

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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*I was a stranger and you made
me welcome ...*

Newsletter 77 November 2015

The Project aims to:

- * provide hospitality and practical support for asylum seekers
- * actively network with like-minded individuals and groups who are working for justice for asylum seekers
- * promote advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers
- * raise awareness of asylum seeker issues and concerns through a range of activities

Respect

So many times when talking to people who are seeking Australia's protection, we hear things like: I just want to be respected. Or he/she is a good person—they treat us with respect. Or alternatively: I can cope with most things but not when people don't treat me with respect.

So many things in the world would be solved if each human being was treated as important as another. Our preciousness as a person does not rely on wealth or titles or skin colour, race or religion. It is simply that, as an individual, we matter. And amazingly, as an individual, we are all unique. We have a unique genetic makeup, a definitive finger print and a special personality. But then, we have so much in common. We all want to be loved, we respond to happiness and pain, we laugh and cry and we are mostly good and we all have the propensity to make some wrong decisions.

So how can we value some lives so much and appear to judge others as mere expendables?

Rightly there is outrage when a handful of fanatics kill innocent civilians in Paris but there is barely any reaction when western countries conduct drone attacks and kill hundreds of people, including children, in nearby countries.

We seem to use the same discriminatory judgments in Australia when the laws applying to 'real Australians' don't apply to others who seek protection here.

Acknowledging the universal worth of each person would not solve all current global issues. Giving respect to each person would not necessarily provide answers to the displacement of peoples or visa issues. However it would be a good basis for having dialogue and working out decent policies and procedures.

It would mean that those people in immigration detention in mainland Australian and off-shore detention centres would not be just left with no answers about their future. It would ensure that the language used about those fleeing persecution and asking for assistance would be compassionate and humane.

We recognize that responding to violence with more violence will not solve anything. A community that believes this starts in its own back yard—for us that is working towards justice and equity in Australia.

Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

Ranjini has been released

Many people have advocated strongly for Ranjini and her children to be released from detention. She has been locked up in Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney for since May 2012 with her three children, the last of whom was born in detention.

Ranjini had been found to be a refugee but was put back into detention after an adverse finding from ASIO. Her sons were callously taken out of school and, with their mother, put into indefinite detention without any explanation of the reasons or any ability to challenge the incarceration.



Ranjini and her family

Ranjini was one of more than 50 refugees indefinitely detained by the government because of secret ASIO assessments deeming them threats to national security. The majority have been quietly released this year without any compensation. Some were detained for up to six years. Between six and ten remain locked away.

Nothing has changed. No evidence has emerged that says there is a reason for each of these forty plus people to be released. And yet there is no apology, no compensation for years lost. We all rejoice in the freedom for each of these people. But we need to acknowledge that the whole exercise, involving well over fifty people, appears to be a cynical use of our national security laws for political purposes.

As for Ranjini—from a “National Security Threat” to “Ordinary Mum” with 3 young boys and a husband with whom she had just begun to share life when she was re-detained – that’s quite a journey.

Such optimism

It is amazing being with people who can be positive when so many things seem to be working against them. Picture just being released from detention, having no place to live (temporarily in a motel assigned by DIBP), wife to have a baby next month, husband also having surgery next month and yet able to say “Melbourne is a good place to be. The streets are beautiful. It is wonderful to see so many trees and parks”. This was from a couple who have yet to find a place to live.

We are constantly amazed by the resilience of folk like these. We probably shouldn’t be surprised—they came half way across the world against incredible odds in most cases.

The same man who marvelled at the beauty of life outside detention said, rather wistfully, “I will work hard. In my country (as a member of a group oppressed by his government), I worked all day and I only earned enough to just exist and keep my family, but here I may even be able to buy a car.”

We would love to hear from anyone

- who has any job possibilities.
- who could help with work and /work experience.

Want to help?

You are all invited to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project Christmas party on Sunday 13th December.

Venue: 54 Beaconsfield Pde, Albert Park

Time: 5pm onwards

We would love to see anyone who has helped BASP or is connected to the Project in any way. It is a chance to meet other people who share a commitment to justice in this area as well as meet some of those who have been helped by the Project. It is also a chance for us to say thank-you.



You are all important to us as we try together to build a safer and more just situation for asylum seekers.

RSPV: bssc@cyberspace.net.au

Christmas celebrations—and a party at MITA

BASP will be organising a Christmas party for the folk in the Broadmeadows detention centre on Monday 21st December. A group organised by Jenell Quinsee is doing shoeboxes with presents for everyone. The Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association is planning some singing of carols and will help with the party. BASP will organise food and decorations.

If anyone has some bon bons, or other decorations we could use to make the place look festive they would be helpful.

Some years, people have sent us Christmas cards with handwritten messages of welcome and wishes for a more secure next year and we have distributed these at the party—or added them to hampers that we will distribute to those in the community.



Some times people have reservations about assuming that it is appropriate to have Christmas celebrations for those of other faiths. But maybe Christmas—with the central idea of waiting for a world of peace and 'new order', symbolised in the birth of a baby in the most humble circumstances, is most appropriate for those who can only hope the future will be a world that is different to that from which they have fled. And for us—the challenge to try to make it so.

As we foreshadowed in our last newsletter, we want to introduce you to the **BASP Council members**. So here is a short profile of two of these.



Bill Armstrong AO

Bill's formation and education was as a member of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) Movement. He is a life member of Australian Volunteers International (AVI), Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and ActionAid Australia. Bill is now Co- Chair of

Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV) and Chair of the City of Port Phillip's Friends of Suai/Covalima (EastTimor). He was awarded an Order of Australia AO in 2003.

Bill says he is involved in BASP because the asylum seeker issue is one of the most important human rights issues of our time and Australia's response to date has been deplorable. Australia has a particular obligation and responsibility to assist having been so often part of the war effort that has caused their displacement.



Anne Boyd csb

After many years in school based education, Anne now works with EarthSong. This is a project offering workshops, seminars and publications in ecology and spirituality promoting an ethical structure that recognises and protects the integrity of all life forms on Earth. Anne is involved with BASP because the injustices suffered by peoples displaced from their homelands are

integrally related to the attitudes of dominance and profit making that are also bringing about the destruction of the life systems of our planet.

Fast tracking

There are about 30,000 people in Australia who are called by the Department of Immigration and Border Force (DIBP) the Legacy Caseload. They are mainly living in Melbourne and Sydney. They have been on Bridging visas for several years now, with no access to learning English programs, no work or study rights and on an income of 89% of Newstart. BASP has been working with many families from this group of people. They are now being required to provide a full refugee claim including all relevant documents within 28 days of receiving a letter from DIBP).

This is going to be a difficult time for all those in this group. BASP has some volunteers who are helping individuals assemble the data that will be needed to fill in the first part of the forms. The application has 64 questions and much of the document is providing information about every aspect of the person's life for the past thirty years. This includes addresses of every place they have lived—sounds easy but many people lived in places without a street name, let alone a house number.

The most difficult part of the application will be making their actual claim for protection. This requires some expertise and it is very doubtful if all those needing legal help will be able to access it. We would be pleased to hear from any migration agents or lawyers willing to help.

The sad part about this process of course is that the application is only for a temporary visa because this whole group of people are, by law, never to be given permanent residence. We are very worried about what will happen to those who get a negative response to this application. Returning to Iran or Afghanistan or Sri Lanka is going to be very frightening for most families—they will be in a worse situation than the one they escaped from because they will be known to have sought protection in a 'foreign' country.

REQUESTS, OFFERS AND THANKS

Art Space – South Melbourne area

A refugee living in the Ministry of Housing units in South Melbourne is seeking a place in the area to use as a studio. He is unable to paint within the confines of the family unit but it would help his wellbeing – and that of his family-if he could find a space to do this.

Any possibilities, please call BASP.

New brochure

Our support through volunteers comes in many forms and recently we were fortunate to receive assistance from journalist Dani Valent. She has revamped the BASP brochure, encapsulating its essence so quickly and giving it a fresh 2015 look.

Dani is also working with Delia and Phillipa to redo our website. Thanks so much to all these people.

Accommodation

We continue to be heartened by the offering of rooms and houses to people seeking protection in Australia.

Recently, the Columban Community has made available a house on their grounds for single males, needing immediate housing for up to six months while they get established. This has been wonderful for 3 men in urgent need of secure accommodation.

A couple who have retired to the country have made their Melbourne home available too. This has become home to 3 young men, one of whom has no income.

Another couple have offered a self contained 3 bedroom house, in front of the granny flat in which they live. They have welcomed a woman and her 4 young children into this home, providing support and back up in times of crisis. This is a welcome change for the young mum who, in her previous house, had to wake all the children and go to an all night pharmacy in a maxi taxi when one of them was sick one night.

The Scoresby Parish has made a house on their grounds available to a family whose visa status was in flux. Those in the parish rallied to support them settle in and assisted them to enrol their children into the local school.

All Hallows Parish in Balwyn have built 2 townhouses for people seeking asylum and were able to respond very quickly to an urgent request for a family with 5 children.

Other offers have been made and await a suitable match with someone in need.

When people are released from detention, certain agencies are contracted by the Immigration Department to assist with getting housing and helping put in place the things that are necessary. However, the staff involved appear to have very heavy case loads and the help provided is often minimal. A couple recently out of detention were left without any money for five days—an administrative mess up that didn't seem to be able to be fixed in spite of many phone calls. The couple only had something to eat because they had been given some presents by people in the community—presents that contained some food (not particularly suitable—but something to eat).

A season of parties and celebrations, excursions and picnics

It is wonderful to be part of events where the wider community offers some hospitality and light relief to individuals and families who otherwise would be very isolated.

The Aspendale/ Mordialloc Social Justice group has also extended its hand of friendship again to those seeking asylum in Australia.

In early November, about 50 individuals and families known to BASP, gathered at St Bede's Mentone for a wonderful lunch provided by the group, followed by games and a play on the beach. John Meyer, a member of the group and a key volunteer of BASP, again hired a bus and brought families from Sunshine and Broadmeadows to participate in the day.

It was such a happy day for all involved- those seeking asylum meeting old friends and making new ones too.

Not only do initiatives such as these give enjoyment to those attending, it further expands the understanding by each group of the other. It helps convey to the broader Australian community that those seeking protection in our country are people just like us, with hopes for themselves and their children and sadness at being apart from family and all that is familiar.

Another opportunity for this came through an end of year visit to BASP by 10 **Year 12 Xavier boys**. They spent the day with 5 young people who shared some of their stories about leaving their homeland, living in refugee centres in Indonesia, their boat trip to Australia and subsequent experiences in detention and the community.

From a shy beginning, it was a delight to see the banter amongst them by the end of the day and the way they were at ease playing beach soccer with women wearing the hijab.

Echuca

In mid October, 47 people- men, women and children- caught the Saturday morning train to Echuca to spend a weekend with host families in Echuca.

This was an initiative of the parish and was eagerly taken up by families and individuals known to BASP. All expenses were covered by the group in Echuca.

The article below was written after the weekend by the organiser, Christine Sebire, Pastoral Associate, St Mary's Echuca and was published in the St Joseph's School Newsletter



On train to Echuca

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me..."

This Gospel message was powerfully lived out our parish of Echuca last weekend as we hosted a group of refugee guests.

People opened their homes, they provided food, they served and cleaned and made donations. In short, they served those who could easily be seen to be 'last' among us. Our guests were so happy to make their first trip out of Melbourne after arriving some years ago. They delighted in the hospitality extended to them but mostly they delighted in the connections that they made with 'real Australian people'.

One guest expressed this powerfully when he explained that their children will never know a grandfather, they will never know an aunt or an uncle but for just a few days they experienced what it would be like to have an extended family and for that he gave thanks.

For the hosts, there was such joy in providing simple delights that we take for granted, a country sunrise, a rose garden, a dog to play with. As we served we were enriched and reminded to count our blessings.

Parishioners were involved on many different levels. Thank you to the host families, to those who provided food, those who helped with preparation and serving, those who brought us car seats and porta cots, and those who made donations.

We easily covered the cost of the paddle steamer rides and food and have almost covered the cost of the train fares (any further contributions would enable us to repay the Brigidine sisters for the tickets). Special thanks are extended to the Morris family for their extraordinary hospitality and to Margaret Spedding for a marathon at the parish Centre.*

The Parish Centre was abuzz on Saturday evening, there was an atmosphere of joy and a tangible feeling of God's love shared among strangers who were made welcome.



A text message sent in thanks from one guest sums up the weekend: "Hi, you all did inestimable stuff which I am quite sure came through your hearts... we just arrived in Melbourne with unforgettable memories of your community. God bless you and your people".

Thank you to all who contributed to the success of this weekend.'

** BASP received a cheque for more than the cost of the tickets from Echuca!*



One of the **host families** in Echuca sent this update a month or so after the visit:

"My husband & I decided to host a young refugee family—2 parents & a 6 year old son. It was a very interesting experience for us as we heard firsthand about their traumatic experience in detention on both Christmas Island and later in Darwin and of the effect this has had on their shy, withdrawn son.

It has been a real education for us to hear of the oppressed lifestyle that they had been subjected to in Iran—especially the women. During this weekend, we established that what they needed mostly at that point, was friendship. So since our son & daughter in law live within 5 minutes drive away we introduced them and through that meeting "our" refugee family have been accepted by their friends.

Now we feel the next thing that this family needs is employment. We are working on that too!

Recently we have been invited by "our" refugee family to join them for a traditional meal in their home. They were absolutely thrilled to host us and didn't want us to leave at the end of the day.

We have found them to be extremely appreciative of anything that we have done for them.

We will continue to keep the contact going, to support and assist them and plan to invite them join our family for Christmas."

Comments from **the visitors** on the trip included: 'the most joy in two and a half years; wonderful; magic; children so happy- playing too much! First picnic ever experienced.'



Palm Sunday 2016

For the
diary

Can we put Sunday, March 20, 2016 in our diaries. The planning for the Palm Sunday walk for justice for refugees has just begun. The most important part of the planning is getting people to come. Let's make it the biggest 'show of compassion' we can manage.

Discussion night at St Josephs Port Melbourne on 22nd October

Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh, Deakin University, spoke to the audience about the situation in Syria. For many of us who find the whole situation in that part of the world somewhat bewildering, he clarified the history and current state of play.

Some of the points made were:

- Syria has become the world's top refugee producing country.
- Since the 1960's the Al-Assad family have been the ruling power and have acted as quasi-dictators.
- In the last decade, the Arab Spring toppled many of the dictators in the Middle east but the Asad family refused to step down and instead started a brutal civil war. Different ethnic and religious groups have fought each other in changing coalitions: Islamic Front, YPG, Hezbollah, Opposition Forces, Government Forces. ISIS has added to this with their goal of establishing a totalitarian caliphate.
- All sides seem to have been committed to horrible war crimes—chemical warfare, mass executions, torture and repeated deadly attacks on civilians.
- The Syrian population has been trapped between the regime, rebel groups and other extremists.
- One third of the Syrian people have been displaced within Syria. Over 4 million have fled the country—the vast majority residing in camps in neighbouring countries. Turkey has 1,900,000, Lebanon 1,200,000. Iraq 250,000 and tiny Jordan 375,000. The Arab states and the Persian Gulf countries have not accepted any (countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Omar, UAE).
- Many of the camps are crowded and under-resourced, subjecting people to cold, hunger and disease.
- Many Syrians have decided that the situation was not going to get better any time soon so they began to move to Europe
- A Dublin Agreement that came into force in 2014 had stated that refugees had to stay in the first state they arrived in. This put great pressure on places like Greece as many arrived in islands off the coast of Greece that were usually reserved for tourists.
- For a year the Italian Government provided a huge rescue operation—the Mare Nostrum. Thousands of those arriving by boat were rescued.
- One incident was very influential—the picture of a dead three year old, face down on the beach. Germany announced they were prepared to take 800,000 of the refugees. Other countries have been divided in their response.
- There are the predictable fears in Europe: a take over by Islam, terrorists posing as refugees and the collapse of social systems.
- Even if Europe accepted all 4 million refugees and they were all Moslems, the percentage of Moslems in Europe would go from 3% to 4%.



BASP Council Chair, Delia Bradshaw with Professor Akbarzadeh



Good News



A couple of weeks ago, Justin Foster ran the New York marathon and was sponsored by a number of people. Justin organised for this money to be paid to BASP. He is pictured crossing the finishing line. Anyone else doing a run?

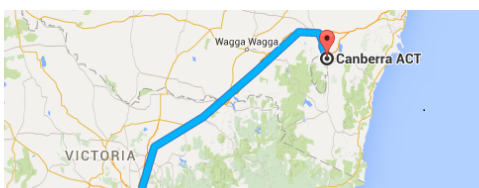


Each Saturday afternoon a Somali refugee woman, Ayan Abdullahi, is running a cooking class that teaches 5-6 people how to cook six great savoury Somali dishes. It is just beginning but the reviews are very positive! Ayan is a great cook. At this stage the classes are happening in one home but as Ayan's confidence builds and

she builds up her recipes and equipment so that she can arrive at a home and conduct a cooking class, we think it will be very simple to develop a business plan. Friends coming together to share a unique experience in their home. The unique techniques and combination of spices plus sharing Ayan's stories and meeting her dear little daughter is making for a great experience as well as building Ayan's confidence and independence.

Jess Hackett, a teacher at Killester, is **walking to Canberra** in January to present a petition to Parliament seeking an increase in resettlement numbers, closure of detention centres and more humane treatment of people seeking asylum. Jess is planning to stop along the way and talk to people and try to interest as many as possible in the issues in her petition.

We are enclosing a copy with this newsletter. It would be a great thing to get many people to sign it. If you send it back to us we will get it to Jess.



Nail polish

A woman recently released from immigration detention proudly showed some friends an array of nail polish and explained they came from some presents given to her at a Christmas party organised by a school in Eltham (CLC). Often it is the seemingly little things that make a big impact. Who would have thought that, in the middle of trying to find a house, and get established in totally new surroundings, that nail polish would help. So often it is the symbolism of the gesture that counts.



The school Principal, Margaret McKenna, entertains a



small person at a Christmas party for families at CLC in Eltham. And students welcome some young visitors for the evening.



Adenyi, an asylum seeker who is living in the house provided by the Columban Fathers designed this for BASP

A wonderful decision

Many people worked hard to get justice for Yeshi. In what seemed a last minute reprieve, the Minister of Immigration agreed that her case could begin again. We rejoice for this brave woman.



General Grocery Support

Many thanks to all those who continue to donate groceries for the families and individuals we see. These are greatly appreciated by the families and individuals who need this support to make ends meet.

The tinned soup and baked beans have very little take up but other staples, such as basmati rice, dried lentils, tinned tomatoes and tuna, and cleaning and hygiene products are always popular.

Christmas Hamper Support

Thank you also to those who have given to the Christmas Hampers, which will be assembled and distributed just prior to Christmas.

We would appreciate any donations of vouchers or cash for last minute fresh fruit and perishable treats **by the 5th December.**

We have a wonderful- and sufficient- supply of toys at this stage.



Again, we thank you all for your support. We never cease to be amazed by your generosity.



We love getting your messages. They are invariably positive and passionate.

Without your financial support, we obviously would only be a very small organisation. We are quite pleased we don't get any government money because it allows us to be independent and to give help where it is most needed. Last year BASP spent about \$350,000 in the work of assisting those seeking asylum. This is all due to your generosity.

We wish you all a very happy Christmas. May your time be blessed with love and joy. And may 2016 be a year when, as a nation, we extend justice and compassion to those seeking protection.



Brigid Arthur



Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)