

# JUST IN TIME



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## Let the children come

In Mark's Gospel Jesus displays anger at his disciples' attempts to keep children away from him. He says "Let the children come, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10: 14). Are we, as a nation, falling into the same trap as Jesus' disciples - trying to keep the children away? Of the 6659 asylum seekers currently in Australian immigration detention, 1027 are children, and almost 300 are unaccompanied minors. In this issue of *JUST IN TIME* we examine what happens to these unaccompanied minors and ask how we could better follow Jesus' call to "Let the children come".

Recent riots and outbreaks in immigration detention centres have drawn attention to the challenging conditions experienced by asylum seekers in Australia. As the numbers of asylum seekers in immigration detention increase, the status determination and security checks seem to take longer to complete, and people are left languishing in overcrowded facilities.

Images of detainees scaling detention centre roofs and holding signs that say "please help us" remind us that these people, whilst kept behind barbed wire, still have a voice. Those who are most vulnerable, however, are those whose voices we rarely hear - the children.

Over the past decade, many campaigns have been fought to release children from immigration detention. As a result, alternative forms of detention have been established. Many children end up living in APODs (alternative places of detention) which, while not considered to be the same as standard detention centres, are still enclosed by barbed wire and still do not afford children freedom of movement. These APODs have become increasingly overcrowded, meaning that the services that are supposed to be provided to children - particularly schooling - have fallen by the wayside.

Another alternative to conventional detention is Community Detention, where children are able to leave the barbed wire behind and join the community while they wait for their refugee status to be determined. Of course, supervision and essential services need to be provided for

children in Community Detention, and this is a considerable undertaking. Fortunately, it is an undertaking that the **Jesuit Refugee Service** (JRS) and **Marist Youth Care** (MYC) have been willing to tackle.

Since May 2010 the Associate Director of JRS, Dr Maryanne Loughry rsm, has been working with the Department of Immigration to find and equip a number of houses across Sydney that could accommodate some of the most vulnerable and needy children in detention. JRS, and Loughry herself, have many years of experience working with refugees and meeting their needs as they go through the status determination process. However, JRS needed to team up with another organisation that had expertise in the area of youth work and residential care - and that is where Cate Sydes, the CEO of MYC, came in.

Together Loughry and Sydes - with the resources and support of their respective organisations behind them - make a formidable team. In under a year, the idea of providing residential care for unaccompanied refugee minors within the community became a reality, and already almost thirty children have experienced the care that Loughry and Sydes offer.

We talked to Loughry and Sydes about this program and its affect on the children. Sydes shared the joy that she experiences when she visits these young people and sees how well they are doing at school and in their community interactions.

“Our staff are amazed at how engaged the young people are. It’s hard once you’ve met the kids to say “you’re a queue jumper” or “you should be sent back home”. Send them back home to what? Some of the kids have never even been in their home countries - they’ve been born and raised in refugee camps”.

Sydes believes that it is not just the responsibility of MYC to care for these children, but the responsibility of all Australians. “Millions of people are displaced every day, and if there are 500 kids whose lives we can make a difference to in Australia, then I think it’s our responsibility as human beings to do that. They’re *children*, and they deserve a childhood.”

**“They’re children, and they deserve a childhood.”**

Loughry spoke of her hopes that the Community Detention program might be expanded to take on other vulnerable people in addition to young and unaccompanied children.

“We are very unhappy with people being in detention for a long time. We can all see the effects that that has on people’s mental health”.

Speaking about the recent history of mandatory detention in Australia, Loughry shared her concern that “we’re at risk of repeating the pattern of people being damaged by detention unless some of these alternatives [such as Community Detention] are put into place”.

JRS and MYC could not have made this program a reality without the support and generosity of religious congregations, from whom they have sourced the houses that these refugee children call home. Loughry explained that sometimes there is a hesitation amongst religious leaders to become involved in a program that has the word “detention” in it. But once she explains that the children are free to move and be involved within

the community - they are not guarded or imprisoned - congregations have been happy to offer support.

**“We’re at risk of repeating the pattern of people being damaged by detention unless alternatives are put into place”**

Loughry admits that sometimes it can be difficult working within a system with which she does not always agree. However she explains that “you need to have advocates working at all levels within and outside of the system. JRS supports the end of mandatory detention, but we are also working to see that the current population of detained children are getting better treatment”.

When asked what other people in the religious community might be able to do to support their work, Loughry says “It’s very helpful for people to really try to understand the full policy on asylum seekers [see ‘Facts about refugees’ web link below]. I do think this is an issue that people should take up with their MPs”. Loughry also noted that many religious groups have fantastic services - such as training people in job skills - that could be offered to refugees in the future.

Sydes also pointed out a very generous act by one Sydney congregational school, who donated the football boots left in their lost property to the refugee children. “That’s the sort of thing that a congregational school can do to really make a big difference. Giving those boots was a simple thing for that school to do, but it meant so much to those kids and meant that they could really engage in the community”.

Maryanne Loughry with JRS and Cate Sydes with MYC, along with many other organisations, are offering a better future for children detained in Australia. Take some time to think about how you and your congregation may also be able to help to “let the children come”.

## Web links

### JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE

[www.jrs.org.au](http://www.jrs.org.au)

### MARIST YOUTH CARE

[www.maristyc.com.au](http://www.maristyc.com.au)

### CHILOUT

[www.chilout.org](http://www.chilout.org)

### HOUSE OF WELCOME

[www.houseofwelcome.com.au](http://www.houseofwelcome.com.au)

Phone: (02) 9727 9290

Email: [thow@tpg.com.au](mailto:thow@tpg.com.au)

### FACTS ABOUT REFUGEES

<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bn/sp/AsylumFacts.pdf>

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