

It takes a village...

As Mary's House Services prepares to open a vital second refuge for women and children escaping domestic and family violence, we meet some of the people helping the charity make room for hope

It's still dark when Sarah* leaves the house with her little boy. There's no neatly packed suitcase, no time to decide what to take, what to leave behind. Clutching her son's hand and his favourite teddy bear, they escape with almost nothing, except each other, and the hope that there will be somewhere safe to go...

For northsiders like Sarah and her son who are impacted by domestic and family violence, Mary's House Services is that safe place.

Founded ten years ago by a group of locals who recognised the gap in essential support for women and children on the north shore, the charity has provided more than 20,000 safe room nights, as well as

"It affects people from all walks of life, regardless of age, culture, education, profession or postcode"

countless hours of specialised support and wellbeing services, to help families in trauma begin building their futures.

Now, as Mary's House reaches its 10th anniversary, it will be able to save more lives with the imminent acquisition of a second refuge property in Sydney's northern suburbs. Expected to welcome its first residents in 2027, this new property will more than double the organisation's accommodation capacity. It will also be the only refuge in the north shore area offering self-contained apartments to provide crisis accommodation for women and children of all ages, including families with pets.

Despite Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declaring domestic and family violence a national crisis, Mary's House receives no government funding for its refuge services. Instead it continues to rely on the generosity, skills, time and commitment of individuals, businesses, philanthropists, volunteers and

*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED
WORDS: ANNA GORDON



The Volunteers

Andrea Taylor, Vanessa Green, Samantha Crawford and Jenny Kent all live in McMahons Point

Domestic and family violence doesn't have a postcode. It can affect all ages, all demographics, anywhere, at any time. It's important for us to support each other, to come together to stand up for what's right and engender a sense of safety throughout our community.

Each of us knows of people who've been supported by Mary's House, from young mums through to women in their 70s and we do whatever we can to help out, from selling raffle tickets and volunteering at events to attending dinners, fundraising and spreading the word near and far to rally people to get involved.

The annual Mary's House Walk in October is such an important event for raising awareness and we'd encourage everyone to take part. It's a really visible way of showing that the community is behind this incredible charity.

We want to give women and children hope, to show that good people are out there and that good things can happen.

"Someone helped me when I was younger and when I asked them how I'd pay them back, they told me to pay it forward instead. That's what I've tried to do ever since"

- Samantha Crawford

LOCAL LEGENDS

community groups who refuse to look away and share the founders' belief that everyone has the right to live free from abuse and violence.

"The new refuge is a relief," says Mary's House Services' CEO, Yvette Vignando. "It's an opportunity for our team to say yes to more women and children. I'm deeply grateful to our supporters, who understand that families in trauma should be offered hope, healing and housing."

As well as providing safe accommodation, Mary's House runs a Community Programs Centre which provides tailored services and practical pathways to independence. There's access to pro-bono experts from a range of professional services including trauma informed counselling and safety planning, legal and financial advice, employment support and more. A specialist tech team is also available to remove trackers from mobile phones, tablets, laptops and even children's toys.

Mary's House
Services CEO,
Yvette Vignando

"Domestic and family violence is one of the most significant social challenges facing Australia today," Yvette says. "It affects people from all walks of life, regardless of age, culture, education, profession or postcode. There's often a perception that communities like the Lower North Shore are somehow immune from it but the reality is very different. Behind closed doors, many women and children are in just as much danger, physically and psychologically, as those in other areas. Locals have increasingly understood that gap in services and want to be part of the solution."

"We don't receive a cent from government to operate our existing refuge and refuge casework services," she continues. "Community support is the reason why Mary's House Services exists. It's our origin story and will always be part of Mary's House DNA. If it hadn't been for those founders who decided to take a risk and start something, we wouldn't be where we are today and so many women and children would have stayed in dangerous, damaging situations and lost their lives because support was not available. We are very proud, encouraged and motivated to be community supported and we're not stopping here. We're determined to provide more crisis housing for women and children in Sydney's northern suburbs to meet the ongoing increases in demand that we're experiencing."

That determination is echoed throughout the snapshot of the Mary's House supporters we meet over the next few pages, from sewing quilts to fundraising, local businesses offering services, sporting teams speaking out and community members showing up.

"Behind every woman who finds safety, every child who experiences stability and every family that begins to rebuild their future is a community of people who have chosen to stand alongside them," Yvette concludes.

**"The new refuge is a relief.
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The
Northbridge
Quilters with one of
the beautiful quilts
they have made
and donated to
Mary's House



The Supporters

General Sir Peter Cosgrove and Lady Lynne Cosgrove live in Milsons Point

When we found out about Mary's House, we thought, right, we'll help in whatever way we can. We're pretty enthusiastic recruits and whenever fundraisers come along we're delighted to be invited to participate and spread the word. If you get the opportunity to contribute to Mary's House, its upkeep and its plans, do so. You'll be expressing some of the most marvellous Australian characteristics: rolling up your sleeves and having a generous heart. It all helps women and children reach safe shelter and receive compassionate, practical support. This goes beyond simply providing a place to stay. It's about giving them the chance to feel that sense of safety and belonging we all need and deserve.

The Quilters

Carolyn Matthews is the Community Quilt Organiser for The Northbridge Quilters

We've always had a tradition of making quilts for charity and we've been involved with Mary's House for the best part of seven years now, donating around 14 quilts each year for adults, kids and for babies.

I think all of us can imagine the fear of being in a situation where you need to leave your home for your own safety and the safety of your children, not knowing who to turn to or where to go. We want women and children arriving at Mary's House to know that their community is thinking about them and for them to have something that belongs to them. They can take their quilt with them when they leave Mary's House, too, if they wish.

There are hundreds of hours of time, care and love poured into every quilt we make. We hope they feel like a big hug, something these women and children can wrap themselves in at a time when they need comfort, safety and a reminder that they are not alone.

**"We want women and children
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If you or someone you know is affected by issues in this story, contact Mary's House Services on 1800 002 111 or the NSW Domestic Violence Hotline on 1800 65 64 63. If there is an immediate safety risk, call Triple Zero.

LOCAL LEGENDS



Mary's House Patron, Her Excellency Sam Mostyn, centre, with some of the charity's original founders, including Roger Williams OAM, far left, and Emma Rossi, second right

The Founders

Northwood local Emma Rossi and Roger Williams OAM from Mosman are two of the original founders of Mary's House Services

Mary's House began with an idea that the community turned into reality. A group of us from The Parish of Our Lady of the Way in North Sydney came together and wanted to do something practical to help women and children on the north shore who were escaping domestic and family violence. We put a notice in the parish bulletin inviting locals to a meeting about starting a refuge. Almost 30 people came, bringing skills, connections and a determination to make it happen. The energy and passion we had was palpable and we put in hundreds of hours alongside our full time jobs. We were very privileged to have a group of people with expertise and connections that meant

we could get things moving in record time. We identified a property, negotiated a discounted lease and rallied an extraordinary network of supporters from architects and builders to businesses, community groups and individuals who all contributed their time, money and skills.

Things really took off when Mary's House was adopted by the wider community, from north shore leagues clubs and Rotary groups to locals of all religions, backgrounds and ages. As well as fundraising, people donated furniture, offered pro bono services, cooked meals and even organised birthday gifts for children in the refuge.

We're very proud of what we've achieved with Mary's House, but the demand still outstrips the resources. Domestic violence is a crisis. Ongoing community support is vital and it's that spirit of generosity that's at the heart of Mary's House.

"As Patron I acknowledge Mary's House Services tenth year of operations and reflect on the gift of refuge, safety and care they provide women and children in the community impacted by domestic and family violence"

- Ms Sam Mostyn AC, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia



Coby Thomas, centre, and The North Sydney Bears with their signed pledges



Tanya Taylor, far left, with the Mayors of Mosman, Lane Cove and Ku-ring-gai at Mary's House Hope Lives Here 10th anniversary event

The Mayors

Tanya Taylor, Mayor of Willoughby City
Mary's House does incredibly important work supporting women and children at a time when they need safety, care and practical help. I'm very proud that Willoughby City Council can work alongside Mary's House, including helping with transitional accommodation when suitable Council housing is available. A safe place to live can make an enormous difference for someone leaving violence and rebuilding their life.

Councils have an important role to play. We're part of people's lives through our libraries, staff, services, community centres and public spaces, which means we can help raise awareness, recognise when someone may need assistance and connect them with specialist support.

The Sports Team

Coby Thomas is Captain of The North Sydney Bears

I stand united with my teammates against domestic and family violence. We do not condone abuse in any form - physical, emotional or psychological - and we're committed to showing respect to women, children and others around us, on and off the field. If we see or hear anything that isn't right, we will not stand aside. We will stand up. Silence is not an option.

In April we became the first New South Wales Rugby League team to introduce a Captain's Code pledge against domestic and family violence. We've supported Mary's House as a community partner for the past two years and attend their events, raise money and engage in conversations about the charity and their work. As athletes, people look up to us, especially kids, and we want to be strong role models in the community. We've got a voice we can use to help foster safe communities and be part of breaking the cycle of family violence.

"If we see or hear anything that isn't right, we will not stand aside. We will stand up. Silence is not an option."

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LOCAL LEGENDS

The Next Generation

Volunteer Charlotte Humphreys is from Mosman

I first became aware of Mary's House when I was the 2025 Service Captain at Redlands Cremorne. We started a relationship with the charity and organised fundraising events throughout the year. I think a lot of people my age know domestic and family violence is an issue, but don't realise how much it relates to us. We see it in movies, but it happens where we live and involves people our age. Our understanding of relationships is still being shaped, so it's important we learn to recognise when something is becoming unhealthy. I'm now a volunteer for Mary's House, assisting with events, fundraisers and more. It's fulfilling to know I'm playing my small part in helping women and children change their lives.



"I think a lot of people my age know domestic and family violence is an issue, but don't realise how much it relates to us"

Step out for Mary's House this October!



Bill Kagaras, second left, and his team from last year's Mary's House Walk



Put your best foot forward on Sunday 25 October for the 2026 Mary's House Walk, an 8.8km walk from St Leonards Park through Balls Head Reserve and Lavender Bay, finishing at North Sydney Oval. This annual, family and dog-friendly event brings the community together to stand against domestic and family violence while raising vital funds for Mary's House Services. Among those getting behind the event is Bill Kagaras and his team at On Path Physio on Blues Point Road. As well as putting together a team for the Mary's House Walk, Bill also organises a fundraising Mother's Day raffle each year. "We've been taking part for three years

now," Bill says. "What Mary's House do is so important and the walk is a great way for us as a community to show that we say 'no' to domestic and family violence."



Scan the QR code →

to find out more and join over 1000 locals in stepping out for Mary's House at the 2026 event.
maryshouse.org.au

