

# Dignity and Respect: Stories from St John's Care

Sue Jordan

St John's Care, Reid

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**Notes on the text**

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With thanks to all the people and  
parishes who support St John's Care



**About St John's Care**

St John's Care (SJC) operates as an emergency relief centre providing food assistance and financial assistance in central Canberra, or simply a friendly cuppa and a chat. SJC was established in 1991 and it continues to operate as a parish-based organisation in partnership with Anglicare. It is supported by other parishes, businesses, service clubs, community organisations and the general community.

The aim of SJC is to foster a loving, non-judgemental, respectful and compassionate atmosphere where anyone, regardless of race or creed, can find support to meet their needs.

You can find out more about SJC on the web at [www.stjohnscanberra.org/#!st-johns-care/ckpg](http://www.stjohnscanberra.org/#!st-johns-care/ckpg) or follow SJC on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/StJohnsCare](http://www.facebook.com/StJohnsCare).

**How you can help**

Interested in donating? Contact SJC using the details below or at the back of this book, or you can give online through

Hands Across Canberra Foundation: [www.handsacrosscanberra.org.au/donate/find-an-organisation/service/st-johns-care/](http://www.handsacrosscanberra.org.au/donate/find-an-organisation/service/st-johns-care/).

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## **Editor's note**

Sue Jordan's stories about St John's Care (SJC) are well-known to Anglican churchgoers in Canberra. For over seven years, Sue wrote a weekly story about working with people coming into SJC for support, for food and for someone to share their worries with. Deranie Jackson, who had read many of the stories in her Holy Covenant parish bulletin, came up with the idea of putting some of them together in a book, as a way of more permanently capturing their message. I approached Sue about making this my major project for my editing studies at the University of Canberra. Sue agreed, and provided me with all the stories she had written during her recent years as director of SJC.

The collection of stories here is a very small, edited selection of the stories Sue wrote. From around 350 pieces, this selection includes just over 40 stories. The stories that have been chosen are those that best convey the varied and complicated reasons that bring people to St John's Care, and the connection they make with SJC, whether just for a single morning or over a longer period of time. While the main focus of the stories has always been the people who come to seek help, they also tell the reader about the myriad of ways in which SJC offers support, and many of the chosen stories strongly reflect the atmosphere in which this help is offered. The stories have been selected to display the full reality of St John's Care, made up as it is of clients, staff and volunteers, its location, services and events and its connections with the wider Canberra community, all joined together by a philosophy that is reflected in the title of this volume.

The stories have been organised into themes that represent the way SJC works, the sense that Sue conveys of the challenges facing her clients, and how SJC responds. Some changes have been made to the stories so that the individual pieces, originally written to stand alone, make sense as a complete volume.

As the stories appeared Sunday after Sunday, each would finish with a wish list—usually groceries in short supply that week, but they sometimes included less tangible items. You'll find some wish lists in this collection; a reminder of the context in which the stories were first written and the realities of the SJC world.

Justine McNamara  
October 2015



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## **Dignity and love**

*The most important thing we have done is to listen to them and hear their story, and to show them that there are people in this world who really care about them.*

*Wish list: Please try to understand how hard life is for some people. School supplies, poppers and small tubs of fruit.*

## **26 April 2009**

Last Friday was one of the most special days I have had in this job. We were extremely busy at St John's Care. We saw twenty-two clients and were down a volunteer, so I got to do a stint on the floor (which I really love but quite often I am stuck away in the office).

I saw a couple with their daughter who was twenty-two months old. They were very young, but a really loving couple who had never been to us before but they were desperate. They had been staying in Sydney for the last couple of weeks and were totally broke—no money and no food in the house.

The reason for the Sydney trip—their young daughter has cerebral palsy. They were given the opportunity of going to Sydney and getting some Botox treatment for her, which might help release her muscles. In her case, it had worked so well that she can now wear callipers on her small legs and for the first time that day, they had actually seen her playing with blocks. Before the treatment, her hand had just been a claw—she had never been able to grasp the blocks.

So there I was with this most beautiful young couple. They were so loving with their little girl, and so happy with the advances that had been made, but they had spent every cent that they owned on getting to and staying in Sydney. The young man assured me that he will get some of the accommodation costs back from the ACT Government, but at the moment they had nothing.

You folks were the most generous people I have ever met—this couple will not have to go shopping for quite a while. We were able to supply nappies and baby food, fresh fruit and vegies, and all the other staples like pasta, pasta sauce, cereal and long-life milk, rice, soup, tinned fish, tinned meat, tinned fruit, and even some treats for the little girl.

It is a bit unfair that you provide the goodies and I get to give them away, but without you that lovely young couple would have had a horrible few days. Thank you so much, everything you give is appreciated.

## **6 June 2010**

Sometimes you don't realise how hard life is for some people.

Today we saw a young woman, aged twenty-two, who has two children aged three and four. She is pregnant and is expecting her third child in ten weeks time. Her partner has been psychologically abusing her for the last two years. She had had enough—she couldn't take it any longer. For her and the two girls, life has been a misery.

So what can she do? She has moved out of the family home. Was it really a family home with that sort of abuse going on, but it was a house, a roof over her head. As so often happens in cases of domestic violence, the victim has to leave the house to end the abuse. So he is living in the house while she and the children are homeless.

She stayed with an aunt for a while, but that caused a lot of problems. The ex-partner kept coming around and harassing her, demanding money. At twenty-two, pregnant and with two little children, you don't need to put up with that sort of pressure.

Thankfully her mother-in-law is happy to have our client and the children at her place, but it is going to be very cramped, as she only has a two bedroom house. So our mum and the two children will occupy one bedroom in the house and of course soon that will be three children. She has her name on the priority public housing list but it will be some time before she is allocated a house.

We were able to help out with lots of food and bedding. In the end, I drove her to the house with all the goodies we had given her. She would never have been able to manage on the bus. I

asked her why she needed the help of her mother-in-law, why not her own family. The mother-in-law is really the first family she has had—this young woman's father was addicted to drugs and her mother was an alcoholic. Neither of them showed much love to her and they have never been able to help her.

It is such an unfair playing field out there—you really don't know what so many members of our community have to put up with. She was a lovely young woman, in control of really difficult circumstances. When we had finished unloading everything, she said that she felt like crying, so I immediately gave her a hug. Sadly, she said it was a long time since she had had one of those.

### **28 November 2010**

Because of our surroundings, the church and the beautiful gardens, St John's Care is a place of peace and tranquillity, but most importantly it is a place of love. Yesterday I was sitting with one of the clients, listening to her story. She has had a hard life and is one of those unfortunate people that trouble seems to follow around. She just seems to solve one problem and another arises.

She occasionally has to come to us for help to feed her family. This time she had run out of things for the school lunches. Yesterday she told me that she would like to come every day. SJC is the one place where she can find a few minutes peace in her life, where she is treated with dignity and respect by all the volunteers who work here—they always make her feel important. As you listen to our clients' stories, you realise how special they are, and they actually become a part of the SJC family. They trust us and that is so important.

### **3 June 2012**

On Friday I met with a most lovely family, who are in the most dire straits that I have ever encountered.

They have three children, aged ten, eight and two. Two months ago everything was pretty good for this family. Dad was working, mum was a stay-at-home mum, they rented a very modest home in an outer Belconnen suburb for \$450 per week, which was achievable, and they managed. Nothing to spare but life was okay.

Four weeks ago, the breadwinner was retrenched. A moderate payout but nothing more. He is now on Newstart Allowance and she is on Parenting Payment. The total payment for the family is \$930 per fortnight. The problem—the private rental house—rent \$450 per week. This leaves the family \$30 per fortnight to live on for a family of two adults and three children. This, of course, is not possible.

Sitting and talking with the family I realised that there were issues that needed to be resolved to help them survive their crisis. The dad was really upset about the family circumstances and was very emotional about where his family is at the moment. They have some tax issues: basically a failure to submit tax returns over a few years is now affecting their family payments.

This family had never had to ask for help before, and they were so embarrassed about it, but I saw it as a problem that needed to be resolved very quickly or this family would be living on the streets.

SJC is a quiet achiever. We don't get any ACT Government funding but we just get things done. For this family we have achieved an amazing amount in a very short time. We haven't resolved everything, but we were able to:

- give them enough food to last for many days
- pay a week's rent to give them a bit of breathing space
- organise for them to meet with a tax agent who is going to help them on a pro bono basis
- write a support letter for Housing ACT
- connect them with the Sustaining Tenancy Program.

But the most important thing we have done is to listen to them and hear their story, and to show them that there are people in this world who really care about them. The hug I received from this young man today was the most powerful reward I have received in the last five years.

### **17 March 2013**

Today one of the volunteers saw a client who comes in about every six weeks. He is on Newstart Allowance (about \$470 per fortnight) but he has his two kids every second weekend. It is really important to him that he keeps in contact with his sons. He gets no allowances for feeding them, but he wants to make these visits special occasions. He really struggles in providing food for them, so it is nice when we can help him with the basics plus a few little treats.



Last time he came was just before the monthly lunch, which was in the school holidays. He was encouraged to bring the boys to the lunch. Today, he was saying how much they had enjoyed the day. It had been real highlight for them. They had enjoyed the turkey pasta bake and nice people had actually served the meal to the table, which was a bit of a novelty, and of course

there was lovely live music in the background. But the real high point was the boys were allowed to have a very large bowl of ice-cream for dessert.

We also saw another long-term client today. She doesn't come very often. She usually needs help with some food, sometimes help filling a prescription, but mostly she comes to get a bit of emotional support from the volunteers, and that is what she needed today. She always feels better when she leaves, having had a cuppa and a chat. Today she was saying that she had been in hospital for a couple of days. Going to hospital for her was like having a holiday; it was the first time she had stayed outside the house for many, many years.

I seem to be asked by many of the clients to be their supporter at meetings with the various authorities. Yesterday, I went with a client to a meeting with Housing ACT. Our client is having a lot of issues with his neighbours, and he is finding it impossible to stay in the house. The last thing anyone wants is for someone on a Disability Support Pension to give up the tenancy of their home. Homelessness and mental illness are not good partners, but unfortunately it happens all too often. The meeting lasted a couple of hours but in the end we got a really positive outcome. He is still in his house and I think that we have put some good strategies in place for him to remain there until he can be allocated more suitable accommodation.

Sometimes people just need to know that there is someone on their side.

#### **19 October 2014**

It's Anti-Poverty Week and here are my thoughts about poverty in Canberra. I don't do the research and I don't quote statistics: my thoughts are about the coalface.

My heart goes out to those who are not able to feed their family. So often I have seen a mum have to cross the welfare door for the first time. It must be so hard when you have to ask a stranger to help you feed your family. It takes a lot of courage to have to ask for help—that's poverty.

One of the times I hate the most is when a mum comes in for assistance, accompanied by her school-age children and it is not school holidays. When you ask the children if it is a pupil-free day they reply that they had no food in the house to eat, so mum didn't send them to school. The majority of our schools will provide a lunch for the children, but it is mainly about the mums not wanting their children to feel different. So what's the problem if the kids miss school? Education is the way they are going to break out of the poverty cycle, so to miss an important day in their life that might help them get a job in the future—that's poverty.

Young people, who for one reason or another have had to leave home, and who are trying to exist on their own on Youth Allowance. I don't know how anyone can live on so little money without the support of their family, and that's what these young people don't have. At an early age they have to navigate the mysteries of Centrelink and housing, and just try to survive—that's poverty.

The unemployed people trying to live on Newstart Allowance have so little money and so few concessions. They usually can't survive, so they take out a short-term loan with a well-advertised loan company, and then they are in real trouble, a massive debt that they will never be able to repay—that's poverty.

Poverty in Canberra is real, it is all around us every day. You probably don't see it but I do.

Nelson Mandela said in 2005: 'Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice.'

## **2 November 2014**

I can't tell you how much I enjoy being on the floor—it is a privilege to have the opportunity to talk with the clients, listen to their story if they want to share it and see how we can help them.

The first client I saw today arrived about an hour before we opened. When he came in he told me that he was sleeping rough. The last couple of nights he had been sleeping under Commonwealth Avenue Bridge. He was hungry but not complaining. He was hopeful that he would be able to get into a men's refuge in the next couple of days.

This lad is thirty years old. He had been in an alcohol and drug recovery centre and had made a mistake, and so was evicted. To be homeless is a genuine hardship. While at least at this time of year it is not as hard as in the middle of a Canberra winter, it is still very tough. When I saw him he was cold and very hungry. He accepted that he had been in the wrong and really regretted his error.

I made him a meal and coffee. He scoffed those down so I made him another meal. He was very, very hungry. He then started to relax and just wanted to talk to someone about his family and his life. He is really sorry about his current situation. He wants to give up the alcohol and drugs but doesn't seem to be able to manage it.

He grew up in Canberra but had a very hard life. His father was an alcoholic and also a minor criminal and often spent time in prison. Each time dad came out of prison there would soon be another sibling on the way, so he was part of a large family. He left school as soon as he could and has never really held down a job for very long. He also has problems with literacy and numeracy, which makes job hunting very difficult.

He has spoken to the drug and alcohol people at the Canberra Hospital. They agree that he has difficulty giving up drugs and alcohol in Canberra—too many temptations, too many friends with the same problem. They are looking at getting him into a detox centre in Queensland but he has to get himself to the centre. If he gets a place, I have assured him that SJC will get him there.

It was a real pleasure to spend some time with this delightful young man who was really embarrassed about his addiction problems. When he left he asked if I could support him in prayer. I agreed but told him that I would also get an army of pray-ers to support him. So please pray for my friend.

## Supporting people through tough times

*We were able to give him some food and a bus pass to help him look for a new job, but most importantly we were able to put an arm around his really despondent shoulders and promise to be there if he needed our help.*

*Wish list: An end to domestic violence, shampoo and conditioner, pasta sauce and presents for teenagers.*

## **29 March 2009**

This week I have had a win, a good win, for one of our clients. He is a homeless fellow who has been in Canberra for a few months. He doesn't particularly like being homeless but he has accepted it as his current lifestyle, and is very self-contained. He wouldn't tell me where he is camping but he assured me he has a magnificent view of the lake in the morning—apparently dawn on the lake is particularly beautiful at the moment. He didn't need help with food or bedding: he buys a couple of sandwiches and some coffee in the morning, and that's enough for him to get by on, and he has a good swag. He is on a Disability Support Pension.

He came to see if we could help him with Centrelink, which had stopped his pension payment. They had written to him c/- Australia Post, Canberra ACT 2601. The address on his pension card is 'No Fixed Address'. They had asked him to supply some proof of identity documents, to the value of one hundred points. He is a migrant, so one of the documents they wanted to see was his citizenship certificate.

When you are homeless it is very difficult to look after your important papers—they get wet or lost or stolen. He knew the exact date, time and place of his citizenship ceremony, and was proud that he was an Australian citizen, but over the years the important bit of paper has disappeared. This is where the catch 22 situation arises. As a primary source of identification, Centrelink required a copy of his citizenship certificate. He had the money to apply for a copy of the document, but the Department of Immigration also required a photo endorsed by someone, in certain specified employment categories, who had known him for at least two years, plus a copy of his driver's licence or passport.

A bit of a problem when you know no-one in authority and don't have a driver's licence or passport. That's when he decided he needed help.

The good news is that after a large number of phone calls, starting with an excellent social worker at Centrelink, the problem was resolved. All the required documents were already on file, so his pension has been restored and I am sure that he will be treated sympathetically in the future. A great result!

## **30 May 2010**

Late on Thursday afternoon I had a call from a young man. Could he get some help with food? 'Not a problem, we would love to help you and we will be open tomorrow from 9.30 am until 2.00 pm, no appointment required.' All seemed to be going well and the next thing I knew I had a very upset young man on the phone.

His story: he has been working for a firm as a contractor. The firm has been providing services for a large government department. At the beginning of the month the firm either lost the contract or the contract was not renewed, but whatever the case my young friend had been laid off. Because he was a contractor, there was no severance pay or other assistance.

So all of a sudden he went from being employed and earning over \$1,000 per week to being unemployed. His world was geared to earning that amount of money. Rent was \$320 per week (which is a pretty cheap for private rent), repayments on the car and furniture were another commitment. He had not been rich but, as he said, he was living a really nice life.

After a qualifying time he is now on Newstart Allowance—\$461 per fortnight.

It is no wonder that he dissolved into tears when he was talking to me. His rent per fortnight will be \$640, which is \$200 more than his unemployment benefit and then there are the repayments on the car and furniture, the mobile phone and, of course, food.

I am hopeful that he will get another job but I am not terribly confident that this is going to happen in the near future. He has no family that can help him; in fact over the last few months he has been supporting some members of his family.

Life is going to be pretty dreadful for him. Unless he gets a job he will be homeless in five or six weeks.

He came in on Friday and we were able to give him some food and a bus pass to help him look for a new job, but most importantly we were able to put an arm around his really despondent shoulders and promise to be there if he needed our help. That's what we do well—be there when we are needed.

### **15 August 2010**

Every now and then I get totally gobsmacked by how hard life is for some of our clients. Over the years that I have been in the job I have heard a lot of stories, but sometimes someone comes in with a story that sets you back on your heels. It happened to me this week.

The lady needed help with some scripts and of course some help with food. She was not a young woman, probably in her late fifties. She had been working full-time, looking after her disabled son, who is now twenty years old and not able to work, and another teenage son finishing school. She was paying off a mortgage on her home. Life was not easy for her but she was managing.

Then she was diagnosed with cancer and now life has become a real battle for her. She has little or no support other than her two sons. She has been in and out of hospital for the last seven months. She had to give up her job—she just could not cope with the treatment and working. After using her sick pay and savings to live on, she was then given Sickness Allowance, which of course was a great help but it was not enough to repay the mortgage. Thankfully the bank has been sympathetic, but as they have said to her, they are not a charity.

The lady is now receiving a Disability Support Pension, which is still not a lot but it is manageable. Unfortunately, there were a few hiccups when she changed from Sickness Allowance to the Disability Support Pension so she needs all her money to repay the mortgage, but in the meantime she also needs to feed the boys and she must keep taking the various medications she needs.

When she came to SJC she was at her wit's end: she had no food left for the weekend and she urgently needed five scripts filled.

I am sure that this lady will get on top of her situation, but at the moment she just needed someone to be there for her, to help her through this really rough period. Thankfully we were able to get the scripts filled for her and give her lots of food for the weekend, including a few cooked casseroles, so she could have the weekend off.

### **31 July 2011**

I had a lady ring me this morning. She had nothing in the house to feed her family—her husband, herself and four children, aged eleven, nine, four and one. Another agency had referred her to us because her family was not on a benefit. I was really pleased that I was able to invite her to come to St John's Care and tell her that we would be delighted to help her family. As far as we were concerned, no family in Canberra should be without food.

The lady was very nervous when she arrived and thankfully the volunteer was able to calm her nerves and make her feel more comfortable and really welcome. This was the first time she

had ever had to ask for assistance to feed her family and she was really embarrassed. Crossing the door into a welfare agency is not an easy thing to do for many of our clients.

Her husband is normally a good provider but he has been in hospital for the past few weeks with a breathing problem. Unfortunately, the family had recently been on holidays, so he had no annual leave and he had used his sick leave while he was still in hospital. With four children they had very little savings, and now there is nothing—he is not entitled to Sickness Allowance at this stage.

The question remains: how do you feed a family when you have no savings, you are not entitled to benefits, you can't work, but are not eligible to receive help from some of the larger agencies? The answer is simple: you come to St John's Care.

This young woman was really stunned by the help she received for her family. The food was wonderful, but it was all those things that you can't do without, like nappies, toilet paper and laundry detergent that become so important when you have no money. I am also working with Centrelink on the family's behalf to see if there is anything that might be available to help them.

You were all incredibly generous today, you have helped a young family survive and stay together in a time of hardship.

## **12 August 2012**

We had an older woman in this week. She needed help with food but as she talked with the volunteer it became evident that there were more problems than just the lack of food. When the volunteer asked if there was anything more she could help with, the tears started.

This poor woman is in a bit of a pickle. She was living in Melbourne with her partner, but unfortunately he died. Two years ago, she moved to Canberra to be closer to her daughter and grandchildren. She moved in with the family, but three generations in the one house did not work, and earlier this year her daughter asked her to leave. She was fortunate that her partner had left her a car and caravan, so at least she had some temporary housing.

For the last few months she has been staying in a caravan park, but unfortunately it is not a long-stay caravan park. It is also fairly expensive: the cost of a powered site is nearly half her fortnightly pension, leaving her very little to live on. But the main problem is that she has to leave there in less than four weeks. The management of the park are very kind to her but she has to leave on that date. She will be homeless, which was one of the reasons for the tears.

I contacted the Housing Options Advisor at COTA ACT to see if they could think of a solution. There are a few places around which may have been suitable for an older woman, such as Abbeyfield or Betty Searle House, but unfortunately our client has a companion dog, and she is not willing to part with the dog. Understandably, neither of these places will accept an animal.

Her only option now is public housing. She has been on the Housing ACT high needs housing list since April this year, but there are another 1,088 people on that list and the average waiting time is 538 days.

COTA and I will both write support letters to ACT Housing on her behalf, and hopefully they will reassess her application. It is no wonder that she was in tears: it must be very stressful to be in this situation. She was given lots of food.

When she returned today to collect her support letter, she was a much happier person. I think that she may have been hungry when she first came to see us.

## **15 February 2015**

You often hear about kids couch surfing or being homeless. Most of us assume that it is probably the result of a kid being a bit wild, and leaving home because they don't want to put up with the rules and regulations imposed by their parents. But I can assure you that this is not always the case.

Zack, our YouthCARE worker, is dealing with a young lad who I will call Fred. He is sixteen and in his first year at college and wanting to complete Year 12. He seems a nice enough kid, very quiet and intelligent but in a really difficult situation.

Fred's parents separated when he was quite young. After the separation he lived two weeks with mum and then two weeks with dad. This went on for years, until mum moved interstate, so he has been staying with his dad for the last year or so. He doesn't want to go back to his mum and other half-siblings, in fact he would rather live on the streets than live with her. This is probably irrational but that is how he feels, and his feelings must be respected.

The problem is that his dad, who has struggled for years with mental health issues and drug and alcohol addiction, now feels that his home is no longer a safe place for Fred.

So what happens now! Zack is exploring all the options for this young man, but unfortunately there are not many options available. At the moment we are trying to find him supported accommodation and get a support team to help mentor and guide him.

I am sure this is not the first time this situation has arisen but there just seem to be so few alternatives available that won't exacerbate the situation.

YouthCARE Canberra is such an important program. It stops kids falling through the cracks.



## Connections and friendships

*So many of our clients lead very lonely lives and the support of a really caring person who is willing to listen to them is very important.*

*Wish list: Affordable housing for Canberra, pasta sauce, shampoo, tinned fruit and washing up*

## **7 February 2010**

This is a really hard story for me to write. Robert Affleck was homeless for a number of years—not by choice but that was the way it was. Over that time SJC had helped him with clothes and sleeping bags and food. He became a friend, part of the furniture, and then life got better for Bob.

He was finally allocated a flat, and we were able to help out there a bit with bedding and cutlery and china and so on, and he was really happy. He just wanted to give back to SJC for the help that we had given him.

But he needed more than that, he needed to belong, and that is where everything was working so well. Bob took control of the grounds around SJC, which are quite extensive. When we had a volunteers' barbecue, Bob joined us. In fact, Bob was part of the team and we enjoyed that relationship with him for about ten months.

In July last year I went away for seven weeks and when I got back Bob was missing. I made a few phone calls and he assured me that he was well but had once again moved on. There was nothing that I could do, but warning bells sounded all over the place. Bob was a delightful person, but fragile—he suffered from depression.

On 30 December last year the Northern Territory police rang me to say that Bob had taken his own life the previous evening. They rang me in the hope that I may have been family as there were only four phone numbers in Bob's mobile phone, and mine was one. The police hoped that I might have known Bob's family, but unfortunately he never shared his whole story with me, only snippets here and there.

I hope that Bob knew that he was loved and important to us at St John's Care. As individuals and as a community we must be able to do more to help those like Bob who are suffering from depression.

## **4 July 2010**

SJC actually runs a supermarket. The only difference is that there are no cash registers; we happily give the food away. This is the time of year, thanks to you, the Anglicare Winter Pantry Appeal and the various local supermarket collections, that I stock my warehouse for the coming year. It is a busy time for me, making sure that all the food is sorted and shelved.

Sometimes I get so busy with things that I forget about people, which is the most important part of my job. It is not just about providing food, though that is very important for so many, it is also about providing a safe space, a space where our friends can tell us their problems, and have someone genuinely listen to their concerns and woes. If possible we can provide them with some guidance on what they could do and where they should go for help.

On Monday, I was so involved in the process of running a supermarket that I missed a call for help from a young woman we see from time to time. She only comes in for help when she really needs it and she is a real battler. We have known each other for at least five years and I admire how she copes with life. It is not easy for her being alone with five wayward kids.

I saw her on Monday, gave her a hug, and was genuinely glad that I had seen her and then hurried away to my warehouse to make sure that everything was correctly sorted. I failed to give my friend time—I was so busy with things that I forgot about the person. The volunteer on duty later advised me that my friend has been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. The prognosis is not good.

Thankfully I have been able to contact her and she has since been in to see me. She has so many problems: money is short, the kids are a real handful, and, at the age of forty-five, she is facing death. She needs a shoulder, someone to support her—SJC will be there for her.

I guess what I am trying to say is that sometimes we get so involved with what we are doing, we forget how important people are and how much care they need.

### **6 March 2011**

At the moment I am spending an incredible amount of time with a client, a middle-aged woman who is desperately sick. Her postal address for Centrelink is the palliative care unit at one of Canberra's hospitals, as unfortunately she is also homeless. Quite honestly, at the end of every session with her, I am exhausted.

My friend, and she has become my friend, has a brain tumour and severe cardiac problems, which makes death a very current topic in her life. How long she will survive is a mystery to me, but I know that she does not have a long-term future. She also has a severe mental health problem. It is wonderful that she is also a Christian and does not fear death.

She has been staying with a young Christian man, who I think should be considered for canonisation—he has done a remarkable job with her but today that platonic friendship ended, he had had enough. Tonight she will be living in her car. How can we, an educated and reasonably affluent society, allow someone who is so sick, no matter how in-your-face that person is, to be homeless. And that is what she is—homeless.

She submitted an application to Housing ACT for priority allocation of a house or flat a month ago, but they are not able to consider the application until she responds to ten different requests for information. She needed help to get this together. The letter was so daunting that she just put it in the too hard basket. And that's what we can do and are doing to help this woman.

Thankfully we have such a good working relationship with Centrelink that we were able to solve four of the issues in as many minutes. The rest of the questions will take a while, but we will get there. We will get the application to the right people before the cut-off date and then hopefully it won't be too long before she has a roof over her head.

### **13 March 2011**

Last week I wrote about a client, who has become a friend of mine. A lady with a brain tumour who does not have a very good prognosis, and unfortunately she is homeless. Over the last week I have spent a lot of time trying to gather all the documents she needs to submit with her application for priority housing in Canberra. Even with all the support letters and other evidence I have put together, it will still be some months before she would get into stable accommodation.

Tuesday she contacted me to say that her sixteen-year-old son had rung her the previous evening; he wanted to make peace with her before she died. She desperately wanted to go to northern New South Wales and make contact with her son. She rang to ask if SJC could help her with petrol to get to a little town just south of Coffs Harbour. She assures me that when she gets there she will have accommodation for both of them, which will be so much better for her than the nomadic life she is living in Canberra.

She is no longer fit to drive around locally, let alone take the long trip north, but she assures me that she has two friends who are willing to drive her. The car has just been serviced and is in reasonable condition, so all I could do was promise to help her with the petrol. It really does mean so much to her to go home and see her boy before she dies.

Yesterday she came in to the office to collect the petrol cards. She is very excited about going home but she is also sad to be leaving Canberra and the many friends she has made here. Among those friends are the volunteers at SJC, where she has always been welcomed and treated with the utmost dignity and respect. On the whiteboard she left the simple message: 'Goodbye everybody, God bless and thank you.'

Part of her goodbye to me was the phrase 'you are a pretty good old stick'. All I can hope for now is that she and her friends have a safe trip, that she and her son have a meaningful time together and that the end is not too painful for her. I will miss her.

## **7 December 2014**

One of the sad aspects of my job is watching people implode.

For the past five years I have been supporting a young man with food and just being there for him. He is an interesting person, who grew up in one of the rougher areas of Sydney. He is not physically large and he told me that when he started school, because he was a little tacker, he was picked on and physically abused.

He remembers the beatings he received, and then when he became a little bigger, he became the thug and he picked on the little kids. That was the start of his career as a petty crim.

He is not sure when the drugs started. He had always been a user of alcohol and tobacco, probably from his early teens, or before. He remembers smoking grass when he was about thirteen; as he said to me it was about him being an important person in the neighbourhood.

As an older teenager he was caught, charged and convicted of being a not very nice person. Once again he told me of the abuse he received in the prison system because he was very short and slight.

After he was released from prison he moved to Canberra to make a new, clean life. No drugs, no crime, he just wanted to be an ordinary person. Over the years I have spent a lot of time with him; I am not a counsellor, but he just wanted someone to talk to. He was doing really well and I think that he was clean for about three years.

Last year he started to play around with drugs again, big time. His father died just over a year ago.

He went home for the funeral but his family have decided that enough is enough, and he is no longer welcome at his family home. I appreciate where the family is coming from, they have every right to throw up their hands and be rid of this nuisance in their life, but this leaves their son, their brother, alone.

I think he will be a statistic fairly soon. He is using heavily and he is now homeless: not a good prognosis.

I don't think I could have done anything better. I listened to him, I supported him in trying to establish a lawn-mowing business, and I was there when he wanted to talk. Sometimes the damage is done very early in life. I know it sounds silly but I regard him as a friend and I think he regards me as one of the few friends he has left. It is very sad.

## Two Canberras

*One of the things I have learnt in my time at SJC is that Canberra is not the affluent city that people think it is, and it is not an even playing field out there. So many Canberra families really have a hard time surviving. They need support to make ends meet.*

*Wish list: No poverty in Canberra, Christmas presents for boys older than six, long-life milk, small tins of ham and biscuits.*

### **1 June 2008**

Yesterday I went to Woden Plaza for the official launch of the Anglicare Winter Pantry Appeal.

It was a good launch with lots of interest from the general public. The Year 1 choir from Radford College opened and closed the proceedings. They were beautiful and sang with much gusto.

While I was watching these lovely children in their smart school uniforms, I thought about some of the children that come to St John's Care with their parents. It is not that the children are neglected, and I know that they are loved by their parents, but they really are experiencing a different upbringing.

Believe it or not, many of them have experienced hunger and new clothes are a rarity, with many of the mums relying on SJC for their clothing. Unfortunately, many of them have never experienced the joys of being read to at night nor are books considered to be of any great importance. Weekend sport is usually out of the question as the registration fees, although kept to a minimum, are beyond the family's means.

I wonder if we will ever be able to break the poverty cycle. But with your help, we can try and even the playing field a little by making sure that we can always help the family with food when their cupboard is bare, so that the children are not hungry and have a lunch to take to school.

### **30 January 2011**

Canberra is often ranked one of Australia's most livable cities. I agree that Canberra is a wonderful place to live, but then I have a home. Have you ever thought about what life would be like in Canberra if you were homeless and sleeping rough? It is not just the hardship of not having a warm, dry bed to get into at night. If you need to go to the loo, what do you do? Use the bushes. Just feel like a cuppa or a bit of a late night snack, what do you do? Nothing; you have no power or any type of equipment to fulfil even these simple requirements. Where can you have a shower or wash your clothes? Nowhere. Where can you keep your very meagre possessions safe? Nowhere.

For the last three months SJC has been supporting a young homeless man. He came to Canberra with the hope of finding work in the construction industry. He has been sleeping rough. Sometimes he slept on the verandah of the shed at St John's. He was a nice enough chap. Occasionally he would have a bit too much to drink and become very belligerent and a bit threatening but otherwise he was very polite and very appreciative of the food and clothing we gave him.

The problem with Canberra is that there is nowhere that the homeless can find a 'safe shelter' out of the rain, out of the cold in winter or away from the young drunks, who think it's funny to give them a hard time. The refuges we have are always full, so their only option is to become a rough sleeper.

The young man we were helping had very few possessions, but last week he lost the lot—because he had nowhere safe to sleep, his very few things were destroyed by the 'night club set'. Thankfully he has a father in Hobart, who is willing to accommodate him for a few weeks, so at least he will have a chance of having a normal existence. I was able to get a very cheap flight for him to reconnect with his family, so hopefully he will be a happier person this week. He went with nothing, not even his book or any other hand luggage—everything had been stolen. When I drove him to the airport he went with our love and best wishes for a better life.

## **6 November 2011**

You would think that after so many years at SJC, I would have heard every hard luck story there is, but that is not the case. I am not sure which of our clients this week touched me the most. When I hear their stories I usually have three reactions:

- I thank God for the wonderful start I was given in life and for the strength that my belief gives me.
- I think how unfair life is for so many. You wouldn't believe what a battle some people in Canberra have just to survive.
- My third reaction is to question myself and work out how SJC can help the most. Often the simplest solution is not the best.

It is usually the lack of food that drives our clients to SJC for help, but often the problems are far more complex than that. They need someone to listen to them, to hear their story without being judgemental, and to treat them as a real person, not just a number.

The lady I saw today is having a lot of financial problems. She is a single mum with three children. Her eldest is nineteen, on Youth Allowance, studying at CIT (Canberra Institute of Technology), still living at home, and of course eats like a horse. The other two are at high school. The older of these is due to graduate after completing Year 10, and that was one of her major concerns today. She was short of food but, almost as importantly to her, she could not afford the \$150 for the graduation ceremony and formal. She wanted her son to attend; she did not want him to feel like a second class citizen.

The irony of her situation—twelve weeks ago she submitted an Education Tax Refund claim to the tax office, and is due for a healthy return. The refund of \$1,500 was due six weeks ago, but still nothing has come through. She has followed up the claim but it is being continually delayed. She has added pressures as the children's grandfather is living on the coast, and has terminal cancer. They would like to visit him, but can't afford it. Her mum lives in Victoria and also has cancer. The refund would make a big difference in their lives.

She was getting nowhere, but today I was able to fax a letter of support to the tax office and the person I spoke to there has assured me that the claim will be paid this week. In the meantime, besides giving her lots and lots of food (the boys eat twelve Weetbix a morning between the two of them), we have also paid for the young man to attend his formal. I have also spoken to the Anglicare Bargain Hunter in Queanbeyan and they will make sure that he looks pretty cool for his big evening, at no expense to mum.

All she needed was a friend, someone to support her, and that's what you did today. Thank you.

## **15 July 2012**

So far this winter I have received postcards from England, Scotland, Barcelona, Paris, Dubrovnik, Napoli, Bhutan and Mont Blanc. My volunteers are well travelled. I am about to head off to China. For the next few weeks I will be thinking about the clothes that should be packed and the million little jobs that should be done before I go and of course looking forward to the new sights, smells and food that we will be introduced to.

This afternoon I thought about two of the clients we had in today. One lady is in her early seventies. She has been a client of SJC for a long time but we only see her once, maybe twice a year. You know that when she asks for help she really needs it. Today she needed help with food and, more importantly, some help in purchasing her medications. She is a very bad asthmatic

and it is essential that she has her puffers with her at all times. She has recently been very sick and all the medications and the extra tests have left her very short of money.

The other woman is nearly sixty, and is trying to survive on Newstart Allowance, which is not a lot of money a fortnight. She, too, needed medications and food. I was thinking how hard it must be for them to have to cross the welfare door and ask for help with these basic needs, and here am I worrying about what clothes I am going to take to China.

Then I had a call from Jodie. She has become a special friend over the years. She has some severe mental health issues, but on this occasion she wanted an electric blanket, as she is really cold at night. We don't help with anything electrical, but I had a good woollen doona so offered her that. I took the doona around to her house after work. The house was all in darkness and I assumed that no-one was at home. Eventually she came to the door and was very pleased with the warm doona. She is so worried that she will not be able to pay her electricity bill when it comes that she is living in the bedroom of her house and not using any heating—no wonder Jodie is cold!

I feel a bit guilty about worrying about packing for the holidays. There are so many people in Canberra who are having a really tough time at the moment.

#### **21 December 2014**

As Christmas is just around the corner, I thought that this story should be a happy one, but frankly I have found the week quite depressing. The number of people seeking support from SJC is just so constant. No, it is not constant, it is increasing. Two of the people we have seen this week were former clients and have not needed our help for many years.

The first woman hadn't been to see us for four years. She is now in a stable relationship and has four children aged from fifteen months to fifteen. She was just after emergency food and had forgotten about the present room, which was a real bonus for her. Unfortunately her partner, who is the breadwinner, was injured in a social sporting match. He has used all his sick leave and holiday leave and is now on leave without pay. She is sure that it won't be too long before he is back at work, but in the meantime they are struggling. It is so nice to be able to help, but it just shows how difficult it is for some families. The slightest blip on the radar and the family lose their sense of direction.

The second family have had car problems. They have three children who are all involved in sporting groups and other activities and, as we all know, a car is basically a necessity for most families in Canberra. So all of a sudden the Christmas budget is shot, no presents for the kids and the immediate need is food. It was great to be able to help with both food and presents, but it is a good reminder to me about how fragile many families in our community are.

It is strange to most of us to be so short of money. If we had to pay for car repairs we would be able to charge them to our credit card and pay them off over several months, if that was required. But if you don't have a credit card and you have no savings what do you do? You don't buy food for the family and Christmas presents are a thing of the past. It is a hard time for so many families.

## Christmas

*Christmas is a big event in the SJC year: the Christmas present room is available for parents to pick gifts for their children, and since 2011 SJC has also been giving away Christmas hampers to every family that needs one. On Christmas Day, SJC hosts a huge community lunch.*

*The two stories here are about the St John's Care Christmas in 2009—before and after the day.*

### Christmas (before): 22 November 2009

I need to buy thirty kilos of turkey, thirty kilos of ham, forty kilos of potatoes, thirty kilos of pumpkin, ten kilos of peas, ten kilos of beans, one kilo of Gravox and twelve bottles of cranberry sauce and that is just the food for the main course for the 2009 Canberra Community Christmas Day Lunch, to be held in St John's Hall on Christmas Day. The food is important, so too are the decorations and the drinks. But nothing is as important as making people welcome and making them feel special on Christmas Day. There is nothing worse than feeling lonely in a room full of people.

The Christmas lunch is not just about the homeless, it is a lunch for anyone and everyone; it is a lunch to make sure that no one has to spend Christmas Day alone. If someone needs transport we can arrange that as well.

I have a couple of musicians lined up for the day, but I would like to hear from some more—so if you have that particular gift, please share it with us on Christmas Day.

Thank you for all the Christmas presents, I am sure that we will have a wonderful present and food room this year. Thankfully I have only received a few stuffed toys, so I have been able to isolate them in different rooms, and make sure that they don't start breeding. For the older children, CDs and DVDs make a great present.



Bishop Stuart Robinson and Sue Jordan in the present room

**Christmas (after): 11 January 2009**

This year, Christmas at St John's Care started for me on the Sunday before. I had to go to SJC and deliver some of the purchases for the Christmas Day lunch—this was my third trip for the weekend so I was not the happiest person in the world. When I pulled up there was a parcel at the door. Inside the bag were two thriving plants, a rosemary bush and an olive tree. They had obviously been struck in someone's garden with love and were beautifully cared for, and are still thriving. The card said, 'To the team at St John's Care. Just would like to thank you for the wonderful job you do, and would like to offer these plants as a token of my gratitude.' They were from someone we had helped earlier in the year.

After that I knew it was going to be a great Christmas and it was. Christmas lunch was one of the happiest occasions I have been involved in. We served more than 330 meals, which is important, but more importantly we had a hall full of happy people. In fact we had more than a hall full of happy people as we ran out of room in the hall and had to set up tables on the grass outside.

The music program was fantastic and went all day; we had a choir, pianists, cello and violin players. The turkey and the ham were delicious and everyone had a bonbon to share with the other guests at their table, so there were lots of silly hats and dreadful jokes. It was a happy family Christmas, just a bit bigger than normal.

## **Giving and receiving**

*We are a small organisation that does really big things. We don't have a PR section like some agencies, but we are a Canberra organisation that looks after Canberrans who are having a hard time. We do it with love and with incredible support from you.*

*Wish list: Peace on earth, pasta sauce and tinned fish.*

## **2 August 2009**

The last couple of weeks have been incredible.

A couple of weeks ago we had an African migrant family visit us for help. We were having a little difficulty with trying to give them the types of food they like, especially the frozen casseroles. At the same time, one of our volunteer casserole makers was delivering her most welcome contributions. She observed what was happening and then emailed me to say that she cooked both African and subcontinental food. Would I like her to concentrate on those dishes? 'Yes, please,' and we now have the most wonderful selection of Indian, African, and vegetarian meals.

On Friday, a young woman came into SJC with two beautiful meat trays. She had won them the night before and thought that they may be of use to us. She looked a little familiar, but I couldn't put a name to the face so I asked if she was from one of the parishes that support us. 'No,' she replied, 'a couple of years ago I was in a bit of difficulty and SJC was very kind to me. There is too much meat in the trays for one person, so I immediately thought that you might be able to give them to some of your clients.' We were able to repackage the trays and a number of people were delighted to receive a steak or a couple of chops.

One of the things I want to do is hold cooking demonstrations during the SJC Friday Lunches. Just very simple basic cooking, showing the diners what you can do with the food we provide. It would only be a trial to see if it works, so I was loath to spend money on a portable cooktop. I had been trying to think where I could borrow one and then this morning one of the volunteers came in with a brand new portable cooktop under her arm. Her daughter-in-law had won it in a raffle and it was of no use to her. It will be just perfect for what we want to do.

I love being at St John's Care. The help that we get and the prayers we receive make us a very special place.

## **20 December 2009**

What a week it has been—we have been so busy in both the present room and emergency relief centre. The present room opened on Thursday and in four days we have seen seventy-three clients and one hundred and eighty-eight children will have a better Christmas than they might have expected. Some statistics for the presents we have given away: ninety-nine were for boys, eighty-nine for girls, sixty-six were for children aged from zero to five, fifty-one for children aged from five to ten and seventy presents were for that really difficult group, the over-tens.

Sometimes I wonder if we are achieving anything—we are only a Bandaid organisation, we don't have the capacity to do case management, so we are just helping people for a couple of days. What good can that do? But this week I was so uplifted by a couple of incidents that happened to SJC.

The first was on Thursday. While we had all these people waiting for toys, we also had a delivery of food. The driver of the truck was really friendly, wanting to know what the queue was all about, so I explained. He then pulled out his wallet and gave me \$20. He apologised about the amount, but that was all he could afford at the moment, so I said, 'Don't worry, we have lots of great supporters.' Then the young man replied, 'But I need to—about four years ago I was a real basket case. I was into drugs and SJC kept me alive for about twelve months, until I decided it was time to go to rehab. I now have a job and am back in contact with my family.'

Then on Saturday my parish did a collection of food for SJC at the local shops. I was not involved but went to see how well they were going. Just as I arrived a young lady was putting two bags of groceries into the wheelbarrow. She recognised me and simply said, 'You have supported me in hard times, now I am doing a little better, I want to support you. Thank you.'

### **17 April 2011**

One of our clients taught me a lot this week. This young woman is on a Disability Support Pension and had not been to see us for over four years. Life hasn't been the easiest but she was proud that she had been able to manage.

But then all of a sudden, about August last year, things went horribly wrong for her. The reason—a young salesman had come to the door and recommended that she change her telephone contract.

The new package was going to be perfect for her. The total entertainment package, access to free-to-air TV channels without needing a digital TV, and, with the broadband component, access to internet TV channels, movies, TV shows, videos on demand and YouTube. I can feel you all cringing.

All these goodies were going to be delivered to her lounge room at a set price per month, with nothing extra to pay. The contract even included calls to mobiles. She thought she could afford that set price and, as she reasoned it to me, the TV is her only form of entertainment.

About October the bills started to change, this was added and then there was more money for that, and so on and so on. Her account for December was over \$1,000. She tried calling the company but seemed to get nowhere, so eventually she lodged a complaint with the Telecommunications Ombudsman and they have agreed to investigate it for her. In the meantime the phone company has disconnected her landline. She still has a mobile but at the moment she really can't afford to use it.

We discussed her options and came up with a basic service that she would be able to manage with. After about an hour on our phone she achieved the desired result.

The lesson for me—she never once lost her patience even though she was asked for the same information from about ten different operators, who then put her on hold and transferred her to the next operator who asked the same questions. I could not have been that patient. When I congratulated her on her persistence and patience, she said that she had made the mistake signing the contract and was now after a favour, so she had to be nice.

### **16 October 2011**

The volunteers in the emergency relief centre are wonderful people, so caring, so loving, but more important than that they are non-judgemental. Making clients feel comfortable in a welfare office is a real gift. I can never stress how important it is to listen to people. So many of our clients lead lonely lives, often feeling very isolated and cut off from mainstream society. To have their story heard is very special.

The volunteers give generously of their time—one day a week. As in every walk of life, not everyone we see is a beautiful person. But we all know that most of those who visit us are undergoing a crisis. Basically that crisis is no food and no money at the same time: a very hard place for anyone to be in, especially in this affluent society. It is a situation that most of us have never had to experience nor will many of us ever understand how people get into that situation, but it is something we deal with at SJC on a daily basis.

This morning, out of the blue, I had a call from a lady who used to be a client. She was a very difficult person at the time, into drugs and alcohol, and would often go on a bender and become a real handful. She seems to have sorted her life out and is now living in Queensland. This morning she just rang to say hello and to thank us for all the help we had given her during her recent troubled period. She realised that she had not been the easiest person to deal with, but when she came to SJC she was always treated with a great deal of respect and was made to feel very welcomed. She just wanted to say how much she appreciated SJC.

#### **4 December 2011**

This morning we had a delightful woman seek our help. She hadn't been to SJC for two years, but she was desperate. She has two daughters aged fifteen and sixteen and a son who turns eighteen just a few days before Christmas. She originally came in for some help with food. As the volunteer talked with her, and more importantly listened to her, it became evident that she needed more help than just the food.

She hadn't been to SJC for a long time because she had been working full-time with a community program. Unfortunately, the program was closing and as the staff levels were consequently reduced she was needed to provide 24/7 on call support. With three teenage children, as well as the rigours of the job, she was soon burnt out. She is now on Sickness Allowance and finding it really hard to manage.

The food was not a problem, you are great providers, but the volunteer soon found out that the woman was worried about her daughter's Year 10 formal and she also needed to celebrate her son's eighteenth birthday, and then there was Christmas—it was all too much. She was really feeling pressured by the circumstances.

Luckily, SJC—actually you—was able to help. The family went away with lots of food, so this lady will not have to spend much housekeeping money on that this week. The Anglicare Bargain Hunter has offered to help with an outfit for the daughter to attend the formal and SJC will pay for her ticket—it is not a lot of money, and the mum would feel really bad if her daughter had to miss the function because they couldn't afford to pay.

Mum is going to come back to SJC closer to her son's eighteenth and I am sure that by then we will be able to provide some party food, and will have a voucher for her to give him as a present.

When the lady left this morning, she looked five years younger, and so much happier. It is great to be able to support a battler, just to give them that boost when they really need it.

#### **25 December 2011**

I will end this year on a high note. Personally, I had a granddaughter born on Wednesday. Naturally she is the most beautiful person that has ever been born—not that I am an over-the-top granny.

This week has been really hard work for us at SJC. As I write, it is Tuesday night, and in seven days of operation of the present room, we have given away 178 Christmas food hampers, and 455 significant presents, plus lots of stocking fillers. So far this month in the food room we have helped 281 clients.

A few weeks ago I helped a mum with the money for her son to attend the Year 10 formal and also gave her a chit to get him some clothes from the Bargain Hunter. Today she brought in a graduation photo, with the lad dressed in his new suit. He looked wonderful, and as his mum

said, 'He scrubbed up really well.' On the night, he was also presented with a scholarship for the next couple of years and he starts a part-time job tomorrow, so all is looking good for the family.

It doesn't get much better than this.

### **7 April 2013**

After our break-in was reported in the newspaper late last year, a young woman emailed me and asked how she could contribute to SJC. She had been a long-term client, someone who had only asked for help twice or maybe three times a year. But at the time she was working and just wanted to say thanks. She set up a small transfer of funds. It was very small, but it meant as much to me as a large donation (although don't get me wrong, I love big donations). I thought that life was probably good for her at the moment.

Today she came into SJC for help. She was really embarrassed. She asked to see me, and as we were coping with lots of people, it was hard to give her time. But thankfully, we had a little lull, so I was able to concentrate on her situation. Listening to a person's story is the best gift we can give anyone.

She has some serious mental health issues. Unfortunately, she lost her job a couple of weeks ago. She is really hurt by the whole experience and it will be a while before she has the courage to apply for another. She was probably in the wrong but sometimes people with mental health issues need a bit of extra support. She was shattered by the whole experience.

While she was working, she incurred a number of debts. She knows that it was wrong, but it happened. Today she was so lonely and so depressed. She has a young daughter, who is doing really well at school, and she is proud of her, but she has no support, no family, and no friends. In fact SJC is her support network at the moment. It is amazing how common this theme is: mental health issues, no support. We were able to help her with lots of food and love. It is going to be a hard journey for her over the next few months.



## Courage and respect

*Two young sisters we had in this week had three children between them and one on the way. They grew up in a dysfunctional, abusive family, but both of them are so loving, the kids are really well looked after and they are so supportive of each other. They are trying to make a go of it for the kids' sake and for themselves.*

*Wish list: No mental health issues for anyone in our community, pasta sauce, tinned fish, and freeze-dried vegetables.*

## **29 August 2010**

'Those People'—this is a term that I can't quite get my head around, but I hear it so often. Who are 'Those People'? I hear this so often about the clients at St John's Care, and if someone can please explain it to me, I would be really appreciative.

At SJC I see lots and lots of people, but the people I see are just like you and me. They love their kids and are trying to do the right thing by them but sometimes they just don't have the background to let them do that easily. They want to be part of our community but no-one has encouraged them to become involved with the community, in fact no-one has encouraged them to do anything. Some of them lack education but they probably have survival skills that we could never contemplate.

I admit that some of them may not have been as lucky as me—they probably did not have parents that loved and nurtured them, taught them about Christianity, made sure that they had a good education, gave them a lot of love and helped them be part of their local community.

But does that make them different to you and me? Surely they are the same as you and me, each person one of God's children, to be loved and nurtured by all of us. They are NOT 'Those People'.

We had two young women in this week, sisters, one eighteen, the other twenty. Between them they had three children and one on the way. They grew up in a dysfunctional, abusive family, but both of them are so loving, the kids are really well looked after and they are so supportive of each other. They are trying to make a go of it for the kids' sake and for themselves. Should they be classified as 'Those People'?

Please don't apply handles to people before you get to know them, and please don't use that term 'Those People'. They are you and me—just not as lucky as you and me.

## **19 September 2010**

One of the wonderful rewards of this job is that you get to help people, just ease the burden and make sure that they can feed their family for the next few days. Your support makes this possible and makes us look good. This week I have been away but apparently Friday was a magic day at SJC.

A family came in for help—they were very stressed. They had not been to SJC for a long time. Their son was turning fifteen on Saturday, and he had invited friends to the house, but the family had nothing to feed them and they had no money to buy him a present. They were anxious and upset.

That problem was very quickly solved: some movie passes for the young man and a couple of his mates to go to the movies and have a Coke and some popcorn.

Food for the party—spaghetti, pasta sauce and some mince to make spag bol. We had some cans of soft drink and a few packets of chips. Two cake mixes for the family to make the birthday cake, and all of a sudden the fifteen-year-old was going to have a super party. The family actually cried with relief and joy. Every day is special at St John's Care, but the volunteers loved this day more than most.

### **3 March 2012**

Mine is not a normal office job. I get to meet the most amazing people, some of them coming from really harsh backgrounds. Many have been abused as children, and are still suffering from this hurt. Many just dabble in drugs and then become hooked and have to live with the consequences. February has been the busiest month we have ever had. Normally we help about 230 or 240 people a month. This month we have helped more than 300 people. It has been really busy and of course hard work for all the volunteers. I don't know why but they keep complaining that I don't pay them enough!

At times we have even had to interview clients on the verandah, and on Wednesday that is where I found myself, talking to a homeless fellow who needed help with everything. There is no emergency accommodation available in Canberra, so this fellow wanted guidance on where to find a safe place to sleep the night in the rough, and where he could heat up some tucker. He also needed a sleeping bag, a mat to sleep on, and of course food that he could eat. Not only were we able to provide him with food, a sleeping bag and mat but we were also able to give him a great backpack to carry his new goodies in.

I am getting pretty good with information on rough sleeping for the homeless, which is not a bad effort as my idea of camping is a three-star hotel. But I listen to the clients and I learn a lot from them. They are really interesting people. Besides the food and equipment, this fellow just wanted someone who would listen to his story and not pass judgement on the life he has lived.

I went home exhausted that night. Trying to be responsive, but non-judgemental, to this man was really hard work. If I ever decide to do drugs, I now know where to buy them and how to use them, I also know how difficult it is to go 'cold turkey' on giving up heroin, and that it is a lot easier to give up cocaine. He just wanted to download his story, which was not a pretty life.

I guess this guy was about forty, but he looked so much older. He had a really broken body, having fallen from a third floor balcony onto a concrete driveway a couple of years ago, when he was 'out of his tree'. Life has been tough for him, but what he wanted last week was someone to listen to his story—not judge him, just listen. Besides helping with food and other practical things, at SJC we are good listeners. It is something everyone can try to do with neighbours and friends.

### **16 September 2012**

Yesterday morning we saw a delightful young woman who is having a really hard time. She was hungry and very tearful when she arrived at SJC.

She is eighteen years of age, and lives alone in an ACT Government flat. I am not sure why she is not living at home, there are probably many reasons. She has bipolar disorder and suffers from anxiety, which makes life very difficult for her.

She is in receipt of Youth Allowance which is \$402.70 per fortnight. From that she has to pay her rent of \$100.50 per fortnight, her electricity, gas and telephone. It is also reasonably expensive, but very necessary, for her to purchase her medications to keep her illness stabilised. All the scripts are on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) and only cost \$5.80 but each month she has several she needs to have filled.

Six weeks ago she broke her arm, which required surgery. Unfortunately this has not mended properly and she has another appointment with the orthopaedic specialist in a couple of weeks. In the meantime, she has limited use of her arm and quite a bit of pain to put up with as well.

It was no wonder she was in tears when she arrived. Life is pretty hard for her at the moment, and I suspect that hunger always makes things seem bleaker than they are. It was great that when she left she was a much happier person, in fact she was smiling. She had been treated with respect and care by the volunteer, she had been given something to eat to get rid of the hunger pains and of course had been helped with a lot of food to keep her well-fed for the next few days. More importantly, she was encouraged to come back for some more help if she needed it. She knew she was not alone.

### **7 October 2012**

Even though I have been at SJC for a long time I am always on a learning curve. On Friday, I was called onto the floor, and I met this really large man. He was just so rough you wouldn't believe it. Long, unkempt hair, Jackie Howe singlet covered by a flannelette shirt with the sleeves ripped off, baggy trackie dacks and thongs. There was no point giving him toothpaste or toothbrushes—he had no need for them. It is at this stage that you have to make sure that you put your judgment in your back pocket and leave it there.

We had a bit of a chat about our day and the weather and so on and then I began to realise that this rough guy was an absolute diamond. He was brought up in the country on a very poor farm and had to leave school when he was eight. He made ends meet by doing odd jobs around a number of the local farms. Unfortunately his lack of schooling means that he is illiterate and innumerate.

He now in his late fifties but because of health issues, a bad back and a lack of skills he is not really employable. He looks after his sixteen-year-old son and is determined that this young man is going to receive the education that he never had the chance to have. The government has decided that he should be working so they have to live on Newstart Allowance plus a bit of child support. That is not an easy thing to do.

What amazed me was that he was not complaining—he was short of money this fortnight because he had bought some chickens so he could become a little more self-sufficient. He needed a little bit of tucker to keep them going till payday on Tuesday and was worried about the long weekend. I put a lot of food on the trolley for them and then brought it out for him to make sure that it was food that they liked. We always offer to change or replace items the clients would not use.

'No, no, we don't need all that.' He only took what they needed for the few days and was really thankful for the support he received. At the end, he gave me half-a-dozen eggs from the new chooks. Now you know why I do this fantastic job.

## New beginnings

*Often the volunteers will say to me, 'Do you remember so and so, have you seen them lately?' If I haven't seen them we just wonder what has happened to the client. You hope that the reason we haven't seen them is that they are now coping and that their life is back on an even keel.'*

*Wish list: I really wish that I didn't have to ask, that I could give you a break, but I can't. I need school supplies, lunch boxes, drink bottles and also things for school lunches such as poppers and muesli bars.*

### **11 October 2009**

Last week was so busy. We saw seventy-nine clients and fed one hundred and two adults and fifty-four children. This is a really massive effort for a small agency, and at times I wonder if we are achieving anything at all.

And then I know that, yes, we are. One young woman I saw during the week has been a client of SJC over the last few years. She works as a checkout operator with a supermarket. When she first needed some help she was a part-time casual. She went through a period of sickness and so as a casual—no work, no pay. SJC helped with food and a bit of money to help with the rent. She needed to visit us a few times but she was in control. She doesn't have any family support, in fact SJC has become her family.

This week I got a hug from her because she was so excited. She and a girlfriend are going up to Sydney next weekend. They have booked and paid for their accommodation and they know that they can get cheap meals nearby. The reason for her excitement—she is twenty-eight years old and this two day holiday will be the first holiday that she has ever had.

SJC didn't do a lot for her. We were able to feed her, but what was important to her was just knowing that there were some loving people who cared about her. Well done SJC supporters.

### **14 March 2010**

I am often asked if I get depressed doing the job that I do—being confronted by homelessness and those who are isolated from society. Nothing could be further from the truth. The job is incredibly rewarding. The volunteers and your generosity make SJC a very special place.

A few weeks ago I wrote about two young girls who were homeless, one had two young children and the other was pregnant. They are now housed and SJC was able to help them out with some manchester, some kitchen goods and some food to start them off in their new house. They were very grateful for all the support they had been given.

Yesterday, a young woman donated some items that she thought would be good for our Mother's Day table. They were all new items, gifts that had been given to her over time, gifts that were not quite her (I think we all have a drawer of these). I first met this young woman as a client in 2003. At that stage she was seventeen and had been thrown out of home when she was just sixteen. She was living in a Housing ACT flat in a very rough area, and used to come to SJC for some assistance with food, but I think she also came for support and encouragement. That was seven years ago. She doesn't come to SJC very often these days, only when she is very short of food and just needs that little bit of support to tide her over.

Over the years, I have seen her develop into a lovely young lady. She has completed Year 12, has done some hospitality training, and loves reading. For the last few months she has been working as a casual in a café, and tomorrow she starts at the same café as a full-time employee. She probably won't need our help again but she has promised that she will drop in every now and then just to say hello to her friends at SJC and let us know how she is going. That's why SJC is such a great place to work.

## **5 September 2010**

A couple of weeks ago I had to complete the return for our Commonwealth Government grant. It was a really interesting exercise compiling the figures, and it made me think about what we do and the people we had assisted in the last twelve months. A few statistics—we provided assistance on 2,481 occasions and we saw 1,128 different clients. Most of them were on benefits, but a number of them were low income families or had been breached by Centrelink.

It was amazing that 688 clients only needed help once in the year, and 185 needed help twice. Some clients returned several times and 108 people accessed our service more than five times in the year.

As I was pondering the various statistics, a young woman rang. I have written about her before—she had three children, the man she married had three children, and then they had a special little person. The husband was working but she had had to give up work with the arrival of their new one and finances were strained. Seven children and two adults are a lot of mouths to feed on one salary.

Then she had a minor car accident. They were insured, but the accident was her fault so of course they had to pay the first \$500, which was enough to put the family into a really bad situation—they could see no way ahead. Thankfully SJC was able to help with food and a little financial support.

SJC provided food for them on a number of occasions. This allowed them to use the food money to pay off a few of the more pressing debts. When she rang last week she just wanted to let me know that that they were back on their feet and to say thank you for the wonderful support, support that had no obligations or commitments.

They had been to us more than five times in the year, but that was a one-off. We probably will never see the family again, but it was great to be able to help them out when they needed it.

## **14 August 2011**

Today I saw a young woman who last visited us in March last year. She told me that the help, support and encouragement she received from SJC has been so important to her, it actually turned her life around, and it gave her the strength to carry on.

She is a young mum with a thirteen-year-old daughter. Her marriage fell apart a few years ago and unfortunately her ex-husband does not provide any financial support for the family. At the time of the break-up she was working so they were able to cope, but then she became ill and so had to give up work. She is now trying to survive on sickness benefits.

I think what really amazed me yesterday is how well she is doing. She is usually able to cope but a few months ago she decided that it was important for daughter to have internet access at home so she can complete her homework. They had been going to the local library but found it difficult to get enough time on the computers. Unfortunately the cost of having the internet connected, that extra little bit of expenditure, has made her budget so tight that it is almost impossible for them to survive.

Fortunately we were able to help her with her Telstra account and of course lots and lots of food. It is amazing that sometimes just a little bit of help every now and then is enough to keep a family out of financial difficulty. It is just so good to be able to provide that help.

This week we have also been helping one of our homeless clients with his census return. Just getting hold of a form for him was an interesting exercise, but eventually with a lot of patience we managed it and we were able to complete his return online. It was remarkable how important it was to him to be counted.

### **13 July 2014**

This is a good news story. Unfortunately on Thursday I missed a visit from a client who is also a friend, but thankfully she was able to talk to the volunteers on the day and leave me a very loving message.

I first met Mary in 2003. She is an Aboriginal lady who was in Canberra with her partner and fourteen-year-old son, to set up a small business. All went well for a time, and the products she produced were fantastic. But then she had a problem with suppliers. The relationship she was in collapsed.

And all of a sudden SJC had a new client, Mary, and her son. Having arrived from Adelaide in July they were homeless. There was nothing we could do. The refuges were full, so to help them out I gave them a tent and put them up in one of the local caravan parks. I felt dreadful but it was all that we could do. Mary and Michael lived in the tent for several months, and then Mary negotiated renting an on-site caravan at the same park. SJC helped with some site fees and we were always there for Mary with food and other practical help but more importantly with emotional support.

After twelve months they were allocated a Housing ACT flat. Not in the best location but it was their home. When they were in trouble Mary came to SJC for help. They became part of the SJC family.

I then lost contact for a couple of years when I needed a bit of a break from welfare. When I returned, Mary was one of my first clients and it was lovely to renew the relationship. She and Michael had had their ups and downs, but SJC was always there for them and we always knew that when they came for help it was really needed.

Michael is now a corporal in the Australian Army, posted to Adelaide. He has two small children, and over the years I have enjoyed seeing the family photos. Mary's older son also lives in Adelaide, and the boys want her to be with them and her grandchildren.

For the past two years Mary has been working part-time with a big company. The message the other day: she was going to Adelaide to be with her boys and her grandchildren. She is nervous about it, but her company has transferred her to their Adelaide store, so she has a job to go to and family to be with. But she is really sorry that she is leaving her Canberra family who have been so kind to her. That family was St John's Care.

A winner!!!!

### **23 November 2014**

Last week I received an anonymous donation of \$50. I was thrilled to receive it, actually I am always thrilled to receive any donation, but it was not totally anonymous. The card read, 'Thanks SJC, the job is working out, I am getting back on my feet, thank you for all your support,' so I knew exactly who it was from. I will call him Harry.

For about twelve months, up until June this year, we were supporting a homeless fellow. Harry did not fit the 'normal profile' of a homeless person. What a stupid statement—there is no normal profile for a homeless person. So many are women, lots of them are under twenty, either

couch surfing or sleeping rough. Our client had been in a middle management job in a government agency. He is probably about fifty and at the same time he was made redundant, his marriage of twenty-plus years also failed, a double whammy. He was lucky as he still had his car to live in, but he certainly found it difficult. He was granted Newstart Allowance but he found it difficult to survive on when he had been on such a good salary while employed.

He first came to SJC to see if he could get help with his mobile phone and internet account. Thankfully he was with Telstra. Telstra have the Telstra Bill Assistance Program (TBAP) which gives vouchers to some welfare agencies, so that we can help our clients who are experiencing financial difficulties and are unable to pay their Telstra bill. It is a really good system and it is important to be able to help clients stay connected, especially those who have school-age children who need to use the internet for their homework.

Harry needed his internet and mobile phone so that he could apply for jobs, send his CV off and make appointments for interviews. Without it he would be stranded. The phone and data package was a contract he had taken out when he was in the paid workforce. There was no way that he could afford it on Newstart Allowance, but he needed it. SJC happily used some of our TBAP vouchers to pay the first month to keep him connected. Then he needed another month's connection, so we used some more of our vouchers. Harry was applying for lots of jobs and would often get to interview stage but just did not get the position. Each time he came and saw us he was more depressed.

We bent the Telstra guidelines a little and supported him for many months. In June, he came back to SJC with the biggest smile on his face. He had found himself a good job in Sydney. He had just come in to say 'thank you' and said that as soon as he was on his feet he would support us, and he did.

## Thank you

Many thanks, you are wonderful people.

Thank you for your support, you let us do what we are really good at.

I am sure that if we pull together as a team, we can achieve something special.

We achieve so much but we can only do that because we have so much support from you. Thank you once again; you are St John's Care.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your support for this year. You have done so much. Every time you put something in the basket at church you are helping someone survive.

I think that there is something wrong with the way things operate. You give the food and I get the joy of giving it away.

The support we receive from you is absolutely amazing, and I cannot tell you often enough how much it is appreciated.

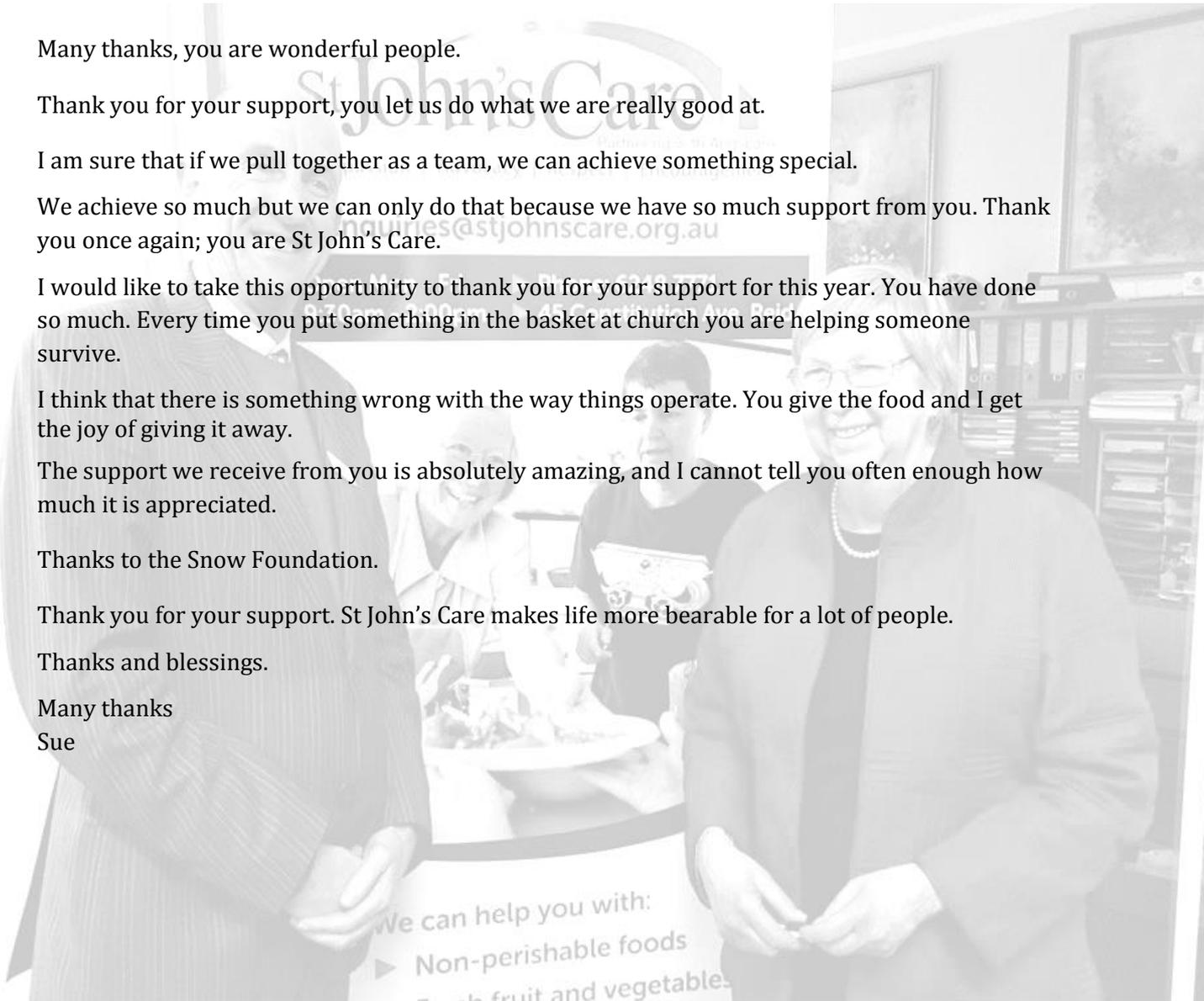
Thanks to the Snow Foundation.

Thank you for your support. St John's Care makes life more bearable for a lot of people.

Thanks and blessings.

Many thanks

Sue



## Contact St John's Care

St John's Care is open 9.30 am to 2.00 pm Monday to Friday.

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