



WE & YOU



# Newsletter

## December 2024

VALERIO DANIEL DE SIMONI  
ASSOCIATION *open fearless positive*

*In the spirit of reconciliation the Valerio Daniel De Simoni Association Inc. acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.*

### **In this edition:**

Looking back on VDSA's programs:

- Refugees & Asylum Seekers
- Asylum Seekers Centre Lunches
- VDSA Vegetable Garden

2024 News:

- Vale Paola Marmini
- VDSA prize
- VDSA end-of-year picnic

Dear All,

The year 2023-2024 has been for VDSA a year of positive, rewarding progress of volunteers' work in many areas.



of immigration is trying in many ways to push them to return to their home country even though they had to flee from there for fear of persecution and were provided either with protection visas or classified as being part of "modern slavery".

In order to maintain and strengthen our connection with our refugee friends we held an End of The Year Picnic in Bronte on December 8. As you can see from the photos it was very successful! Our friend Nathan was the first among the people we used to visit in Villawood Detention Centre to pass the exam to become Australian citizen, congratulations Nathan!

### **Refugees visits**

You will read a complete report from Charity Heynes below. I personally want to thank Charity and Lizzie Kruse for their incredibly generous work, especially helping some of the people who couldn't apply for the Albanese government's offer of permanent visa to refugees and who therefore had been left in limbo. For them life is very difficult now because the department

### **VDSA lunches at the ASC**

You can read Mariella Totaro's report below. Again I want to thank Mariella



for her incredible ability to make her endless, perfect work as Coordinator of the lunches groups seem “very light”, work that she has been doing for 13 years.

### VDSA organic vegetable garden

Please read Anne Rutherford’s report below. I can only say that without Anne’s constant work, planning and love for our garden, our project of weekly delivery to the Jarjum College couldn’t have gone ahead.

I also want to thank Sandra Marchesini, who recently joined the garden group and who has been another important addition to our team.

### Art Competition

We successfully started this very innovative project last year. The project originated from VDSA in Italy: the central idea is to use Valerio’s book *Travel Journals* as a starting point to promote the theme of “The Journey” through art work among young refugees and indigenous youth. The Journey can be real, imaginary, a recount of parents’/ ancestors’ journeys, in short it’s quite open and it is left to participants to use different media (writing, painting, music, video etc). VDSA liaise with schools, youth centres etc., provides Valerio’s book as a reference and gives prizes.

We started successfully last year with Central Sydney High School and the project has gone ahead this year as well.

In September, after having been liaising with Kingswood High School in Penrith, we selected and gave prizes to two Indigenous students for their artwork focussing on the “The Journey”: one was an interesting short story the other one was a lovely poem.



We were also asked to be part of the Marrickville Youth Centre Jury to select the best artwork which Indigenous Youth from the school nearby have submitted on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November. Prizes were handed on December 17 at the event at the Centre. We liaised in the past with that Centre sponsoring two young



Indigenous exhibitions, the connection was very successful and we are happy to continue to collaborate with the Marrickville Youth Centre.

I believe that Art Competition can be an opportunity for VDSA to expand its intervention among refugees and Indigenous Youth in a creative way, not only in Sydney but in all Australia.

This is a project that can also attract new volunteers to VDSA, especially young people who don't have time to physically visit refugees or indigenous people but who, through Internet, social media, through contact with schools, youth centres, can create connections, partnership with other organisations proposing new, creative projects for marginalised people to express art and also to access art.

I have been discussing and planning step by step this project with Sandra, our great Treasurer and Secretary and her suggestions have been invaluable, so I thank Sandra and I hope that our collaboration will continue next year.

I have also asked the VDSA Committee to dedicate part of the next Committee Meeting in 2025 to plan an open zoom meeting inviting all VDSA member to discuss the plans and directions of our Association, with an eye to attract especially young people.

In short: "Creative ideas and possible projects for the future of VDSA".

Lorenzo, our VDSA editor and excellent Vice President, will send info

on date and time. I thank Lorenzo for this and for his continuous good work for the Association in many different ways.

And thanks again to Sandra, this time for her ability to wear the two hats of Treasurer and Secretary of VDSA. Although during these past three years Sandra gave birth first to beautiful daughter Leonora and recently to adorable little Sofia, she has continued working for VDSA as usual and we couldn't notice any difference.

I also want to thank Jamie and Ted for their precious financial advice to the Treasurer this year but also throughout these past years. I am a disaster in that field so I am very happy that younger people in our Committee have experience in finance and can provide VDSA with reliable advice!

The last part of my report regards projects done outside VDSA Australia but somehow related to VDSA and Valerio:

The documentary *Sand Roads*, an Italian-Australian coproduction, created in part with footage from the journey Valerio, Jamie and Ted undertook in 2010-2011 plus recent interviews of the people and the families affected by that journey and Valerio's death. It will be released hopefully by June 2025.

By then our website would look perfect, up to date and visually in good shape. Hopefully many new people around the world will be interested in browsing it. Lorenzo and Ted will look into it, thank you to both of you!!

## The school in Malawi

You might remember that in 2013 we partnered with Slow Food in Africa, a network which so far has created more than 3.000 organic gardens in Africa. Since VDSA can't donate money outside Australia, we managed through private donors (all VDSA volunteers) to sponsor an organic vegetable garden at Gamba school in the North-most and poorest area of Malawi.

We continue helping that school, always through private donors, and so far we have built for them a bore hole for clean water and donated solar panels for classroom electricity.

This year we are paying fees for a Gamba student who has been selected for a boarding secondary school but can't afford to pay the fees of US\$160 per trimester. Again from a very generous donor we were given enough money to pay for the 2025 fees.

## VDSA Italy

The three organic vegetable gardens that our twin sister Association in Rome has built and continues to cultivate, give delicious veggies to refugee youths. This year the Association has also created a vegetable garden for the Guido Alessi primary school, near the Auditorium where the VDSA main veggie garden is located. Young students learn how to plant seeds, to look lovingly after seedlings and then taste the delicious veggies they have contributed to growing.

The last news coming from Italy is that the Fondazione Archivio Diaristico Nazionale/The National Diaries Archive, where Valerio's handwritten diaries are kept, has recently published a prestigious book with photos and part of the most interesting diaries kept in the archive, including Valerio's writing, among others.

Finally, I would like to thank again our great VDSA Committee for their incredible voluntary work, what a good team we are!

Last but not the least, I would like to thank all the VDSA members who this year participated in different capacities to our projects.

Let's not forget that the great asset of VDSA is its grassroots origin and the fact that all our work is voluntary. People trust us, work with us and donate to us. Let's hope to continue growing through this path!

In a world devastated by terrible wars, our VDSA contribution is to projects aiming at helping people in need, always hoping for a future of peace and love.

Happy Holidays!

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## VDSA's Refugees & Asylum Seekers Program

*Charity Haynes*

Regular visits were made during the year to various refugee families living in the Western Suburbs. These range from visiting families that are established in the Community, have work and whose children are at school or university, to those still struggling to find work and put food on the table. Often support from VDSA is the only way that they can survive.

It is very rewarding to see how some of our refugee friends have become successful and are establishing a life here, with their children achieving positive outcomes in dance, sport and at university. One client has set up her own business and imports clothes from India and sells them from her home and at various outlets.

Unfortunately, there are several families that are still under a lot of stress, particularly those who do not have a permanent visa. In the case of one young man, he did well at high school but is not able to go to university or TAFE without a visa. However, this has not prevented him from advocating for refugees and he is speaking at a rally at Parliament next week on this issue.

Another group that is struggling are single mothers, who have young children, and no partner to support them. Even for those with children at school, it is very hard to get work that just takes place in school hours and

after school care is very expensive. This is a group that VDSA has focused on supporting, so that they can start to support themselves and start to be independent. Another group that VDSA supports are those with health problems, which make it hard for them to get a job. Often a small contribution to their expenses enables them to take the steps needed to get help. Unfortunately there is still a fairly large group of refugees waiting for visas. This includes a 17-yr old who has just finished high school, but with no visa cannot go to university or TAFE.

In addition to regular visits to refugees in the Western Suburbs, several picnics were organised at Coogee beach for refugee clients. The children enjoy the chance to swim or play in the playground, and a delicious picnic is shared, making it a popular outing in the summer. The end of year picnic in Bronte in 2023 was well attended and the delicious food and beautiful surroundings, made it a lovely way to end the year. It enables those who are not able to visit the refugees in the Western Suburbs a chance to meet them. refugees or indigenous youth, VDSA and its purpose as an Association.

Overall VDSA has really contributed to “the relief of poverty, sickness, distress or helplessness of refugees and asylum seekers”, as our Constitution sets out. For more information visit: [valeriodesimoni.org/en/causes/refugees-asylu](http://valeriodesimoni.org/en/causes/refugees-asylu)

## VDSA Lunch Group for the Asylum Seekers' Centre or, *The Foodies*

*Mariella Totaro-Genevois*  
Coordinator, VDSA Lunch Group ASC

The VDSA Lunch Group, created twelve years ago to support the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) by providing a monthly hot lunch for their clients, has successfully kept its pledge over time.

The meals we offer are entirely donated by our volunteers, despite VDSA's offer to reimburse volunteers for ingredients. We cater on each occasion for 35-40 people, and in preparing lunches we follow the regulations and advice of the ASC. For example, we make sure that there is always a main vegetarian dish and that any meat dish is halal. Leftovers are carefully packed at the end of each lunch, so the ASC clients can take them home ensuring there is no food waste.

The VDSA Lunch Group continues to be highly flexible. It comprises 20-22 people; some of them have been

involved since the very beginning of our project, others have joined more recently, and often there is a welcome and unexpected person volunteering at the last minute to replace any dropouts.

This year - sadly - we have lost a wonderful supporter and team member, Paola Marmini, who passed away last July. Her kindness, generosity and sophisticated culinary skills will not be forgotten.

Nevertheless 2024 has been another year of friendly, delicious VDSA meals at the Newtown ASC. Our contribution is acknowledged through the warm letters of thanks I receive after each lunch, and in the ongoing enthusiastic comments of ASC clients and staff that I meet when I am on duty there.

Finally I am delighted to add that the VDSA Lunch Group roster for Semester 1 2025 has already been completed thanks to the generous, reliable cooperation of our members. This is why my report can be concluded with a heartfelt thank you to all the magnificent supporters of this VDSA project.



## VDSA Veggie Garden Report

*Anne Rutherford*

This year we've continued our relationship with Jarjum College for Indigenous kids at risk, delivering veggies every week for the kids' lunches. After experimenting with different varieties last year, this year we decided to focus on a more limited range of veggies that we know we can grow successfully in our location. We've delivered some sensational harvests of leeks, three varieties of silver beet, kale, lettuce, parsley, mint, rosemary, shallots, oregano, sage and thyme. Our tomatoes are growing well and we should have fruit very soon.

This year we reclaimed our two garden beds that get the best sun and this has improved our harvests greatly. We've also worked to build up our soil and we're seeing the benefits of better nutrition to the garden beds. We're gaining more knowledge as we go, through trial and error and some judicious advice, and this is boosting our success rate. With eleven garden beds there's a lot of work planting and weeding and maintaining the passages around the garden beds.

Our core group of four workers has done most of the work, with some occasional extra help, and we can always use extra hands, even as a one-off, particularly when we have a special garden working bee. We've been trying to grow veggies from seed without much success and we could really use some help with that. Anyone out there with a green thumb who could take a planted seed bed and nurture it into healthy seedlings?



## Remembering my friend Paola Marmini

*Mariella Totaro-Genevois*

With deep sadness we share news that our committee and generous colleague at VDSA, Paola Marmini, passed away on July 14 2024, after a brief illness(\*). It was entirely in keeping with Paola's generosity of spirit and sense of justice that she joined the work of VDSA since its foundation. When our president, Vittoria Pasquini, asked me to reminisce about Paola in this newsletter, I was humbled and honoured to share my treasured memories of her.

Paola and I were introduced to each other in 1978 during an interval between classes at the then Department of Italian of Sydney University. Our interaction began in a professional context and rapidly thrived as we both loved our work and were keen to experiment and share new language-teaching projects.

As time went by and we got to know each other better and better, our relationship spontaneously developed into a strong and profound friendship, and it is from the perspective of being amica di Paola that I'll talk about her.

In Italian the word for friendship is amicizia, from the verb amare; it suggests a rapport based on feelings and implies, among other things, sharing experiences.

Contrary to the idea that to be friends you must be similar and like the same



things, we didn't. Paola liked blue, I love green. Paola was from Northern Ferrara, I am from the Southern Naples, Paola loved crime stories I am keen on legal-political plots. Paola hated oysters, I adore them. Paola played Sudoku, I have not an inkling about it, Paola would wade calmly into the sea only if the water was warm, I enjoy diving in nippy waves. I could go on, but aside the stimulating tension created by our differences, what they reveal is Paola's non-judgemental nature and inclination to always respect and give space to the other.

If I were to highlight her quintessential virtues, I would select kindness and patience, attributes apparent in any situation she was in and regarding everybody. In one historic and humorous event, a senior colleague from another department, developed a crush for beautiful Paola Marmini and enrolled in an Italian beginners' class taken by her. Unfortunately, he was

not only sort of tone-deaf to the Italian language but also very stubborn, so he re-enrolled on a regular basis. He would stand outside Paola's study with a variety of excuses just for the chance to see her. A long-suffering and committed educator, Paola continued to offer him the same patient, generous support given to all of her students. When I once asked: 'ma perché non lo mandi al diavolo?' (why don't you tell him to go to hell?), she answered with her gentle smile: 'poveretto, ci prova ma non ce la fa' (the poor thing, he tries but can't cope).

On one occasion, Paola was given a dog, a handsome Schnauzer called Motti. It was the first dog she had owned in her life, and she adored him. Except that Motti was a kind of canine Houdini and managed to continually escape from her garden in Watson's Bay, lifting himself like a helicopter over any barrier or fence. Many times, coming back from work, Paola had to wonder the streets in the dark looking for him. However, no complains! That recurring event became just an amusing part of our conversations. Plus Motti had to follow a breed-specific diet, so his devoted owner also cooked ad hoc meals for her beloved dog.

Talking of cooking, Paola was a superb and creative cook; she could do anything - and I mean ANYTHING. I am put off by recipes that are lengthy or include spices I am not familiar with, but Paola could breeze through the most complicated cooking instructions with no fuss and obtain mouthwatering results.

Her cakes are literally legendary among her friends.

When together on holidays on the South Coast, we shared the preparation of meals; just watching her dealing with food was like a Master Class in haute cuisine. Even a humble fruit salad done by her became a sophisticated combination of flavors and colors with perfectly cut fruit cubes and, I remember, no melon: too imposing.

Paola adored crafts and antiques markets and always managed to discover new ones to explore, her searches, however, were mainly aimed at finding gifts for others, friends or family members living in Italy. Her good taste and generosity were beyond description.

Unquestionably in all these years both of us went through areas of light and other of shadows, moments of joy and moments of sorrow, yet we did it together and our friendship kept growing stronger and richer.

This is why I believe - and whoever knew her would agree - that Paola's influence on us and her contribution to our life has been so significant that nothing will erase it in the tide of time. We will miss her but cherish her memory.

Vale Paola, my beloved friend.

\*In Memory of Doctor Paola Marmini  
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## VDSA end of year picnic 2024

Once again, the VDSA end of year picnic was a warm and relaxed occasion to reflect on and celebrate the year's accomplishments in the company of friends, while enjoying the generous, multi-cultural banquet that the event has become famous for. But this year was an especially happy celebration of our dear friend Nathan's becoming an Australian citizen! A terrific, hopeful note to end the year on.



