

REAL PEOPLE, REAL STORIES Spring 2021

Sarive, *iTrack* participant



**THANK YOU FOR BEING A
CHAMPION.**



everyone's family

YOU CONNECT STUDENTS TO A WORLD OF POSSIBILITY

Over the last 18 months we have seen the impacts of COVID-19 on schooling. Children and their families have had to adjust to remote learning, some for weeks at a time.

Yet thousands of families living in poverty cannot afford computers and internet, and many don't have the technical support or training to adequately engage. The high cost of digital connectivity is simply another layer of hardship and worry.

In this edition, we show what it could take to close the digital divide – and how Champions like you help students connect with opportunities.

Zoey's story on page 6 highlights the challenge many students encounter. Zoey's family facing serious illness and hardship meant she was locked out of many online learning benefits. But you helped her unlock the code to digital literacy.

You'll also meet Sarive on page 4, who began life in a war zone. You've helped connect Sarive with a wise mentor and kept her digitally connected. This support is taking her places she never imagined.

As this edition of *Real People Real Stories* goes to print, The Smith Family is looking forward

to welcoming our new Chief Executive Officer, Doug Taylor. Doug brings to The Smith Family extensive national and international experience in leading innovative social impact initiatives in partnership with the not-for-profit, government, philanthropic and the corporate sectors.

Thank you for being such a loyal and generous monthly supporter. Together we can help students take a big leap across the digital divide to a brighter future.

Best wishes,



Judy Barraclough
Deputy Chief Executive Officer



I would like to thank everyone who donated to our Winter Appeal. Thanks to your generosity, more than 15,000 disadvantaged children will have access to our out-of-school learning programs, providing critical support for their education this year.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: A NEW KIND OF POVERTY

Life in today's digital world is ever-changing. Online learning and flexible working arrangements are transforming how we study and do our jobs. And digital technology is creating new possibilities for the type of work we do. Yet many disadvantaged students without access to computers or the internet at home are falling further behind at school. This can also impact them later in life, as they might lack the skills to take part in our digitally connected world.

DIGITAL INEQUALITY: A SNAPSHOT

- **Poor affordability:** many families cannot afford digital devices or connectivity. And the cost of internet access can be higher in rural and remote areas compared to metropolitan Australia.
- **Geography:** slow, unreliable broadband access can isolate students from their classmates and teachers.
- **Digital literacy:** disadvantaged parents and grandparent carers often lack technological skills to connect or navigate any challenges or issues.

ALL STUDENTS SHOULD GET TO BUILD SKILLS FOR A DIGITAL WORLD

The Smith Family has been helping a number of families access essential computers, laptops, tablets and internet. And we give families who need it most access to digital education and support to make the most of technology.

HOW WE ARE ENSURING MORE STUDENTS AREN'T LEFT BEHIND

Your monthly gifts – at weekly out-of-school *Learning Clubs* you help us deliver in 91 communities around the country, disadvantaged students can access computers so they can do their homework.

Learning for Life sponsorship – from primary school onwards, a laptop or tablet is now essential in many schools. The financial support provided by sponsorship can make a digital device possible for a student that could otherwise not afford one.

Digital Access – this program with Suncorp and a philanthropic partner delivered 1,000 *Digital Inclusion Packs* to disadvantaged families across the country during COVID-19 last year. They get a device, internet connection and technical support to help navigate schooling at home. This year we are in the process of delivering an additional 4,000 *Digital Inclusion Packs*.

Donate Your Data – our partnership with Optus enabled us to access this initiative which provided 21,676 *Learning for Life* students with a Prepaid SIM, data, plus unlimited calls and text enabling them online access to support their learning and homework. Students also received additional data donated by Optus customers.

Together we are helping to close the digital divide!

AFTER FLEEING WAR, YOU'VE HELPED SARIVE TRIUMPH

After fleeing war in the Congo and five years in a refugee camp, Sarive's family settled in Australia. They struggled to build a new life. School was hard. "Learning English was a battle," Sarive recalls. Her parents had to learn all the same things she was. "My parents made great sacrifices to get us here, but they'd never been to school themselves," she says.

Then Sarive entered the big new world of high school. She was still carrying the scars of war and displacement. It's usually a time when young people start to dream of their future careers. The work also becomes a lot harder. Sarive was struggling to adapt and keep up. She was too overwhelmed to think about her future. What made things worse was not having a laptop – considered an essential – to do her class and homework.

Sarive was smart and driven. But she lacked confidence and resources to achieve. "My parents had been great role models in so many ways," she says. "But the fact they'd never been to school and couldn't offer me educational support made high school especially challenging."

When The Smith Family began supporting Sarive, her outlook changed. Sarive was eligible for a free laptop through our *Digital Access* program – through our Suncorp partnership. It helped her get the most from the technology-rich environment. Thanks to your ongoing support, students like Sarive can join learning programs for help with homework, numeracy, reading and technology.

"Through The Smith Family, I could access fantastic opportunities," she says. "Extra encouragement and help allowed me to embrace my education. Guidance boosted my confidence. I developed a positive mindset about my education and other aspects of life."

As Sarive moved into senior high school, her future was now looking much brighter – but she still didn't know how to reach her post-school goals. What she needed most was someone to help plan a transition to university and beyond. Thanks to Champions like you, Sarive could join our *iTrack* program. She gained a mentor who gave her advice and encouraged her. Sarive enjoyed every session.

"My mentor guided me through my career pathways, study and workplace options," she says. "At first, I was shy to share my thoughts, but they opened my eyes to opportunities I had not explored. My mentor helped me build aspirations and reach for my goals. They showed me how to create a resume and gave me tips on how to study."

Today Sarive has started a double degree in psychology and criminology. She has exciting plans for a career in social justice. Sarive loves university and is making the most of every moment. She has joined university societies and does internships and volunteer work. Sarive says: "This is a way to give back to the community that has given so much to my family and I."

Sarive, iTrack participant



“From a young age, I’ve felt immense gratitude at the prospect of attending university. I would not be where I am today without my mentor and Smith Family Champions. You have helped me strive and thrive and opened so many doors.”

“When my parents were struggling to pay off internet bills it was hard for me to keep on top of my work. I can now finish assignments without stressing the internet will be gone soon.” – Sarive

CHAMPIONS LIKE YOU PUT THE WORLD AT ZOEY'S FINGERTIPS

Connie had to juggle breast cancer treatment and money troubles with supporting and encouraging her daughter Zoey and three other children in their learning.

"I had to stop work because of the treatment," recalls Connie. "Having to cope financially on only my husband's income was very hard and we struggled a lot."

When a family faces a double hit of serious illness and financial hardship, it creates a lot of stress for children to deal with. It's common for students in Zoey's situation to see keeping up with school and homework as an impossible goal.

Zoey, Learning Club participant and mother Connie



"If someone was considering supporting The Smith Family, I would tell them: 'Go for it' – you'll never see a smile as big as the one on my daughter's face." – Connie

“Zoey had also just started Year 7 and after the year we’d all been through with my cancer and COVID-19, she was finding things hard,” Connie says. “She never did her homework and was falling behind in class.”

But thanks to kind Champions like you, Zoey was able to join The Smith Family’s learning programs. At a very overwhelming time, she was supported to keep up in class.

After school, *Learning Club* is a place Zoey goes each week. The safe and supportive environment provides volunteer tutors to help her get the most out of digital learning and stay on top of homework.

“Zoey never used to do her homework, it was always a struggle.

“*Learning Club* has been so helpful. She goes every week and the volunteer tutors help her get her homework done. She’s handing it in at the end of each week and is doing so well,” says Connie proudly. “The support is outstanding.”

In schools today, children need access to digital tools and an internet connection at home. Zoey had to start Year 7 with a laptop, but her parents couldn’t afford it. Fortunately, her sponsor’s support helped them with Zoey’s uniforms and other school essentials. This meant her parents could scrape together the extra for the laptop. Now Zoey’s *Learning Club* tutor helps her get the most out of her device and build digital skills for her future. She truly couldn’t receive this help without you.

Zoey has also enjoyed using her computer for reading practice with a student buddy in our

student2student program – The Smith Family’s peer reading program where students are partnered with an older student mentor who helps them learn to read, which your generous monthly gifts help fund. Zoey can read to her buddy to get help sounding out hard words. “Zoey has just had to grow up so quickly,” says Connie. “With the support of Smith Family programs, she has become a better student.”

And soon, Zoey will get the chance to take part in our *iTrack* online mentoring program. Once a week she chats online to her mentor who is a professional to become interview and job ready. “I can see Zoey excelling – nothing’s holding her back,” Connie says.

Today Connie is in recovery from cancer. It brings great peace of mind that Zoey has been able to keep up at high school during this difficult time. Zoey tells Connie that when she grows up, she wants to be a nurse to support people with cancer.

“The advice I have for Zoey is to dream big and go for what she wants.” – Connie

Connie is so proud that after all they have been through as a family, Zoey is thriving at school. “Zoey has overcome obstacles in leaps and bounds, with help from Smith Family Champions,” says Connie. “If someone was considering supporting The Smith Family with a regular monthly gift, I would tell them: ‘Go for it’ – you’ll never see a smile as big as the one on my daughter’s face.”

WITH THE INTERNET DOWN, JASON'S BUDDY BECAME HIS LEARNING LIFELINE

Courtney had always tried so hard to help Jason thrive with a learning disability. Like many in their low-income community, she struggled with the cost and demands of modern family life. Trying to help Jason achieve his best and juggle the needs of his two siblings was overwhelming.

Then the pandemic began. Her partner Stephen lost his full-time job. Her two-year-old could not attend day care in the lockdown. Courtney had to supervise Jason and his sister Imogen's remote schooling. Jason's learning disability meant he could not sit still, get settled and listen. It was chaos.

"The hardest thing with the pandemic was that our kids had been pulled out of school. Mum had turned into the teacher and they'd never dealt with that before," says Courtney. "It was almost impossible to get Jason to do anything."

Their family was also suddenly facing an added layer of hardship – digital poverty.

The internet connection was often down because upgrades were underway on local phone towers. This meant for weeks they were forced to read and complete remote lessons on a small, prepaid smartphone.

Jason could have been cut off from learning completely in the lockdown. But thanks to amazing Champions like you, he was invited to join our *student2student* program. He began working with a student buddy, who called two or

three times a week, to help him with reading.

Reading out loud with a buddy became Jason's learning lifeline. It was more fun – and less stressful – than squinting at words on his mum's smartphone. "Jason's a maths kid – he's not a reading kid," says Courtney. "But *student2student* made a huge improvement to his literacy.

"I'd listen to the way Jason's buddy helped him sound the words out. He had such patience.

Over time I heard Jason's vocabulary change. The results were unreal, especially for a child who has behavioural issues and usually can't sit still, let alone read one page."

Courtney says the fact a young person – and not his mum – was helping Jason read is why *student2student* worked in lockdown. "Jason was suddenly connecting to his buddy, who was a couple of years older and a bit more mature. It was a bit of an outlet," she says.

"These buddies deserve a lot of credit, because they work really hard with kids like Jason," says Courtney. "Jason's buddy has worked around his after-school sporting activities – even calling him on the weekend at a time that fit around his football."

Last year's lockdown left many excluded from learning. With Jason being back in classroom she's excited about other opportunities to

help him build skills and confidence. *Learning Club* is one – a safe space to get homework help.

Today, Courtney credits your monthly support – and Jason’s wonderful buddy – for keeping him learning in lockdown, despite the digital divide. “We couldn’t have coped without those *student2student* phone calls,” she says. “They were the best thing that could’ve happened.



Courtney and Stephen with their children Imogen, Cassidy and Jason

HOW COVID-19 WIDENED THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

For Courtney’s family and many others in their tight-knit Indigenous community, the lockdown has widened the digital divide. Courtney says many families – her own included – cannot afford the laptops, tablets, or basic internet access that are essential for today’s education.

“My daughter Imogen will start Year 7 next year,” she says. “At her high school, learning is completely technology-based. Everything is online, and their homework gets emailed. They all need an iPad bought – but how many people in a community like ours can afford an iPad? You also have to be able to afford the internet connection.”

“That’s the digital divide right there.”

The local library in one of the communities Kara works in



“We want all our *Learning for Life* families to reap the education benefits of being digitally included. It’s never too late to learn.” – Kara

FRONTLINE WORKER SPEAKS OUT FOR OLDER CARERS

Canteen orders, absentee notes, homework. There is hardly an aspect of modern school life that isn't done online. *Learning for Life* Coordinator Kara is on the front line and meets many older caregivers struggling to adapt. She's worried their children could be left behind.

There are millions of people in Australia who don't have reliable internet. In fact, some regional and remote communities have no web access at all. It's no surprise that thousands of Australians living in these places – especially older people – lack digital skills and the confidence to learn.

"It might be eye-opening to supporters that many grandparents are carers and are victims of a generational technology gap," Kara says. "I remember one grandfather in his seventies who was living with disadvantage and had low literacy. And he became the primary carer to a six-year-old granddaughter and a 15-year-old grandson. I saw how hard it was for him not having the digital literacy to support the children to learn with technology. Even ordering online from the school canteen and submitting online absentee notes were really hard."

In regional areas of NSW near Bathurst and Orange where Kara works, many families live near the poverty line. They cannot afford digital devices and costly internet plans. Smaller towns in the region lack libraries where young people can go online to do homework. But the biggest challenge, says Kara, is a lack of digital literacy in older carers.

"Grandparents can struggle just to log on to the school portal or communicate with their school over Facebook, let alone supporting our students with technology in their learning," Kara says.

This is where The Smith Family can make a big difference. Through our *Digital Access* program, made possible by our corporate partners, we provide digital device and internet access to families. We provide training to help parents and carers improve their computer skills and confidence online. It's never too late to learn.



Kara, Learning for Life Coordinator

STEM LEARNING CLUBS ARE BRIDGING THE GAP

The digital divide is a harsh reality for many students and in Launceston, Tasmania, Learning Clubs are one of the many ways that you are helping us bridge the gap.

Shannon, a *Learning Club* Coordinator, spoke to us about two *Learning Clubs* in Launceston who are focusing on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). STEM helps to equip students with problem solving and digital technology skills required in the workforce.

“At the moment we are focusing mostly on engineering challenges,” Shannon said. “We give them an imagined problem and they have to design something to overcome the problem. For example, they have designed bridges, towers and even balloon powered cars.

“We have grade 3 children right through to grade 6, so we can’t be too technical with what we do. But we try and keep the activities fun and engaging. In the past we have done robotics and next term we will be focusing on science.”

“Each year we get the kids to do a PowerPoint presentation on their favourite experiment. When we see these, it becomes apparent the very different levels of digital literacy among the students. You have some students making their own YouTube clips through to some literally writing a couple of words on a slide.”

The *Learning Clubs* also provide students with access to technology and laptops to complete their homework on. This provides a great opportunity for students who may not otherwise have this option at home.

These out-of-school *Learning Clubs* are run by teams of dedicated volunteers and a paid team member. They would not be possible without your generous donations so thank you!



A student learning to make slime at a STEM Learning Club

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