

Welcome,

We are delighted to share with you this special edition of our LIFELINKS newsletter, provided as part of, and in support of, the Archbishop's 2025 Winter Appeal for LifeLink.

In this Year of Jubilee the Church has called on Catholics around the world to be **"Pilgrims of Hope"** to our brothers and sisters in need, and to recognise and celebrate those who give of themselves and their time to deliver hope to them.



As Archbishop Costelloe SDB writes in his appeal message, we don't need to look far for **'inspirational heroes of hope'** than one of the many agencies supported by LifeLink.

**The Shopfront**, which serves on the frontline of need here in the Archdiocese of Perth, has been managed by Damian Walsh for almost 10 years now, with support provided predominately by his generous and loyal group of volunteers.

Every day, they warmly welcome 'visitors' to their 'home' in Bentley, providing meals, counselling, emergency relief, access to GP's, basic foodstuffs and household items, a place to shower and refresh, linking them to other government and community support services.

**These visitors come from all walks of life and for all sorts of reasons** – homelessness, financial crisis, struggling with mental health conditions, needing emergency relief due to a critical change, looking for respite from their troubles.

But one thing they share is the fundamental human need to feel seen, to feel genuinely cared about, to experience human interaction and engagement, to not feel isolated or lonely.



**This is at the very core of what The Shopfront does.** Each and every visitor is welcomed without judgement, with a friendly smile and a great deal of compassion.

We seek to assist and fulfil their urgent needs as best we can, but it is in the hope, friendship, love, compassion, encouragement and understanding that we truly see, experience and walk in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd.

In this newsletter we will introduce you to the personal stories of two wonderful men who have been long-standing visitors and friends to The Shopfront. We hope it provides an insight into their need, how it occurred and what life is truly like for someone who is homeless.

In addition, we speak with Damian Walsh and hear the latest news, needs and hopes he has for The Shopfront.

We hope this information will help you discover, celebrate and recognise all our heroes of hope, and motivate you to be a Pilgrim of Hope for someone in need.

With my best wishes,

**Brett A Mendez**  
Manager, LifeLink



We wanted to learn more about the issue of homelessness, to understand how and why people become homeless, the impact it has on their lives and how The Shopfront agency is making such a very real and positive difference in their lives.

**Luc and Murray**, two long-term friends and visitors to The Shopfront, volunteered to speak with us, as they had a few things they felt important to share with our Archdiocesan community.

The rendezvous had been arranged by Damian Walsh, Director of The Shopfront, who had known both men for about 9-10 years as regular visitors who received help and support from the agency.

It was obvious once we started chatting that both men had a genuine affection for each other, and for Damian.



## “It’s my safe haven.”

### ...LUC’S STORY

**Luc (53) has been a regular visitor to The Shopfront ever since word of mouth on the streets led him to its original Maylands location.** Born in Belgium, he’d had what he describes as “a troubled and unhappy childhood”.



It perhaps explains why he left home at a young age to travel so far away to work on a kibbutz in Israel, following the same pathway his sister first walked some years earlier. Luc loved his time there working in the aquaculture side of things. He became an important part of the community, so much in fact that he extended his one-year term of service to more than five years.

**But it was love that would eventually lead Luc to move and settle permanently in Australia.** Whilst at the kibbutz, he met and eventually married a lovely woman, a primary school teacher, who was from Perth, Western Australia. In 1993, the couple arrived and settled in Perth. Luc held various factory or blue-collar jobs and looks back with fondness on the 20 years he worked for BCG Cement.

Right from the very beginning, their relationship was ‘challenging’ as Luc puts it, mainly due to his issues and their many differences. The greatest of these was that Luc absolutely did not want children, and his wife deeply wanted to be a mother. Eventually, this led to their divorce.

**Luc explained that he has battled health and mental health issues for much of his life, and how this led to alcohol misuse and anger management issues which have impacted so dramatically on his life.**

*“I suffer from atrial fibrillation – an irregular pulse or heartbeat – which means that blood doesn’t flow properly, and I have an increased chance of having a life-ending stroke. I take medication of course but that also causes me problems.*

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*I've been diagnosed with Manic Depressive Bipolar which means I have massive mood swings up and down, I'm easily distracted and make inappropriate decisions and sometimes have symptoms of psychosis such as hallucinations and delusions. I'm quick to anger and have control issues. This has led to problems with relationships, friendships and the law.*

*'The Beast Within,' as I have named it, can't be tamed with medication because that would affect the meds I am on for my heart, and it could kill me. So I live on this roller-coaster and do the best I can. I've attempted suicide several times as it all became just too much for me," said Luc.*

After many years of going on his own, dealing with his issues and still maintaining some control over his life, Luc started a relationship with an older woman, and they moved in together. It was a turbulent relationship right from the start and resulted in a great deal of stress that manifested into bouts of uncontrolled anger. This in turn led to legal problems when Police had to intervene in their relationship and Luc had a violence restraining order (VROs) brought against him.



Unable to work, isolated and without family or friends to support him, Luc found himself homeless.

The only place he could afford was a site at the Queens Grove Caravan Park for \$25 per night. So he moved there, sleeping in his van and later setting up a more permanent tent as 'home'. But eventually money ran out and he ended up living on the streets. He was now truly homeless.

Luc found The Shopfront and Damian by word of mouth on the streets and has been a regular visitor for more than 9 years now. Damian and he have established an obvious bond when you see the two interact together.

*Luc said, "The Shopfront truly is my Safe Haven. It's the place where I can find real support or assistance with whatever I may need. There are people there who genuinely care about me.*

*That's the biggest thing. I feel connected to and accepted by everyone at The Shopfront – Damian, the staff, the volunteers and my fellow visitors. I've made friendships that I value greatly, like my mate Murray.*

*My days on the street thankfully ended about 5 months ago when, with Damian's help, I was able to secure a safe one-bedroom unit at St Pat's in Fremantle (St Pat's provides support for people facing homelessness in Perth's south metro region).*

*I've had some issues I have to admit adjusting to my new life indoors, but I tell you I couldn't be happier. I don't miss the constant stress and worry about being assaulted or my meagre possessions being stolen.*

*The Shopfront threw me a lifeline to a much better life, and I will be forever grateful," said Luc.*



# “I’m not homeless. I’m residentially challenged.”

## ...MURRAY’S STORY

**Murray (48) is physically fit for his age and circumstances. He absolutely loves footy and held dreams as a young man of playing AFL for the Eagles, his beloved team.**

Murray has been homeless for decades, living on the streets of Perth across the metropolitan area. He said he has met hundreds of people living on the streets. While some were bad people who did bad things, the vast majority were just victims of circumstance who were basically good people.

His childhood, as he described it, “*was violent and chaotic*” due to an alcoholic father and his mother (herself a Ward of the State) who had no guidance or experience in how to bring up, or properly care for children.

As a young man, he said he was a bit of a ‘sheep’ and followed the example of friends into drugs and alcohol. Addictions which would plague him for many years.

Murray said, “*I was also diagnosed with Bipolar and that had huge impacts on my ability to go to school, to focus, to maintain self-control as I was always feeling so angry, to actually feel like a part of society.*”

Leaving school at just 13 or 14 years of age, he commenced work as a Bakers Assistant. But drugs, alcohol and poor choices led him into contact with WA Police and over time, resulted in him having “a holiday” at the Rangeview Juvenile Remand Centre – a juvenile remand prison facility for young boys aged between 10 and 18 years.



*“I was 16 years old and had been charged with assault, disorderly conduct and minor theft. From then until I was about 27 years old, I was heavily addicted to methamphetamine. That doesn’t help when you have anger issues let me tell you,”* said Murray.

**Anger, Alcohol, Anxiety and Amphetamines have all led to Murray’s homelessness. By his own admission, he’s a Straight ‘A’ student of an imperfect life.**

*“This all led me to the streets, but I don’t consider myself homeless, more residentially challenged,”* joked Murray.

Murray said, “*Finally about ten years ago, after being in and out of rehab, I started to get control of myself. I realised I couldn’t act on*

*feelings of anger towards others when they had done absolutely nothing wrong. I have tried to follow a sober road. I fail from time to time and end up down some side streets, but mate I eventually make my way back on track.*

*The Shopfront has been an important part of me trying to help myself and keep my head pointed in the right direction. Damian and all the volunteers are fantastic, they really do care about us and mate we (the homeless men) know if someone is being real or not. I first met Damian, (pauses) it must be when he started working there about 9 or so years ago.*

*He’s someone I trust and someone I know will be there for me. The Shopfront has given me food, sleeping bags, toiletries, clothes. I shouldn’t say this but I’m being honest. The Shopfront has probably stopped me from shoplifting what I need.*

***I isolate myself from others, so I don’t lose control in terms of my anger issues. But like anyone, I need people in my life. The best thing about the Shopfront is that I have formed real friendships with other visitors and the volunteers, and I get that much needed human contact.***

*That’s it... The Shopfront allows us to make attachments and genuine friendships, and we are so grateful,”* said Murray.

I ask Murray two last questions. What is it like living on the streets today compared with 10 years ago, and if I had a magic wand, what would he most like in the world.

*“The streets are very different today. We used to have a sense of brotherhood or community and looked out for one another. I still do that for the newbies I encounter out there, I look after them, guide them, try as best I can to educate them.*





*But the increase in drug and mental health issues has turned the streets into a lonely, violent and frightening place where you can't sleep properly for fear of being assaulted and all your possessions taken. I don't recommend it," he relied.*

As for his wish, it's a humbling one...

*"There is no way on the money I get that I can afford to rent somewhere to live even if there was a place available. Rent is more than I get, and I still have to eat every day. The HomesWest waiting list is years long mate and there are women with children to house first and I support that.*

*I can't live in shared accommodation because of my need to isolate myself. It'd only cause more problems.*

*So my wish is to have a little place I can call me own, that I can pay for with whatever money I get and that I can look after on my own. I don't want someone telling me what to do every minute of my life. I'd keep it clean; I'd look after it and I wouldn't bother anyone.*

*That's what I want," said Murray.*



Note: As Murray leaves he shares with me where he sleeps these nights. It's safe and meets his needs. But because it is near a school which has something on there on a Tuesday evening, he said he'll go back late tonight so he doesn't disturb or worry anyone.

He wished people would look at him without judgment, without fear.

## **"Grateful to do what we do. Hoping to do more."**

...THE SHOPFRONT



**As he enters his 10th year of service as Director of The Shopfront, we take an opportunity of catching up with Damian Walsh to discuss the state of homelessness in the community, how The Shopfront is coping with a significant increase in people seeking support, and his hopes for the future of the agency.**

Damian said, *"The statistics relating to homelessness in Perth are concerning. **We are advised there are 3,600 young people under the age of 18 are classified homeless and more than 12,000 adults.***

*A majority of these people are couch surfing with friends and family, accessing low-cost housing options like caravan parks and tent sites or fortunate to secure government or organisational accommodation like St Pats. Still the actual number of people living on the streets would surprise many people I suspect.*

*At The Shopfront, roughly speaking, we welcome thousands of visitors each year. Our daily meals service at our Bentley HQ has on average 20-30 people attending and our twice weekly meals service at St Mary's Cathedral is growing each month.*

*108 visitors a month will call on us seeking assistance - requests for food, emergency relief, housing and counselling. They come to us from 48 different suburbs, so we know that their need is widespread.*

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With the cost-of-living crisis we are seeing more families coming to us for food hampers or help paying electricity or other household bills.



**Sadly, this is also evident in people's generosity. We used to almost count on receiving donations of food, toiletries and other essentials. But as households across the board struggle financially, donations have dried up.** We recently spent an annual emergency allowance of \$4,000 to meet unexpected demand is just one month!

We are so grateful to each of the Catholic schools' which have generously donate food, hampers and toiletries. *I want to make special mention of, and acknowledge, John XXIII College, Chisholm College, Santa Maria College, St Brigid's College, Sacred Heart College (Sorrento) and Mazenod College which continue to so generously support The Shopfront year in, year out.*

**Our cupboards are literally bare. I've never seen it like this. We desperately need donations of canned foods, household needs and toiletries (including feminine hygiene products).** *With winter just around the corner, we urgently need sleeping bags and blankets. Unfortunately as businesses also are finding it tough, so we don't have a regular supplier of these absolute necessities at the moment.*



Just today, I received a call from a single mother with 3 children aged under 5 years old. She was told it would be years before public housing became available for her and her children. She has been forced to squat in an unused HomesWest house that she knew was vacant. She was truly distraught. Sadly, these calls come all too frequently these days."

**We ask Damian what his priorities and hopes are for The Shopfront looking forward.**

"Currently our ability to help people in need who call on us for help is limited to what people and other resources we have on hand. We will continue to focus on the core objective of providing emergency relief, compassionate support, companionship and hospitality to all visitors.

Our parishes have been so generous and so supportive of The Shopfront ever since it was first established. In this Year of Jubilee, I know many parishes and parishioners will be focusing on being Pilgrims of Hope and looking to support our agency in some way. My hope is that every parish will look at what they can do to support us in our mission of care to those in need.



Our Bentley location limits who can access our centre since the government closed the railway stop right near us. Visitors have to walk 500 metres from the nearest bus stop. When we originally moved to this location from Maylands, it was to be where the most need existed geographically.

But things have changed over the years and now the real hot spot for need is Midland. There are so many people seeking help in that area. I would love to see The Shopfront relocate or open a second centre there, even if it was for just a couple of days a week. We would need an extra employee to assist with the increase in demand which I know is an added expense, but I'd really like to make this possible.

This is what I'll include in my prayers whilst at the same time making sure to give thanks for all that we can and are doing for our brothers and sisters in need, and for all those who so generously assist and support the work of this fantastic agency," Damian said.