

Mary's News *today*



Reaching the Margins

SPRING 2025

Read how:

- You helped bring a love of learning to preschoolers in Timor-Leste
- Thanks to you, Maryorie is growing into a confident student leader
- Margaret's 10 years of dedicated service is making a real difference ... and many more stories about the impact you make possible.

MARY MACKILLOP
today



Welcome to the 2025 Spring edition of Mary's News Today where you can read about the impact of your kind partnership.

Thanks to compassionate supporters like you, we raised close to \$200,000 in our end-of-financial-year fundraising appeal—an incredible result given the current cost-of-living crisis. A heartfelt thank you.

I'd like to update you on Libby, the inspiring grandmother from regional NSW whose story I recently shared. Thanks to your generosity, she received personalised support from our Financial Counselling team to help her get back on her feet.

We asked Libby if she had a message for our wonderful supporters:

"When everything seemed to be falling apart for me due to my rising debts, my Financial Counsellor became more than just a helper, she became a friend. I knew I could trust her. Thank you to everyone at Mary MacKillop Today who gave me hope and helped me breathe again."

We've selected more uplifting stories like Libby's to share with you:

- Fabian in rural Fiji, who is thriving in our economic empowerment program, thanks to you
- Meet Kevin, one of our passionate and dedicated supporters

I hope you enjoy reading about the life-changing impact you make possible through your generous support. Thank you.

With gratitude,

Jane Woolford
Chief Executive Officer

"What a difference a year can make."

Emma is one of our dedicated Financial Counsellors working in the Central West region of NSW. She recently supported Sarah, a client who was struggling to break free from a cycle of debt.

"When I first met Sarah, she was weighed down by financial debt. She lived alone in a rental property outside of town, relying on a disability pension that barely covered her basic needs. Any unexpected expense was enough to send her into crisis. On top of that, Sarah was living with a range of complex health issues that required frequent medical appointments and costly specialist tests.

In our first sessions together, we worked through a budget and secured Government energy vouchers. I arranged a payment-matching plan with her electricity provider—every \$50 fortnightly payment Sarah made was matched. Over 12 months, her electricity debt dropped from \$3,800 to just \$800, thanks to her commitment to the repayments.

Recognising the burden of travelling to out-of-area medical appointments, I also provided Sarah with information about the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme. To her surprise, she qualified for support and was reimbursed for the travel costs. Slowly, her emotional resilience began to grow."

The impact of this support was so meaningful that Sarah asked Emma to share her story: ***"Please tell your other clients to make the call. It's worth it."***

Thanks to generous supporters like you, people like Sarah don't have to walk alone.

Sarah still faces ongoing health and financial challenges - but she now feels more confident navigating support systems and knows where to turn for help. Most of all, she wants others to know that change is possible.

Your kindness to Mary MacKillop Today is creating hope and real change across Australia and beyond. Thank you.



Emma, Financial Counsellor

Inspired by Australia's first saint, Mary MacKillop Today empowers communities in Australia and overseas to realise their dignity through education, health, financial inclusion and livelihoods. All photos by Mary MacKillop Today unless otherwise stated. When necessary, names have been changed for privacy. Some content in this newsletter has been translated. Front Cover: Sera, Project Officer for PSA's Economic Empowerment Project - Fiji.



Mary MacKillop Today acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians of the land, past, present, and emerging, on which our offices are located.



Mary MacKillop Today NGO is accredited by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), responsible for managing Australia's development program. To maintain accreditation, Mary MacKillop Today's systems, policies and processes are rigorously reviewed by the Australian Government. Mary MacKillop Today receives support through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP).



Mary MacKillop Today is a member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and complies with industry standards of good practice, transparency and accountability.



Mary MacKillop Today is a Registered Charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), the national regulator of charities.

"It was an eye-opener for me to see that there were others like me."

Fabian, a 55-year-old man from a remote island in Fiji, has lived with bipolar disorder for most of his life. The stigma surrounding his condition made it difficult for him to share his experiences or feel comfortable venturing far from home.

When Fabian first joined the Pathway to Economic Independence Project training sessions - run by Mary MacKillop Today's local partner, the Psychiatric Survivors Association (PSA) to empower people with psychosocial disabilities - he was very reserved and hardly spoke.

"I was really scared to talk about my illness," he said.

But as he continued attending sessions, Fabian began to feel safe and supported. Over time, he opened up to other participants. Not only did he gain practical skills for financial independence, but he also discovered that he wasn't alone - others were facing similar challenges.

The biggest transformation came during PSA's Start Your Business

training. By the end of the program, Fabian had become the most outspoken participant, eager to share his thoughts and ideas.

"I felt like I could finally be myself and explore new opportunities. The training has given me the confidence to believe that life has more to offer beyond the isolation of my home" he shared.

Fabian has also learned to live without relying on medication, which has made a significant difference in his wellbeing.

His journey from quiet and withdrawn to confident and empowered shows the positive impact of PSA's program. Fabian's story highlights the importance of creating safe, inclusive



spaces for people with psychosocial disabilities - places where stigma is broken down, skills are built, and futures can be reimaged.

Thank you for helping people like Fabian gain the confidence for a brighter future.

The Pathways to Economic Independence Project receives support from the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP).

Standing Up for Respect and Change

The Student Leadership & Citizenship Training Project, delivered in partnership with Fe y Alegría, is building the social and political skills of students and teachers in rural Peru through collaborative learning and community action.

Meet Maryorie, one of our inspiring young participants. Maryorie was invited to take part in her school's *Learning Community for the Practice of Citizenship* (CAP) by her teacher.

"I was chosen because I express myself well and can speak up for my classmates," Maryorie shared.

Joining the CAP has changed how Maryorie sees herself—and her classroom.

"In our class, there were lots of arguments and name calling. It really hurt to see that. But through the CAP, I learned how to help. I started encouraging my classmates not to stay quiet. I told them they could speak to the teacher and ask for help, because staying quiet wouldn't change anything."



The training also helped Maryorie grow in other ways.

"I used to be shy around people I didn't know. But now, I'm learning to communicate better and get along with others."

One of the most powerful aspects of the CAP for Maryorie was how

everyone—students, teachers, principals, and even parents—came together to share their experiences and work toward solutions.

"We all had a voice," she said. **"We listened to each other. It was exciting to be part of that."**

Through the program, Maryorie has also made new friends from other schools.

"That was one of the best parts - meeting other young people like me who care about making things better."

Maryorie's story is a powerful reminder that when young people are given the opportunity to lead, to speak, and to be heard, real change can happen.

Your generous support is making this a reality for students across rural Peru.

I always had a special feeling for people who strive to make a difference

When Patricia first learned about Saint Mary MacKillop - as a child attending a Josephite school - she was immediately drawn in. Mary's story resonated deeply - her courage, her compassion, her commitment to helping those most in need, no matter the cost.

This vision for a just world followed Patricia into adult life, cemented by her strong Catholic faith.

One day, Patricia heard about a young Australian man who had been unjustly imprisoned overseas. With no clear hope of release, and his family beside themselves, Patricia felt a deep call to act.

"Here was a young person full of love, like I was, and like so many—being persecuted for no reason," she recalls. So, she prayed. Every single day, without fail, to Mary. Months passed. And then - against all odds - Patricia turned on the TV to see a story announcing the young man's release.

"I fell to my knees and cried," she says. ***"No one expected it. But I knew in my heart that Saint Mary had heard me. I felt pure joy."***

It was in that moment Patricia truly committed to Mary - not just in prayer, but in action.

"She is the Saint of 'Can Do'," Patricia says simply. ***"And I want to help carry that spirit forward."***

Today, Patricia is proud to share that she has left a gift in her Will to Mary MacKillop Today to help continue the legacy of Saint Mary. Through her bequest, Patricia is honouring the Sisters who shaped her life, the Saint who answered her prayers, and the



Patricia

power of doing good.

If you'd like to include a gift to Mary MacKillop Today in your Will, just like Patricia, please contact April on (02) 8912 2720.

Celebrating 10 Wonderful Years of Margaret at Mary MacKillop Today

We recently celebrated the 10-year work anniversary of our wonderful colleague Margaret Lea - a decade of dedication, warmth, and meaningful impact at Mary MacKillop Today.

Before joining our team, Margaret spent 19 years at Catholic Mission, where she developed a strong commitment to faith-based work. A former colleague introduced her to Mary MacKillop Today, suggesting Margaret could help trial a new idea: inviting parishes to hold fundraising appeals.

"As soon as I came into the office, I felt really welcome. I could see the wonderful work that was happening here," Margaret recalls.

In those early days, Margaret took on the task of calling parishes, building relationships with Parish Priests and Secretaries. Through her warmth and perseverance, trust was built - and over time, many parishes became valued



Margaret

partners in our work, especially around the Feast Day of Saint Mary MacKillop.

When COVID hit, the parish appeals had to be put on hold. But Margaret's commitment never wavered. She found new joy in helping process stamp donations and often shared her amazement at the generosity of people who collect stamps from friends, relatives, or parish communities - giving what they can, however they can.

"My motivation for staying at Mary MacKillop Today is that

I feel I'm making a difference, even in a small way," Margaret says. ***"And I love coming into the office to see my friendly work colleagues. They constantly inspire me with their wisdom, humour and energy."***

Outside of work, Margaret enjoys reading, walking, and letter writing—but nothing compares to the joy of her 16-month-old great-granddaughter, who keeps her smiling and amazed with every visit.

Margaret's gentle dedication and steadfast presence have been a true gift to Mary MacKillop Today.

Thank you, Margaret, for 10 wonderful years - we're so lucky to have you as part of our story.

If you wish to donate stamps, please send them to:

Mary MacKillop Today, PO Box 1646, North Sydney NSW 2059

Every stamp—used or unused—helps us raise vital funds for our programs. Thank you for your support.

"Saint Mary's courage lit a spark in me - one that has never faded."

At 95 years old, Kevin has lived a life devoted to service and a deep commitment to education. From his early days of attending a Marist Brothers school, to becoming a teaching Marist Brother, and later a respected school principal, Kevin has lived by the values of compassion and justice – values he sees reflected in the work of Saint Mary MacKillop.

Kevin first encountered the story of Mary while in novitiate of the Marist Brothers.

"I was very taken with the work of Saint Mary and the difficulties she overcame in her life," he recalls. "I thought she was a strong and inspiring woman."

During his time as a Marist Brother, Kevin worked closely with the Sisters of Saint Joseph, preparing children for their First Holy Communion.

"They're a phenomenal bunch of women," he shared. "They really do such incredible work in their communities."

When Kevin made the decision to leave the Marist Brothers to channel his calling into teaching at a Catholic boy's high school, the values inspired by Mary and the Sisters remained at the heart of his work.

That admiration grew even deeper when Kevin had five children—all of whom were taught by the Sisters of Saint



Joseph. ***"I'm very proud of all of my children," he says. "And I believe that a lot of their success in life is down to the great influence of the Sisters in their early years."***

When Kevin learned about Mary MacKillop Today and its mission in continuing the work of Mary and the Sisters, the decision to support it was easy. ***"I was inspired by the work of the Sisters early on, and I wished to contribute to their***

mission in some way," he explains. "When I found out about Mary MacKillop Today, I saw it as a continuation of everything I admired. I decided to become a monthly donor and to commit to giving as much as I could, whenever I could."

Now in retirement, Kevin remains a passionate advocate for giving back. ***"Mary MacKillop Today is an Australian organisation doing fantastic work," he says passionately. "You've just got to support them!"***

By making regular, monthly donations like Kevin, you can help bring the gift of education to people in Australia and around the world.

If you would like to join our 'Independent Spirits' family of monthly supporters, helping to create a better world, please visit <https://www.marymackilloptoday.org.au/how-you-can-help/give-regularly/>. Your generosity will help to transform lives.

Small Grants, Big Impact: Communities Taking Action

Each year, Mary MacKillop Today's Highways and Byways Small Grants program supports grassroots organisations working to overcome disadvantage and exclusion - especially in rural and regional Australia.

This year's theme, *'Embracing and Valuing Diversity in Nature and Community'*, invited projects that care for the environment while strengthening social connections. From restoring ecosystems to tackling social isolation, we were inspired by the 109 applications received from across the country.

A special consultative committee - made up of Highways and Byways volunteers along with Mary MacKillop Today



staff and Board members - reviewed the submissions. We're delighted to announce that 29 diverse projects have been awarded grants.

One standout is *The Wild Weed Weavers* in Western Australia—a creative initiative that removes invasive weeds from local reserves

and transforms them into handcrafted objects. This unique project brings people together through environmental care, cultural learning, and the therapeutic art of weaving.

Another wonderful example is the *Brunkunga Fire-Resilient Garden* in South Australia, which will revitalise the town's entrance as a vibrant hub of sustainability and safety. Featuring fire-resistant native plants, metal sculptures, and educational signage, the garden will offer a hands-on, accessible approach to bushfire resilience.

Thanks to your support, communities across Australia are leading powerful local response to climate change - bringing people together to care for the land and for each other.

Travels through Fiji – a field trip update

Our International Programs team recently travelled to Fiji to visit our local partners as part of our annual monitoring trip - to see firsthand the impact of the work you make possible through your generous donations.

As part of the field visit, the team spent time with our partners at *Building Innate Resilience Through Hearts (BIRTH) Fiji* and met with participants from the *Community Strengthening Program to Prevent Violence* – a powerful initiative we've supported throughout its pilot phase over the past 12 months.

This community-led program is making a real difference by raising awareness and driving action to prevent domestic violence, particularly its impact on vulnerable groups such as women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly.

Through targeted workshops and counselling sessions, the program addresses key topics including positive parenting, substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health—empowering individuals and strengthening communities from within.

“As a single mother, I used to be quite strict with my daughters.



Yesenia, Charlotte and Caitlin from MMT with participants of BIRTH Fiji

The positive parenting workshops made me realize so many things – I now know that I need to listen to my children,” one of the participants shared.

Following a strong first year, we're now working closely with BIRTH Fiji to design a new three-year project cycle that will expand this important work and reach even more people.

Together, with your kind support, we

are building safer, stronger, and more resilient communities across Fiji.

STAY CONNECTED

- L5, 12 Mount Street North Sydney NSW 2060
- 02 8912 2777 9am – 5pm AEST Mon-Fri
- hello@marymackilloptoday.org.au
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