Lorraine and Victoria.

Cut here ✂

## Homelessness should never be the safer option.



**Donate today to help women and children have a safer option.**

# Twelve Batmi

Twelve Batmi is a program in which girls approaching the Jewish 'coming-of-age' year work together with their parents to volunteer for a meaningful cause.

Once again we have been fortunate that McAuley is one of the organisations to benefit. A recent activity for girls taking part in Twelve Batmi was to put together Mother's Day gifts for women supported by our services.

Twelve Batmi co-ordinator Moran Dvir said: 'Family violence isn't an easy topic to broach, especially with impressionable twelve year old girls, but we were proud of their mature, thoughtful approach to the afternoon.'

'It was great to hear from Tanya, McAuley's Community and Schools Engagement Officer. We listened to the challenges mums and kids face when they escape violence, and what abuse can look like in its various forms.'

'With a clear picture of who we were helping and why, our families got to work assembling bags of donated gifts. We also made fleecy blankets for young children who had fled home with little or no belongings.'

'We talked about the comfort that the blankets, so lovingly made by our families, would bring to the children as they embarked on their difficult journeys. The girls also wrote beautiful messages showing their empathy for the mums. Families worked in small groups making colourful ribbon wreaths to bring colour and cheer into their lives.'

'Parents who worked alongside their daughters said the experience was

"inspiring, moving and productive" and "helpful, informative and thought provoking". One parent said she was delighted to watch her daughter make the gift bags: 'She was smiling all the time obviously thinking about the joy these gifts would bring to someone in need.'

**"Family violence isn't an easy topic to broach, especially with impressionable twelve year old girls, but we were proud of their mature, thoughtful approach to the afternoon."**


Images: Twelve Batmi participants and their donations from the day.





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