



VALERIO DANIEL DE SIMONI  
ASSOCIATION open fearless positive



# Newsletter

## December 2025

*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:

- Refugee visits
- Lunches at the Asylum Seeker Centre
- Weekly deliveries of organic vegetables to the Jarjum College of Indigenous students
- Promotion of "Art Competition" among refugees and Indigenous Youth
- Promotion of Sport among young refugees and Indigenous Youth
- Promotion of VDSA and its initiatives among possible donors.

Dear All,

I hope you are well and ready to rest and relax during the Festive Season!

I want to start this report by saying I believe that the year 2024- 2025 has been again a successful year for VDSA.

We continued and enriched our main projects, as well as developing some newer ones.

#### Refugees' visits:

A full report on this program by Charity Haynes follows below in the



newsletter, but I want to here personally thank Charity for her constant, generous work with our refugee friends. Her regular visits in faraway suburbs, her organisation of picnics throughout the years have allowed people new to this country to feel at home, to feel that they have friends they can count on in difficult moments.

I also want to thank Lizzie Kruse for her invaluable help to some of our refugees. Her ability to navigate the bureaucratic system, at times challenging to people of a different language and backgrounds, makes a big difference.

Alongside Charity and Lizzie, the VDSA Committee has organised on December 7 the annual End of the



Year Picnic in Bronte to bring together VDSA members and refugee friends. This event continues to be a success. This year three more refugees became Australian citizens: Ranjini, Komathy and Mathy. We celebrated this important achievement with a chorus of cheers, many hugs and of course delicious food from many different cuisines. Nathan made a moving speech talking about the historical connection between “them” and “us”, remembering Valerio, Nicoletta Zanardi and Paola Marmini, all sorely missed.

### Lunches at the Asylum Centre

Mariella’s report below will explain in detail about this long-term VDSA initiative.

I not only want to thank Mariella but briefly say that Mariella’s work as Coordinator for the lunches at the ASC for 14 years has been invaluable. Her communication skills used with both the ASC and the teams of VDSA volunteers involved in preparing and serving the meals, have made the complex coordination of this service seamless. Again, thank you Mariella!

### Weekly delivery of organic vegetables:

Please read Anne Rutherford’s report below.

I thank Anne for her great work in the vegetable garden. She is an invaluable and constant leading presence, along with Sandra Marchesin whom I thank as well. Without them the production of the veggies and the weekly delivery at the Jarjum College wouldn’t have been possible.

Recently Charity has occasionally joined the group as well and I thank her

for her help.

### Art Competition

This is the third year we offered this prize to young refugees and Indigenous Youth. We think that the result is positive and therefore we will continue proposing it. In 2024-2025 we have offered the Art Competition Prize to one school and to one Youth Centre. The school is Kingswood Secondary in Penrith, and the winners were two young Indigenous girls. One wrote a beautiful poem, the other a moving short story. Once we will have renewed our website, I think we should publish the work of all the winners of our competitions.

The Youth Centre is Midjubury Youth Centre in Marrickville. Before it was called Marrickville Youth Centre and Lizzie Kruse was coordinating many interesting projects there for Indigenous Youth.

VDSA sponsored two art exhibitions there, one in 2016 and another in 2018.

This year we have offered four prizes to the winners of the VDSA Art Competition. The Centre Coordinator Louise Hammond decided to extend the offer to Indigenous students in schools nearby to enter the competition. All the artwork presented consisted of paintings and we were mesmerised by the excellent quality of the artworks.

All in all, the results were very promising, and our intention is to go continue this programme.

### Promotion of Sport among young refugees and Indigenous Youth

Since its beginning VDSA has been in favour of promoting sport among young

refugees and Indigenous Youth and we have sponsored several sport events.

This program was created in honour of Valerio, a very good soccer player, having also in mind that sport can be valuable both physically and mentally for Indigenous and refugee youth who potentially carry trauma.

So, this year, in conjunction with Amnesty International we have promoted a Sport Gala Day in Fairfield, coordinated by Roman Abasy, a young Afghani refugee, ex taekwondo champion, now Youth Settlement Worker with CORE Community Services. We couldn't participate in the actual event, which was postponed due to heavy rainfall, but Ted, who is in charge of VDSA Sport program, will be in contact with Roman to liaise future projects.

#### Regarding projects done outside VDSA but related to VDSA and in memory of Valerio:

The Documentary *Sand Roads*, an Italian-Australian production created with archival footage from the journey Valerio, Jamie and Ted undertook in 2010-2011 in conjunction with recent footage of family and friends affected by that journey and by Valerio's death, is still in the making.

A new Italian law regarding film production blocked the funds allocated by the Italian producer to the documentary, forcing a stop for a while to its editing. In the recent days editing has been resumed so there is hope that by the end of the year the documentary will be finished.

#### The Gamba school in Malawi.

Thanks to private donors (all VDSA members) we are able to continue helping the Gamba school and its students.

As you may remember, in memory of Valerio, private donors sponsored the school's organic vegetable garden, enabled the school to build a bore hole for clean water and donated solar panels for classroom electricity. Also these donors are now paying school fees for an ex Gamba school student who was excelling academically for him to attend a boarding school to further his studies.

#### VDSA Italy

In Rome our twin sister Association continues to cultivate two organic vegetable gardens for under-age refugees and one as a community garden.

Next to the community garden it has also created an organic vegetable garden for a school nearby, the Guido Alessi primary school, where young students learn how to plant seeds, how to grow seedlings, and above all, how to love being in nature.

#### Latest News

It comes from Italy, from *The Fondazione Archivio Diaristico Nazionale* in Pieve Santo Stefano where Valerio's handwritten diaries are kept. And it is very good news.

I visited the Archive and the Museum of Diaries annexed to it in my recent visit to Italy and I was told by the Director that Valerio's book *The Travel Journals* is the most sold book at the Museum of Diaries. She asked us for more books because the Museum is

running out of copies.

Finally, I want to make an announcement: I have decided to step down from my position as VDSA President. In March 2026 it will be 15 years since Valerio's death, 15 years since VDSA was created, 15 years since I became its President.

I think it is time to pass the relay to the younger generation.

I believe and have faith that they can continue the work we have started and contribute a fresh energy to new projects. They are the future of our Association, and I am sure they will do great things.

My resignation has been accepted by the VDSA Committee, I will still be part of the Committee I will still work in various projects and I will pass on my experience and contacts. I aim to remain a support and a consultant for VDSA.

At the last VDSA Committee meeting I asked our Vice President, Lorenzo Logi, to become the new VDSA President. He has very generously accepted, and the Committee has approved my proposal. Lorenzo has shown natural leadership qualities throughout the years which together with his professional expertise (being a journalist and a linguist) will make him a very competent President. His appointment will start from now on.

Also, Jamie Kenyon, VDSA Committee member, has accepted to step in as Vice President. Jamie has been one of the founding members of VDSA, Valerio's closest friend and travelling companion during the unforgettable journey they undertook with Ted Davant in 2010-2011.

To both Lorenzo and Jamie, I am

grateful.

I know that both of you have young families, two children each, so your decision to accept these new appointments is laudable and on behalf of VDSA I thank you.

Sandra Carvajal will remain as our excellent Treasurer and Secretary. Sandra, your work is impeccable, and I couldn't have done it without your competence, advice and creativity. Thank you, Sandra!

I also want to thank Ted Davant for accepting to be in charge of our Sport Events. As I said we want to further extend our intervention in that field. We believe that Ted has the qualities and the competence for improving VDSA involvement in promoting sport among refugees and Indigenous Youth. Thank You, Ted!

A thank you also goes to Conrad Knerr for having recently accepted to be part of our committee. Conrad lives in the South Coast but often comes to Sydney for work. He has been a student of mine at ANU and he was Valerio's Music teacher. His expertise in the field of Ethical Investments will help our Association to stay remain aligned on the right path.

Last but not the Least I want to notify you of the recent announcement by Mariella Totaro-Genevois of stepping down from her position as Coordinator of VDSA Lunches at the Asylum Seeker Centre. I won't repeat what I have already stated about Mariella, but I will add that since the beginning she has been a pillar of our Association. I can only thank her again from the bottom of my heart because her positive, steady attitude helped me many times in many

difficult moments. I understand her decision, and I wish her all the best in her future. She will still be part of VDSA, will participate in making lunches for the ASC and will help the new Coordinator to find her way in this program.

It wasn't easy to replace Mariella but we have been very lucky to have found a substitute for her position in such a short while.

Kathryn Welch, Associate Professor, Department of Classics and Ancient History at Sydney Uni has recently retired and she is happy to take Mariella's position as Coordinator of VDSA Lunches.

I want to thank Kathryn for accepting this role.

Kathryn is not only an excellent scholar, but she is also a very generous, compassionate woman, green at heart, successful coordinator of many important projects in her and other fields.

I am sure she will follow in Mariella's footsteps and will do wonderfully. Mariella has already liaised with her to hand over her role.

Finally, many thanks go to all the VDSA Members who have contributed in different capacities to our projects.

Without all of you, our work would not have been possible!

I believe and we have been told by people many times that we are a good, honest, creative community of volunteers doing a lot with compassion and generosity.

This is the reason why people trust us, help us and donate to us.

Let's continue in this positive trend!

Love, Vittoria

## VDSA's Refugees & Asylum Seekers Program

*Charity Haynes*

Regular visits have been made, approximately once a month, to the refugee families supported by VDSA. Of those visited, several have been helped financially for several years. However, it is very rewarding to see that many refugees are now well established and have work. This ranges from supportive roles in schools, caring for sick and disabled people, to running their own business. In one case, it has involved importing saris and other clothing from India and selling them from a purpose-built converted van, allowing a "shop" to be set up in many different locations, such as at a festival or sporting event. Another has her own beauty treatment business.

Among these good news stories there are still refugees that we visit who have serious problems. This includes health issues, difficult family circumstances or still no visa. One young man, who will be 20 this month, still has no visa and consequently not able to continue his studies, despite achieving very well at High School. In another instance, the partner of a mother, was re-detained, leaving her to support their two children, aged five and seven years. Health problems can often be an issue, making it difficult or impossible to work, since most refugees do not have an extended family locally to help them at such times. It is in circumstances like these, that a small donation from VDSA can make a big difference, in the ability of refugees to move on from their problems and

have hope about the future.

In addition to regular visits to the Western Suburbs, occasional meetings were organised at Coogee beach. The opportunity to swim is greatly appreciated, especially for those with small children. Also, it is a very pleasant way to share a picnic and spend time together in a relaxed environment.

The end of year picnic at Bronte beach in 2024, was well attended, with a delicious, shared picnic making it a culinary treat. The weather was fine, and several families took the opportunity to have a swim as well.

We have also attended some of the celebrations held by our refugee friends, such as a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party. More recently, we were able to celebrate that one refugee friend now has a Permanent Protection Visa.

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*

During 2025 the VDSA Lunch Group has continued providing monthly luncheons to the clients of the Asylum Seekers Centre exactly as scheduled. There have been no changes in our work, as always the food is fully donated by our volunteers, it is cooked at home and then served on location. Our teams leave the kitchen spotless and make sure that leftovers are neatly packed for the participants to take home if they wish.

Remarkably the Lunch Group's composition has been steady; there are 21-23 people involved but on a flexible basis. If someone drops out a replacement is often found at the last minute via friendly contacts. And while



there are times when a new person joins for one occasion only, there are cases when the casual helper becomes a permanent member.

The VDSA Lunch Group teams are by now fully acquainted with the system, and regardless of an unpredictable number of clients (average 30) they always manage to make meals enjoyable occasions when food is nutritious and delicious. The thank you notes recurrently received from the ASC are an eloquent proof that our initiative is genuinely appreciated.

Most recently the ASC has been advised of my resignation from the position of Coordinator and informed about Kathryn Welch replacing me from 2026. However, as our roster for Semester 1 2026 has been already organised, there will be no disruption for the Centre during the transition, and I'll remain a working member of VDSA Lunch Group.

On Thursday 13, while I was there with my team companions for our scheduled lunch, Elijah Buol CEO ASC walked in the room where we were about to serve food; he gave a generous speech to thank me for my contribution to the Centre and handed me a bunch of beautiful flowers. I was taken by surprise but I was really moved.

In conclusion, and being this my last report I am delighted to say that the VDSA Lunch Group is as vigorous as ever, and that I trust its excellent work will continue effectively supporting the ASC in the future.

Answering Elijah Buol's kind words I remarked that it had been an honour and an amazing learning experience to work for the ASC.

Now I wish to add that I am deeply grateful to the VDSA for having offered me that unique opportunity.



## VDSA Veggie Garden Report

*Anne Rutherford*

This year we have continued our relationship with Jarjums College for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids at risk, by delivering veggies on a weekly basis 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 garden. 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 have 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 volunteers has done most of the work, with some occasional extra help. The group can always use extra hands (volunteers), even as a one-off, particularly when we have a special garden working bee. We have been trying to grow veggies from seed without much success and we could really use some support with that. leeks, bok choy, kale, heaps of fresh herbs and other delicious veggies when as available. Every week's delivery is a little different and the college is very happy with our offering.

We're constantly learning more about what we can grow well in our location. We've tried germinating our own seed but have not had a lot of success. We're also planning to invest in nets for a

couple of the garden beds to help us get ahead of the voracious aphids and caterpillars. We started the year with funds from our previous sales of our much sought-after pesto but we haven't had the resources this year to make pesto – it's very labour-intensive.



In the coming year we will purchase seedlings, manure, netting, etc. to continue with our efforts.



## VDSA end of year picnic

The 2025 picnic saw an excellent turnout of local and refugee friends. The highlight was celebrating the recent awarding of citizenship to refugee friends Ranjini, Komathy e Mathy nd hearing from Nathan, who gave a moving speech (see next page) about his appreciation for the VDSA refugee programme support he has received.



## **Speech from Nathan**

Good afternoon, everyone,  
I stand here today with a heart full of gratitude and sincere appreciation.  
On behalf of my entire family, I would like to extend our deepest and most heartfelt thanks to the VDSA, its President, and all of its members.

Your support, your efforts, and your commitment have meant more to us than words can express. You are a community that truly embodies compassion and solidarity. The continued contact and visits you have made have been a tremendous source of comfort during difficult times, and we are profoundly grateful that you keep us connected to this wonderful community. As we move forward, let us take a moment to think about Valerio, Nicoletta, and Paola and pray for their souls in peace.

Thank you so much for keep contacting us and visiting us. Your kindness will never be forgotten.

Thank you.  
Grazie di cuore