



Women Matter

News from McAuley Community Services for Women

A Mothers' Day reflection from CEO Jocelyn Bignold

'I feel like a mum again,' Kristy* told us last year. Her connection with her young children had been disrupted by extended period of homelessness, two stints in prison, and long-running struggles with addiction. Living at McAuley House Ballarat, she had somewhere safe and welcoming for them to visit at last. And just knowing she could see her kids regularly was giving her extra determination to stay the course in her recovery.

Right now, we're being bombarded with Mothers' Day advertising campaigns. Idealised messages about perfect mothers and 'spoiling' mum on her special day are everywhere. These must be jarring and distressing for many women such as Kristy. After losing contact with their children, some wonder if they can still even call themselves mothers. For them, the sense of loss amongst all the glorification of motherhood takes place can be acutely painful.

Mina*, another woman we're supporting, didn't even know that one of her young children had died unexpectedly after she'd escaped family violence and was sleeping rough. While she is now living at McAuley House Footscray, the anguish of the continuing separation from her surviving child is very real. At last year's McAuley Christmas celebration, the happiness and excitement of the children present was very difficult for Mina to bear; she needed to leave the party early, because seeing other mothers with their children reminded her too much of all that she has lost.

More than half of the women supported by McAuley Houses are mothers. Sometimes, their bonds with their children have been eroded because of experiences of family violence, including situations where children remain with the perpetrator, or by interventions from Child Protection agencies. Accumulated experiences of trauma, homelessness, poverty as well as mental health issues can mean some women's capacity to maintain safety and stability for their children is compromised.



'Mother love' a painting by a child while staying at our crisis accommodation: from 'Smarty pants, kitty or tiger', compiled by Sr Nicole Rotaru

The heartbreak if that loss becomes permanent is not only felt by the mothers; it's likely to have deep and profound consequences for their children as well.

In the leadup to Mother's day, an expert in mother-child bonds and children's experience of family violence, Sr Nicole Rotaru, will be working with some of our clients who are mums – allowing them to give voice to their feelings about their identities as mothers. These sessions, like so many things in this time of coronavirus, will be conducted online.

Many of us will be having very different Mothers' Days this year, missing the usual hugs and get-togethers. It is perhaps a small window into what McAuley mums deal with every day. It's inspiring to know, though, that McAuley's focus on strengthening those powerful bonds can be transformative and help others to heal. On Christmas Eve last year we were contacted by a young mum Terri*, who'd previously lived in McAuley House for many months. She shared a joyful photo of herself hugging her young child, who after a long period of separation would at last be spending Christmas Day with her. She wanted us to know she was free of addiction, on top of her mental health issues, had a job ... and now had the greatest incentive and motivation of all to rebuild her life.

*real names not used



Jocelyn Bignold,
Chief Executive Officer

Looking forward to a post-COVID19 world

As an organisation supporting women who've experienced homelessness and/or family violence, the current health emergency has thrown up unique challenges.

Our approach in working with women and their children is normally about overcoming – not enforcing – isolation.

Building connections, not distance.

Creating a vibrant community hub at our McAuley House Footscray – not locking it down and restricting access.

Yet things haven't all been doom and gloom. New ways of working are being identified. Some of them are opening surprising possibilities, in fact improvements to services that are likely to continue long after the virus is contained.

A psychologist, for example, has been based at McAuley House, funded through the NorthWest Primary Health Network. Her counselling sessions have been crucial in addressing underlying trauma; 80 % of women living there have mental health issues, and more than 40% have experienced childhood or sexual abuse. These vital sessions have continued online, keeping the connection going and ensuring those who are now living in the community are less alone.

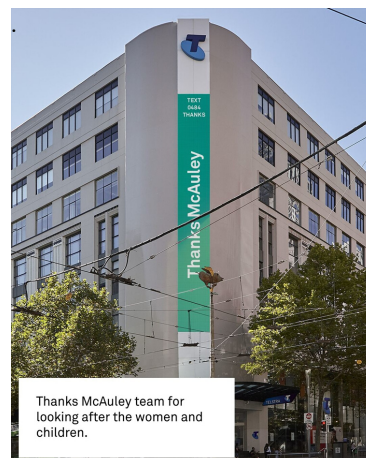
Our volunteer tutoring program was initially suspended when the state of emergency was declared. It was set up to address education gaps and disruption which arise when children move constantly around with their mums to escape family violence. We knew that children were missing weeks or months of schooling and often falling behind. Volunteer tutors worked with the kids at their homes or in refuges to prevent complete disengagement from school.

After pausing the program, we set our mind to how it might continue. Again, online options will come to the rescue. And an added spin-off will be, once set up, the tutoring (and the strong relationship with their tutor) can continue even if the family moves again or settles into a regional area. It wasn't how we initially envisaged the program, but we can now see it being utilised across the state – following the child and their individual needs, not confined to any one location.

Our Skills for Life program has also been challenged by the restrictions on face-to-face contact – especially with a large cohort of women for whom English is not their first language. through, Using Zoom, we've continued to offer meditation, book clubs and reading groups and Bollywood, with plans to expand still further in the coming months.

It would be an overstatement, of course, to say that all has been smooth sailing. We face an ongoing challenge to balance the needs of women living in communal settings, their increased anxieties, their rights to autonomy, and their safety and wellbeing as well as that of our staff. This has required careful monitoring: we have had to make extra provisions for cleaning, and increased staffing costs when anyone has had to self-isolate because of close contact with the virus.

Community generosity and support has been marvellous in helping us meet these extra costs, and we thank you for your ongoing support during this challenging time.



McAuley's name was 'up in lights in the Telstra building in Bourke Street recently; recognition of the fact that our teams' efforts in continuing our essential work in trying times.

Food partnership keeps McAuley kitchens well stocked

Fresh, low-cost and delicious – that’s always been our goal for the meals at McAuley House.

Our Food For Life program means women living in the House can be involved in all aspects of planning and cooking meals. As they have been homeless, in many cases they have been unable to shop for and prepare their own meals for extended periods of time. Sometimes they’ve lost skills and confidence in the kitchen.

Being involved in putting together and sharing meals brings back some of the pleasures and comforts of food, which may have disappeared in the struggle simply to survive.

For this reason, the large and welcoming communal kitchen has always played a central role in the life of the House. It was designed as a place for gathering and celebrations.

At least 16 different nationalities are represented among the House’s residents at any one time, so it’s also seen many multicultural feasts on display as women showcased their own country’s cuisine and shared what traditional foods mean in their culture.

Like so many other aspects of community life, COVID-19 has thrown up a few challenges for the Food For Life program. Social distancing has now made aspects of this program impractical, and our usual food donors had other huge demands on their services.

However Food For Life Co-ordinator Amy Sattler was determined to keep the meal selection and range of available ingredients as fresh, nutritious and appealing as possible, though still affordable.

The solution has been a partnership involving McAuley, Victoria’s Government House, and not-for-profit vegan restaurant Lentil As Anything. Working together has meant the abundance of fresh produce from Government House’s vegetable gardens can be collected by a volunteer from McAuley, then delivered to Lentil As Anything where it is transformed into delectable ready-made meals. Women who choose to independently prepare their own meals in a second kitchen can also make use of the selection available.

We thank both Government House and Lentil as Anything for their generosity.



Pictures: a basket of fresh produce from Government House; ready-to-eat meals prepared by the Lentil As Anything team;; Lentil As Anything crew member loads the meals ready for them to be transported to McAuley House.



Irina is one of 25 women living at McAuley House. Though English isn't her first language, she recently wrote this poem about her journey, her hopes about the future, and her sense of connection with McAuley.



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McAuley Community Services for Women
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