



Sarive, Learning for Life student

Real People, Real Stories

Thank you for changing lives through sponsorship.

Spring 2021



everyone's family

You connect your student 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 the 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 sponsorship helps a student connect with opportunities.

Zoey's story on page 4 highlights the challenges many students encounter. Facing serious illness and hardship, her parents could not afford the laptop she needed. But fortunately, someone like you put the impossible within reach.

You'll also meet Sarive on page 6, who began life in a war zone. Her sponsor's support – including help to be digitally connected – is taking Sarive 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 sponsor. 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

Learning for Life sponsorship – from primary school onwards, a laptop or tablet is almost always essential in many schools. The financial support provided from sponsorship can put a digital device within reach for students who otherwise could not afford it. At *Learning Clubs*, students can access computers for homework and advice to get the most from their own device.

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!

Zoey, Learning for Life student and mother Connie



“With all we’ve been through as a family, it makes me so proud that, with help from her sponsor, Zoey has overcome obstacles in leaps and bounds.” – Connie

A sponsor like you put the world at Zoey's fingertips

Connie had to juggle breast cancer treatment with caring for her daughter Zoey and three other children.

"I had to stop work because of the treatment," recalls Connie. "Having to pay rent and buy school supplies for four children on only my husband's income was very hard. We struggled a lot."

The family had to cover four lots of stationery, books, uniforms, bags, school photos and excursions. Zoey was expected to start Year 7 with her own laptop. She could not do her homework without one.

But there was no way for Zoey's parents to pay for a laptop and everything the others needed. "A big worry was that my kids would get teased at school for not having the correct equipment and supplies," says Connie.

Thanks to kind sponsors like you, Zoey and her three siblings received *Learning for Life* sponsorship. It covered the education essentials for all four children and the family could now buy a laptop for Zoey.

In schools today, it's vital that children in Australia have access to digital tools and an internet connection. Having her own device for school has opened up Zoey's world. She says: "My favourite things about starting high school were getting the laptop and making new friends."

Zoey has also been able to join The Smith Family's learning programs, to help her reach her potential. She reads on the phone each week with a student buddy in *student2student* – The Smith

Family's peer reading program where students are partnered with an older student mentor who helps them learn to read over the phone. This has improved her literacy skills, which will be vital for doing well at school and for the jobs of the future. Once a week, after school, Zoey goes to our *Learning Club*. The safe and supportive environment provides volunteer tutors to help her navigate 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."

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

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

"With all we've been through as a family, it makes me so proud that, with help from her sponsor, Zoey has overcome obstacles in leaps and bounds. If someone was considering becoming a *Learning for Life* sponsor, I would tell them: 'Go for it'. You'll never see a smile as big as the one on my daughter's face."

After fleeing war, a sponsor 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 for Sarive. "Learning English was a battle," she recalls. "My parents could not support my learning. They'd made great sacrifices to get us here, but never went to school themselves."

In high school, Sarive met Smith Family *Learning for Life* Coordinator George and discovered she was eligible for sponsorship. George kept track of Sarive's progress in school and would often ask if she needed any additional help. Thanks to sponsorship, Sarive could buy stationery and textbooks like her classmates and go on excursions. She was also eligible for a laptop through our *Digital Access* program - available through our Suncorp partnership. It helped her catch up and keep up in the technology-rich environment. "Since then, I've never felt left out due to a lack of resources," she says. "I've been able to strive and thrive."

Throughout high school, coordinator George also encouraged Sarive to participate in other Smith Family learning programs. "George has supported me to fully participate in my education and take on opportunities," Sarive says. "He has been a source of success in my education. We continue to have a strong and positive relationship."

A highlight of this wrap-around support has been the *iTrack* mentoring program, which helped Sarive build skills and confidence for her future. "My mentor helped me develop a resume and talked about career paths," says Sarive.

"They opened my eyes to uni courses I hadn't considered."

Today Sarive is a well-spoken, driven young woman. After the early escape from war, she is grateful for the freedom to choose her path in life. Sarive has started a double degree in psychology and criminology. She has exciting plans for a career in social justice. "From a young age, I've felt immense gratitude at the prospect of attending university," she says. "The desire to study this course came naturally, considering my background is one of crime, war and xenophobia."

With so much study ahead, it is more important than ever to be digitally connected. In the past, when Sarive's parents had to prioritise other bills, the internet would get cut off. Sarive had to go to public places to access free Wi Fi to study. This uncertainty was always stressful. "My parents struggling to pay off internet bills has made it hard for me to keep on top of my work," she says. Now, thanks to supporters like you, Sarive has internet access, a device and tech support. "I can now finish assignments without stressing the internet will be gone soon," she says.

Having come so far, Sarive says the ongoing generosity of her sponsor motivates her to focus on her education when things get tough.

"I would not be where I am today without my mentor and my sponsor – they have opened so many doors. They've helped me strive to achieve my potential."



Sarive, *Learning for Life* student

“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

With the internet down, Jason's buddy became his learning lifeline

Courtney had tried so hard to help Jason, in Year 5, thrive with a learning disability. But it took a lot of time and money to help Jason achieve his best, while also providing life's essentials for him and his two siblings. Life was a struggle.

Then Jason, 10, and his sister Imogen, 11, were matched with amazing sponsors like you. Courtney was relieved. "I was excited about all the extra learning possibilities the kids would be offered," she explains.

For the first time, Courtney could afford to send Jason to school in a proper uniform. It felt "unreal" to be able to pay for excursions, sport and other activities for her kids. "Without their sponsors I could not afford Jason's football fees and art classes for Imogen," Courtney says. "Sponsorship helps them grow in all aspects of their lives."

Then, the pandemic began. Courtney's children faced a new kind of hardship – digital poverty.

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

The internet connection was often down because upgrades were underway on local phone towers. This meant that for weeks they were forced to read and complete remote lessons on a small, prepaid smartphone. "It was almost impossible to get Jason to do anything," Courtney says.

Jason could have been cut off from learning completely in the lockdown. But thanks to his sponsor's ongoing support, he could join our *student2student* program. Jason worked with a student buddy, who called two or three times a week, to help him with reading.

Reading out loud with his buddy became Jason's learning lifeline. It was more fun – and less stressful – than squinting at words on his mum's smartphone. "I'd listen to the way Jason's buddy helped him sound the words out," says Courtney.

"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

Courtney credits Jason's sponsor – and his wonderful buddy – for keeping her son learning in the 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."

One in five students participating in our *Learning for Life* program live in families who don't have a computer or tablet connected to the internet.

How COVID-19 widened the digital divide

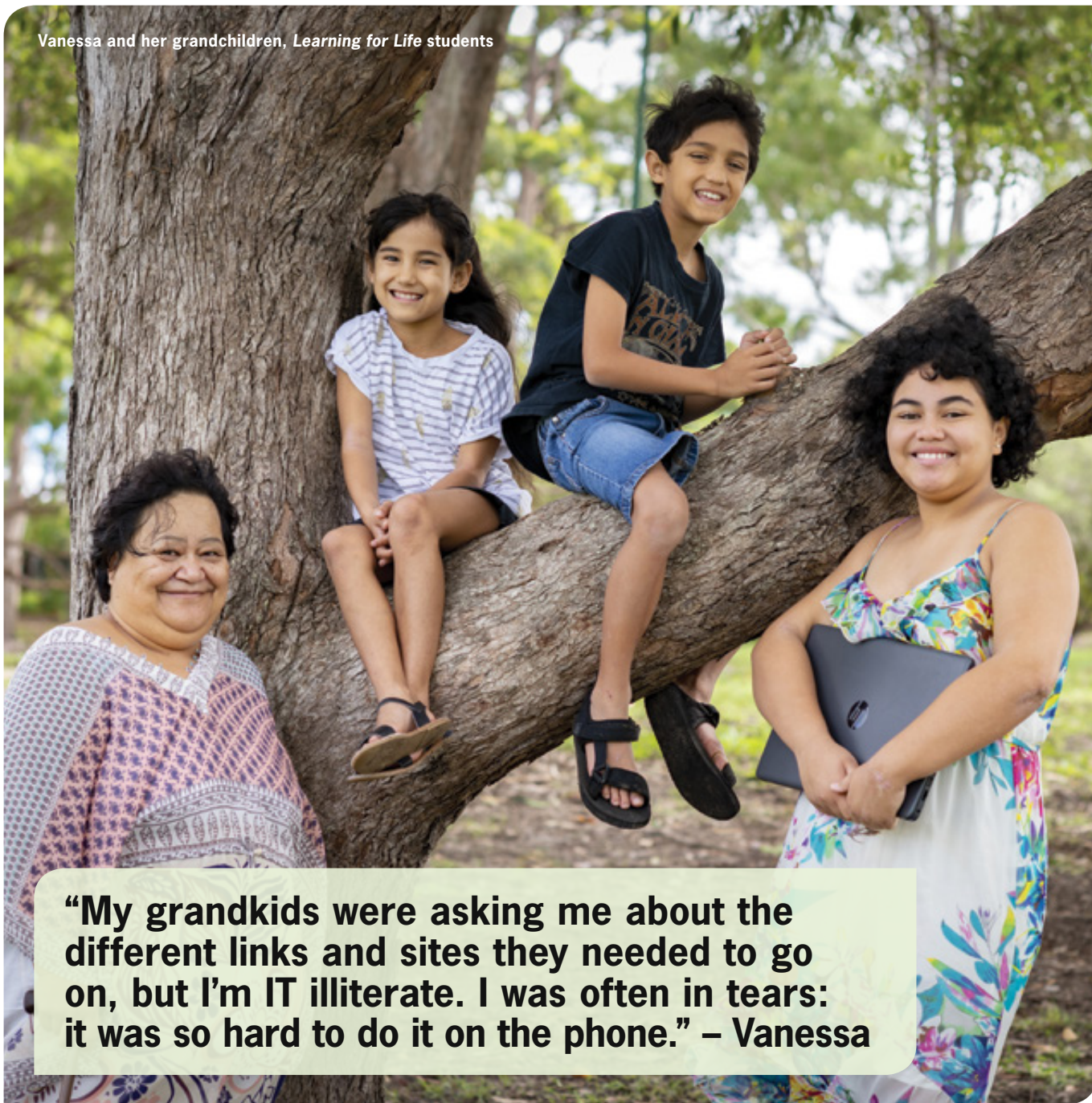
For Courtney's family and many others in their tight-knit Indigenous community, the lockdown has widened the digital divide. She says many families, including hers, cannot afford the laptops, tablets, or basic internet access that are essential for today's students.

"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 a tablet 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.**"



Courtney and Stephen with their children Imogen, Cassidy and Jason

Vanessa and her grandchildren, *Learning for Life* students



“My grandkids were asking me about the different links and sites they needed to go on, but I’m IT illiterate. I was often in tears: it was so hard to do it on the phone.” – Vanessa

Vanessa's grandkids can now tap into tech

Vanessa didn't think twice about putting retirement on hold to raise four grandkids single-handedly when the need arose. But at her age, she never thought she'd only just be covering rent and food and unable to buy new clothes for her grandchildren, Chevrolet, Shelby, Mercedes and Lexus. And yes, they were all named after cars!

Vanessa had already been living with hardship for many years before the grandkids came. Having to unexpectedly cover school essentials at her age was impossible. So, she was a "grateful grandma" when her grandkids got *Learning for Life* sponsorships, thanks to people like you. It meant proper uniforms and backpacks, quality shoes and socks. They could join in our after school programs like *Learning Club* and *student2student*. "They'd go off skipping to school," says Vanessa. "I felt so proud and happy to have The Smith Family in our lives."

Then the pandemic hit, and the disruption caused by online learning was intense. Vanessa could not afford an iPad or laptop for her grandkids to work on – let alone internet access. "I only had a little mobile phone to access their online programs," she says.

Because Vanessa's grandkids had sponsorship, the family was given a free laptop to share through our *Digital Access* program, made possible by our corporate partner Suncorp. They also received free internet and tech support to make the most of this new technology.

"When you have a laptop, it's a lifeline, especially when it's for the education of your grandchildren," says Vanessa. "It's humbling that there are people out there who don't know me but care about my grandkids building a good future."



Our frontline worker reflects on forgotten carers

Canteen orders, absentee notes, homework. There is hardly an aspect of modern school life that isn't done online now. Our *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 the 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 their 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 devices and internet access to families. We also provide training to help parents and carers improve their computer skills and confidence online. It's never too late to learn.

"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



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