Darwin Experts Volunteer to Design Life-Changing Disability Centre in Timor-Leste

MEDIA RELEASE

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Darwin, Northern Territory

A group of Northern Territory professionals are in Timor-Leste to help expand a vital disability care centre — offering new hope to some of the country's most vulnerable children.

From 3–6 November, a volunteer team of Darwin-based engineers, architects and planners will travel to Dili to prepare a pro bono Master Plan for a major expansion of the Alma Sisters Community Centre, which provides therapy, education and residential care for children with disabilities who would otherwise have nowhere to go.

Located just 700 kilometres from Darwin, the centre currently supports 17 children full-time and a further 30 children who visit for therapy and learning programs. Many have been orphaned or abandoned due to disability-related stigma, which remains deeply entrenched in parts of Timor-Leste.

The planned $500,000 redevelopment will double the residential capacity and significantly expand treatment and learning facilities.

Territory Talent Making a Global Impact

The Darwin volunteer team includes:

- Graeme Finch – Project Management
- Carol Cain – Stakeholder Liaison & Interpreter
- Oliver Penman – Urban Design
- Hully Liveris – Architecture
- John Mulkerns – Engineering
- Warren Fryer – Construction

"These are busy professionals giving up their own time because they know it will make a real difference," said Project Coordinator Jocelyn Cull. "Once the Master Plan is complete, it will help secure government, business and philanthropic funding to see this project built."

Expansion Plans

The redevelopment will include:

- 10 therapy and education rooms
- 4 new residential rooms (increasing capacity to 30 children)
- 2 new bathroom and toilet blocks

Community Support & Partnerships

The project is supported by:

- Catholic Diocese of Darwin
- Timor-Leste Government
- Federal MP Luke Gosling OAM, Special Envoy for Northern Australia
- Eddie De Pina, Dili community leader

Renowned musician, journalist and long-time Timor-Leste advocate Paulie Stewart (Painters and Dockers) has been instrumental in rallying local support.
"Paulie's passion for Timor-Leste and his longstanding relationship with the Alma Sisters are invaluable," Ms Cull said. "His commitment lifts the whole project."

A Mission Close to the Heart

Bishop Charles Gauci, Catholic Diocese of Darwin, said he strongly supports the initiative:

"I have personally witnessed the Sisters' ministry and was profoundly moved by their Christ-like love for the children in their care. Their dedication is remarkable, and I hold the deepest respect for them. This project deserves our full support."

In 2024, Pope Francis visited the centre, praising the Alma Sisters' mission to protect and uplift children with disabilities.

Timeline

- November 2025: Master Plan completed
- Early 2026: Funding applications
- Mid-2026–2027: Construction (pending funding)
- First stage completed: 18–24 months after construction begins

How to Support

Donations can be made through the Catholic Diocese of Darwin to support the project – https://darwin.catholic.org.au/giving/almaproject/

"Timor-Leste is our closest neighbour," Bishop Gauci said. "Strengthening dignity, access and hope for children living with disability is not only good development — it is our mission and responsibility."

For further information, contact: diocadmin@darwin.catholic.org.au