

Prison chaplain brings God's light and hope to youth on the margins

For Melbourne youth prison chaplain Jwan Kada, the life-giving freedom of Jesus Christ can be found in every prison cell.

Reflecting on her vocation in the lead-up to Prison Sunday on November 11, the 33-year-old former Iraqi refugee is living her Catholic faith well outside the four walls of her close-knit Chaldean community.

"This ministry sets me free," Jwan said of the personal rewards gained while helping disengaged and abandoned youth in detention.

Inspired by Pope Francis' vision of a humble, merciful Church working in the community, the Catholic Regional College Sydenham teacher's personal life journey helps her to connect with the young men she visits.

"I left Iraq in 1996. I was 11. We left because my dad passed away and mum was alone with four young children. I was one of them," she said.

Settling into Australia with no income was initially challenging, but Jwan and her family made it through and are eternally grateful for the support from their Chaldean Catholic community.

Coming from a country with only 2 per cent Christians, Jwan knows what it's like to feel isolated and on the margins of society.

After being heavily involved in her Melbourne Church community throughout her teens and early adult life, Jwan studied a master of arts specialising in theology. She travelled to the United States to discern religious life, but found another vocation where she thought she could make a difference – teaching.

However, it was in youth detention, ministering to disengaged young men aged 12 to 18, where she found her true calling.

"I wanted a radical ministry. I went to Parkville Youth Justice Centre in Melbourne and I just fell in love with it. I visited at Christmas and from that first moment it felt like I was set free," she said.

"I really enjoy working with young people and that's why I chose teaching. They really showed me who God is and what the Church can be.

"I felt I could find the Church in a prison – it doesn't have to be just a building. What also attracted me to prison chaplaincy is Pope Francis' vision of a humble, merciful Church.

"I love the Church; the Church is in everything I do.

"I work mainly with young men who have really struggled and are trying to find hope inside prison walls. They come from really terrible backgrounds, have suffered and are just holding on; and I guess you become the face of hope for them and a reason to live.

"That's the saddest thing when you meet young people who have parents who are incarcerated, and deal with issues of drugs and alcohol and mental health issues. Most of them understandably end up committing some crime.

"I feel like they're disposed of (by society) and I really want to be there with them in their feeling of darkness.

“I probably can’t resolve all their issues, but I want to share in their darkness to help them find some light. Sometimes you are the only light they encounter.”

For the past four years, Jwan has visited the Melbourne youth detention unit for young men, aged 18 and under, convicted or on remand for various crimes.

“Some are as young as 12, which is really heartbreaking,” she said.

“The most effective thing we can do for young people in detention is to have post-release programs in place to help them reintegrate back into society. Deep formation of young people is much needed.

“Prison chaplaincy is really life-giving and if you want to connect on a deeper level with humanity at its rawest and truest form, prison is probably the most vulnerable place that you can encounter humanity.

“You are really visiting Jesus in prison.”

With 2018 being the Year of Youth, the Australian Catholic Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life is focusing on juvenile detention for Prison Sunday on November 11.

Prison Sunday began in 2016 as an initiative from Pope Francis in the Year of Mercy to raise awareness about prisoners and their families. Much support is needed for prisoners when they are released into the community and parishes throughout Australia can make a difference, especially through the service of prison chaplains.

For more information about Prison Sunday and how to become a chaplain contact your local diocesan or parish office or email: pastoral.life@catholic.org.au.

Find additional resources at: <http://bit.ly/prisonsunday>