

BUILDING BETTER LIVES TOGETHER

A newsletter for our valued friends and supporters



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

ISSUE 81 December 2020



Above Kerima, a BSL participant, with son Mahir

A family's resilience during the COVID-19 crisis

"My hope for my children is to support them to finish school ... and make a good future for themselves." – Kerima, mum of two boys

In our recent Christmas Appeal, we introduced supporters to Kerima and her family. Since moving to Australia, Kerima's efforts to make a better life for her family have been impeded by isolation, unemployment and then the COVID-19 crisis hit.

Coming to Australia from Ethiopia was hard for her. Her qualifications as a pharmacist weren't recognised, so she couldn't find work. She had no connections or support network and ended up very isolated with two young children at home.

But with the support from the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL), she was able to take charge and make positive changes in her family's life.

"The Brotherhood of St. Laurence supported me...connecting me with specialist care for my children's development ... and their early learning program has helped my boys to develop their fine motor skills and get school ready", says Kerima.

Also through BSL programs, Kerima received **training in career pathways, digital literacy and small business.**

"I learnt how to find a job, how to prepare a resume and how to use my computer. I also completed a small business course."

Through her training, Kerima was delighted to successfully get a job. She became a tutor in one of BSL's early learning programs for children. Now she's directly involved in teaching parents how to prepare their children for school.

And now Kerima has met a diverse

range of people through BSL, she has a large support network.

Through the regular support from BSL, and thanks to the kindness of supporters like you, Kerima and her family have weathered the COVID crisis better than many. And they now have the tools and support they need to continue to build their lives as they emerge from the pandemic.

Unfortunately, as the long-term effects of the coronavirus crisis continue to unfold, many other families will struggle. **That's why this Christmas we hope to raise \$355,000 needed to meet demand for our vital services for children and families and make this a time of restoring hope and rebuilding lives.**

With your support, we can make this Christmas worth celebrating for many more families in Australia!

You can give a special gift this Christmas by visiting bsl.org.au/christmas or call our friendly team on 1300 DONATE.

Donate today and help us meet increased demand for our employment and training services.

Visit
bsl.org.au/donate



Above Executive Director, Conny Lenneberg.

Executive Director Update

Welcome to the December edition of *Building Better Lives Together*. It has been an extraordinary year full of challenges, uncertainty and loss for all Australians, as we've weathered the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic together.

With the thousands of job losses, business closures and the social isolation we have experienced, it's going to be a long road to recovery as we emerge from this devastating health crisis.

As Christmas approaches, it's time for us to start the process of rebuilding and restoring hope in affected communities.

We know that it is the most disadvantaged that always carry the heaviest burden in any crisis ... and

more children and families already doing it tough will be facing the very real risk of falling into deep hardship as the long-term impacts of this crisis continue to unfold.

This Christmas, money raised will go towards our programs supporting children and families to find training and employment pathways; connect with their local communities; and access early learning services for children facing hardship to get better prepared for school.

In this edition, you will read some heart-warming and inspiring stories about some of our program participants that have made positive changes in their lives during such uncertain times.

You will read Kerima's story. A mother of two young children, new to Australia, she has gone from having no employment or support network – and through the help of our training and employment services – to stability for herself and her family.

Also featured is John, who through experiencing severe anxiety and loneliness throughout the year, took advantage of BSL's Aged Cared Outreach Program, that targeted social isolation during the COVID-19 shutdowns.

The announcement of our new *Energy Assistance Program* is also profiled in this edition. This program provides a

range of services, including support for low-income households to reduce their energy bills, and the financial burden on vulnerable Victorians.

Finally, we have shared an inspiring story of two ANZ staff members that demonstrated their passion by advocating for 'employment with social impact' through our partnership program *Given the Chance*.

As we look to the year ahead, our focus at BSL will be working with those people in our community that are facing severe hardship and disadvantage to ensure they have the same opportunities as everyone and the resources and tools to empower them to rebuild their lives.

Now is the time to come together as a community to ensure no child or family is left behind as we begin the journey of recovery.

I want to thank you for your continued support throughout such a difficult year. Without the compassion and commitment of people like you, our work wouldn't be possible. **I wish you all a healthy and happy Christmas with your loved ones.**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Conny Lenneberg".

Warm regards,
Conny Lenneberg

BSL turned 90 on
8 December 2020

Learn about our rich history and how we have been innovating, advocating and empowering for the past 90 years.

Visit bsl.org.au/90 to find out more

BSL is
turning 90



Introducing our new Energy Assistance Program

We are excited to have launched a new service that could help low-income households save money on their energy bills – the *Energy Assistance Program*. The program will provide much needed support to the thousands of households struggling with very high bills and energy poverty following the Victorian lock-down.

The Energy Assistance Program is a free, easy-to-use, independent service, designed to help eligible Victorians save money on their electricity and gas bills. The program also provides advice on other energy issues, such as how to make your home more energy efficient.

The Energy Assistance Program follows on from our very successful 2019 *Your Energy Broker* trial program with a greater range of services on offer.

This program is provided in partnership with Uniting and the Australian Energy Foundation and is supported by the Victorian Government.

Running until August 2021, the program will assist the first 3,000 eligible Victorians with energy issues, including:

- Difficulty paying energy bills



- Assistance with financial hardship
- Difficulty understanding energy bills

The program is more than helpful advice, offering personalised phone or video service to help households take steps towards lowering their bills.

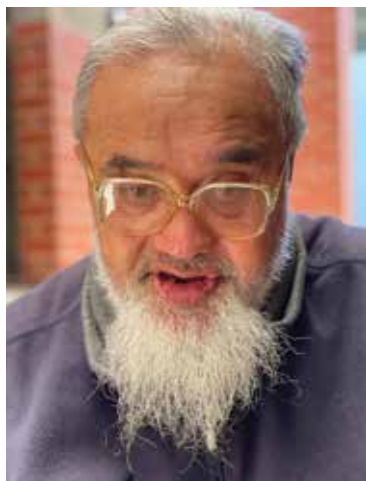
Johanna is an example of just that. She received a bill from her energy provider for \$1,800 in arrears. She was very stressed as she couldn't pay this at the time, and she was unemployed. She called her provider and they were unhelpful. She discovered the Energy Assistance Program and she said "they intervened immediately, and it was sorted in a couple of days". Our program found that her provider had over-charged her and, in the end, she only had to pay \$970 – saving Johanna \$830 by participating in the program.

"If I didn't have that sort of help, I would have had to pay \$1,800, which turned out to be an error. I was so stressed. There should be more programs like the Energy Assistance Program. People aren't aware of their rights."

To find out more about this service or recommend it to someone you know, visit our website or call 1800 830 029 (toll-free).

* In the Your Energy Broker pilot, households that switched to a cheaper electricity offer saved on average \$270. Households that switched both electricity and gas saved on average \$503.

** Program available until 31 August 2021 and is available to the first 3,000 participants who meet the eligibility criteria. View the eligibility <https://www.bsl.org.au/services/energy-assistance/energy-assistance-and-brokerage/>



Friendships and laughter throughout lock-down

John Hoanui has been a long time Coolibah Club member, and now lives in our Independent Living Units in Fitzroy.

John has been a regular at the Coolibah Centre for three years, participating in arts and crafts sessions and enjoying morning tea frequently.

Unfortunately, as a result of COVID-19, our centres, including the Coolibah, temporarily closed which has increased John's feelings of anxiousness.

BSL committed to maintaining delivery of our essential services during the coronavirus crisis and pivoted quickly to an outreach-based program to address social isolation.

At the start of the pandemic, Michelle, John's support worker, would visit him at home and they would play board

games and chat. However, as the lockdown intensified, visits were not permitted. Michelle would keep in touch via telephone. She called John regularly to ensure he was physically well and to direct him to any supports that could help address his feelings of isolation and anxiety.

During this time, John joined several different online Zoom classes run by our support workers, which he attended most days of the week. His favourite activities include Arts and Crafts, Amazing Word Games, Coffee and Chat, and our Google maps session. This session allowed him to revisit some of his childhood memories, including seeing the church where he was baptised many years ago. John reminisced about the church and the community centre his family used to run, and how much it has now changed.

Participating in our online programs has made a significant contribution to John's experience of isolation. He has gotten to know other members quite well, and socialise with them as they share stories, chat and laugh almost daily.

This is what has helped John get through the lockdown, and considers our virtual group like a 'family'.

John is very grateful and appreciative of BSL's support. So much so, that one of his goals for 2021 is to volunteer and give back to the community.

For more information about our Recreation and Social Connections Hubs, visit agedcare.bsl.org.au.



Above Seba Mansour, successful GTC candidate (middle), with Teresa Rulla, Branch Manager at Brimbank Shopping Centre (left) and Rock Hughes, Inclusion Australia ANZ (right).

ANZ staff members support employment with social impact

“It’s not often social and corporate interests intersect, but this is precisely what is happening through this program”
– Conny Lenneberg, BSL Executive Director

As part of a partnership between BSL and ANZ, the *Given the Chance* program actively recruits job seekers who are facing disadvantage, specifically refugees and asylum seekers, into 6-12 month full-time positions.

Earlier this year, we saw two passionate ANZ staff members go above-and-beyond for the program when they were faced with four impressive candidates for the one vacant role.

“After each interview we basically said to each other s/he is the one ... we were delighted with the quality of applicants that we had to choose from”, says Fabian Mazzone, Branch Manager at ANZ Preston.

Although only one role was initially available, ANZ staff members, Fabian and Clare, were so impressed with the candidates that they took it upon themselves to advocate for the creation of three additional roles to accommodate each candidate.

“All four applicants were well prepared for their interview and answered our questions using excellent examples drawing from previous or current employment, showcasing their customer service skills”, says Clare Contsas, Branch Manager at ANZ Northland.

As a result of Fabian and Clare’s drive and initiative, all four individuals were successfully offered a position.

The *Given the Chance* Program was developed in response to employers

who recognised the benefits of diversity in the workforce, but didn’t necessarily have the resources or knowledge to recruit such roles and provide ongoing support once candidates were placed.

BSL plays an active role through training ANZ teams to understand the challenges each candidate faces and articulate the opportunities for the business, which has a flowthrough effect in the community.

BSL also provides candidates with training and interview preparation, and in turn, provides high quality recruits for ANZ. Training focuses on soft skills, including interview preparation, cultural training, reference procurement and building business networks.

Clare Contsas adds, “The interviews were very upbeat, and the applicants did most of the talking... the candidates kept reinforcing how excited and honoured they were to be provided with an opportunity to work at ANZ and had a great outlook on life in general.”

The *Given the Chance* Program has placed over 230 participants into roles at ANZ across various departments since the partnership began in 2006. The program now runs in Victoria, New South Wales and extended to Tasmania in November of this year.

To find out more about this program, please visit: giventhechance.bsl.org.au

**This Christmas,
give families hope for
a brighter future**

Donate today at bsl.org.au/christmas
or call **1300 DONATE**



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