

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 82 December 2016

The Project aims to:

- * provide hospitality and practical support for people seeking asylum
- * 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

Let's treat all refugees equally—it's as simple as that

A new assault on the rights of refugees unfortunate enough to have chosen Australia as a place to seek safety came when Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, announced that anyone seeking to reach this country by boat after July 2013 is now to be banned from even visiting Australia always and forever. This seems more than usually puzzling. The boats stopped two years ago. The move (still to be voted on in Parliament) seems sadistic, unworkable and totally unnecessary. It is also just another example of different groups of people being treated differently—depending on the mode of their arrival and the date.

Julian Burnside says that this is to punish people guilty of the crime of not being drowned at sea!

Then came the news that America had agreed to resettle refugees who are currently indefinitely detained on Manus Island and Nauru. This appeared positive. However, in the cold hard light of day, the reality sank in. Indeed there are more questions than answers. At the outset we need to add that the uncertainty that this is engendering in people who have lived in limbo for three years is extraordinarily difficult.

At BASP we are talking to people who are being told by Immigration 'You will have to return to Nauru or Manus to be considered by America. If you are rejected by them you will have to return home—or accept a 20 year visa to stay in Nauru.' Many of the folk in this situation can't return home even if they felt they could. Iran is not accepting any 'failed' refugees, many others are stateless and so have no country they can return to. And what will happen to those who have received negative assessments at least sometimes because of serious inadequacies of the system? Nauru is a place with few opportunities for refugees and the local population are, on the whole, quite resentful of their presence.

Many people who have already been judged to be refugees on Manus and Nauru may well be rejected by America, a country that has very stringent health and security tests for refugees, and most of those potential candidates for acceptance have quite serious health issues as a result of their treatment and past traumas. So what will happen to those already judged to be refugees but not accepted by another country—America or another?

There are quite a number of families where one part of the family has already settled or is part of the process of being assessed for residence in Australia who have members of their families on Nauru or Manus Island. If the Bill denying those in the off shore detention places the right to ever return to Australia passes in Parliament, these families will be permanently separated. The fact that the Minister has discretion to override such a law in particular cases gives us no joy. We have pleaded with various Ministers about very heart wrenching cases involving separation of families— and almost universally with no success!

Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

Accommodation.

Needs for housing continue as ever. People arriving by plane and seeking asylum often have a time lag of several weeks to months while they submit their protection application and seek income support and/ get work rights and work.

In the interim, they can face homelessness and we have had a number of people in this position seeking help in recent times.

We have been able to house several, through the crisis accommodation houses and through the Kilmore parish, most recently. BASP has also received a most generous offer of a house in Chelsea and one of these families, who has been in one of our crisis accommodation houses, is able to move in there for 12 months. This will then make the emergency house available for the next request. Another parish has offered to support a family when they are able to move into a rental home of their own.

People being released from detention, often after years of being detained, are placed in a motel for 4 weeks with \$240 and usually no Centrelink payments for several weeks after that. They do have a case worker for 4 weeks but are expected to find their own accommodation - and somehow pay for bond and rent. Again, we have had requests from people in this group and have been pleased to house several. Two went to 2 of our crisis accommodation houses. Another to a Brigidine house, while another was able to take up the vacancy at the Columban Mission cottage in Essendon. A fourth, a young man, has been offered accommodation by a couple in Burwood, whose children have grown up, leaving them a couple of spare rooms. The young man has been overwhelmed by their generosity and friendship in helping him become familiar with Melbourne, taking him to the soccer and generally assisting his adjustment out of detention.

People who have been here for some time are also facing crises in accommodation. Changes to work rights and income support can be somewhat random and impact arrangements in place. Fortunately we have community and parish support for some of these. However, the various organisations involved with people seeking asylum are concerned at the likely huge increase of need by this group as the visa determination and appeal process continues.

One of BASP's earliest accommodation was the former convent in Ardeer, used then and now for 11 or 12 men who are in Australia on their own. Sr Martin and the late Sr Catherine lived next door and have been the support and go-to people for many people who have moved through this place. Earlier this year, Sr Martin required surgery and rehabilitation and was absent for some time, leaving Sr Geraldine to continue the role at Ardeer. Sr Martin recently returned home and was greeted with considerable fanfare and much love from the men in the house. Flowers, a sign saying Welcome Home Mom and a card signed by all. Sr Geraldine also said she was taking calls from men who have moved on, seeking updates and passing on their good wishes. We are delighted that Sr. Martin is back in Ardeer and that the men she has assisted over many years have shown such appreciation for all she has done.



BASP House in Ardeer

People here on their own struggle getting access to housing—even when they have income. Private rentals are too expensive for one person. There are limited networks for sharing housing and asylum seekers are unsuccessful, usually, in trying to get a room via websites like Flatmate and Gumtree. Any ideas to tackle this problem would be welcome. (You could let us know any ideas you have by emailing Queries@basp.org.au)

You are all invited to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project Christmas party on Sunday 11th 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: barthur@basp.org.au

The success of young people

It is a truism that many young refugees more easily become part of a new country than those who have lived a substantial number of years as part of another homeland. It is a sign of great hope to watch the success (due to hard work and persistence) of many of the young people we have been able to assist. One Hasara girl, who braved the journey from Pakistan by herself about three years ago, is about to embark on the second year of VCE at a local Secondary College and she had the highest scores in all the subjects she studied this year—English, Physics, Maths, Chemistry, English and Food Technology.

Arwa and Intisar are two Somali girls who graduated from PWC in October. Helen Toohey csb, a member of the BASP Council, was instrumental in enabling them to achieve their dream of attending PCW from 2015. She and Brigid were invited by the girls and their justifiably proud mother to share their graduation celebrations. When they first attended the school, Arwa said she was constantly asked about her background, headscarf etc. By the end of their two years, they were just part of the year 12s. A great achievement for these two young women and for the school too.

Intser did VCAL and has a permanent job in child care at the place she did a placement. And Arwa hopes to do nursing.



Intser Ahmed and Arwa Ahmed with their mother, Helen and Brigid from BASP

Priorities?

The first weeks (or months?) for a person released from detention, often after a number of years, into the community can be very fraught. The agencies who are contracted by the Immigration Department to manage this transition seem very stretched in terms of the resources needed to do this adequately. Those released have never been in Melbourne or any part of Australia except for being locked up and they have to find their own accommodation and with little help establish themselves. The Centrelink payment (89% of Newstart) that they get can take several weeks to come through and in the meantime they have only about \$240 to survive.

Compare the money that seems to be available to these folk who are released to begin a life in Australia with the money spent on deporting a man back to Nauru. A few weeks ago, this man was taken from the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA) in Broadmeadows. In the early hours of the morning, other people in MITA heard distressed cries. We were told by some witnesses that they saw a man dragged out of his bed in his underwear, handcuffed and dragged away by many guards. They heard his cries and pleas not to be taken back to Nauru for about 40 minutes and then silence.

We have since found out that he was taken by an Air Force plane and flown to Brisbane and then Nauru.

Our major problem with this of course is the cruelty involved. This man is a quiet, gentle man who always looked out for others. He had been in a lot of pain on Nauru and was eventually brought to Melbourne for surgery. He was beginning to recover. As well as the cruelty of this forced and sudden removal, it is an extraordinary use of resources that could be used so much more effectively looking after the welfare of those in detention and those released with little help.

It is easy to imagine the intense fear and distress across MITA and the other centres where ex-Nauru people are housed.

At the same time as Australia deports people in this way, there are members of families in Australia separated from others still on Nauru. We are very conscious of a mother and daughter here and a twin brother and father and another daughter still on Nauru. Everyone in this family is suffering immeasurably—physically and mentally.

Mahatma Gandhi said “Action expresses priorities.” So what does all this say about Australia's national priorities?

And what's more ... While we are talking about priorities, a phone connection that could get through to the Immigration Department in a reasonable time would be a good use of money! A series of three possible numbers gives a message—You will have a wait of approximately an hour and a half from two and just a no answer from the third.



On a much larger scale (and not just for those seeking protection) we need much more community housing. Renting for those of very meagre incomes is becoming absolutely impossible. Sometimes it is almost eat or have a roof over your head. So things like bills for utilities become a nightmare!

US as a destination for those on Nauru and Manus Island—or A Simple Solution: Bring Them Here?

We are cautiously optimistic about the possibility of people on Nauru and Manus Island being resettled in the US. It is, at least, a recognition that something needs to happen for these very traumatised people. However there are more questions than answers at this stage and we do have a degree of scepticism that the proposed resettlement in the US will happen. Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, said there would be a priority on families, women and children. But all the people on Manus are men.

Many details are not yet known, including how many will be resettled - this was said to be up to the US. We are also told negotiations with other countries are also ongoing—which countries? What difference will the new President, Donald Trump, make? If his rhetoric before the elections are indicative of his decisions once becoming President, the outlook for any refugees is not hopeful.

Our approach is: at least leave those who are part of the Australian community (about 320 individuals—including many families) here—and indeed why not bring the others (about 2000 people) here too. They have had enough trauma. And all families should be reunited immediately.

Refugees

They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or I
Should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for who they really are
Chancers and scroungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share our homes
Share our countries
Instead let us
Build a wall to keep them out
It is not OK to say
These are people just like us
A place should only belong to those who are born there
Do not be so stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way

(now read from bottom to top)

Acknowledgment to author Brian Bilston.





Echuca Weekend November 12 and 13

Christine Sebire of St Mary's Echuca sent this report after a wonderful weekend.

Echuca Moama Rural Australians for Refugees along with St Mary's parish Echuca hosted forty six visitors to our town last weekend. These visitors are all supported in some capacity by the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project. A few now have permanent visas in Australia, others have very uncertain futures as they have only bridging visas and do not know what their fate is.

Co-organiser of the visit, Jenny Morris, was very pleased with how the weekend went. "The families and individuals who came to visit were friendly and appreciative of the experience and happy to share their stories with



us and each other. There were great stories such as Tadessi whose permanent visa just came through and scary ones such as the family about to be deported. Most had no idea or plan about what was going to happen to them in the future. It must be hard to sleep at night. Most hosts will keep in touch with their families."

Families from our community hosted these visitors in their homes and reflected on how rewarding this experience was.

Leah and Craig Williams hosted a family of seven. They were grateful for vouchers to spend some time as TwistED, the Port of Echuca Discovery Centre and the Echuca War Memorial Aquatic Centre. We thank those businesses for their generosity. Though exhausted on Monday, Leah shared that "Hosting the refugee family was incredibly humbling! We do not realize how lucky we are. To hear their story and see how grateful they are was an experience like no other. We have all made some great friends that we hope to keep in contact with."

Another host, Claire Hogan, explained that "It was a true privilege to hear firsthand the story of why a young couple would leave their families and risk everything to get to Australia. Places like Iran are truly scary and dangerous places to live, especially for people who believe in democracy."

Peter and Lillian Harris also wrote of their experience: "It has been a weekend to remember.

A busload of people that are refugees came to Echuca this weekend for a short holiday. We were lucky enough to be able to host one of them.

I have a paradoxical feeling, more grounded and lifted. I had a glimpse of events in different parts of the world that were not occupying my headspace.

The most important issue in my life – 'is my coffee hot enough' - seems not so important, well, not at the moment anyway.

We accommodated a young person alone in this country. I do not feel that I am able to give any details that might be identifying.

Eye opener one: this person's family would be in danger if I provided identifiers.

Eye opener two: this person's 'crime' was exercising rights that we take for granted.

Eye opener three: this person does not have an education that is recognised in Australia. So, a solo young person, unable to return to country of birth, for fear of punishment no contact with family, no education, no work.

On the up side, I did witness a fantastic example of community spirit. I was moved by the effort and the warmth from all involved to make this weekend very successful despite the rain. I watched local children playing happily with children from different parts of the world. I watched



warm friendly adults breaking through language and cultural barriers.”

Our visitors had a range of experiences from carriage rides, to swimming, to milking cows and gathering eggs. All experiences that are a world away from their usual routines.

Despite the uncharacteristic Echuca weather, we were able to share our town and way of life and the benefits for those visiting and those hosting were mutual. It was a truly joyous weekend for all involved.

Gratitude is extended to all who were involved, especially members of the RAR, St Mary’s Parish and School communities, Twisted the Shire of Campaspe, Echuca Discovery Centre, and the Echuca War Memorial Aquatic Centre. Special thanks however, is extended to Bendigo Coachlines who provided outstanding service, transporting our guests from Melbourne and **free of charge**.

BASP made the arrangements in Melbourne and met them on Saturday morning at Southern Cross station to get them onto the bus for their adventure away. After the weekend, we received many calls of delight and thanks. They were full of superlatives- ‘beautiful, wonderful, enchanting, too good!, fantastic, amazing people, brilliant, children so happy’.



BASP joins in thanking everyone involved and notes the generosity of the hosts and of Bendigo Coachlines, whose driver was a gem and whose service there and back was donated.

Islamophobia is a big worry—and unwarranted

At BASP, we want to strongly affirm the contribution that Malcolm Fraser made to the Australian nation. And we would like to challenge the remarks made by Mr Peter Dutton.

Our only hope for global peace is to try to respect the dignity of all people—in how we speak and what we do.

Recently the Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton, not only questioned this contribution, but cast a slur on a whole group of immigrants who came here.

Firstly, the contribution that Malcolm Fraser made has strengthened this country. It broke the back of ‘White Australia’. Including family reunion we brought 250,000 Indo-Chinese to Australia. It was a great success story. And secondly, it is very worrying when a Minister uses a religious descriptor to describe

For us, using ‘Muslims’ to talk about a small number of people is wrong:

- It implies that there is a bloc known as 'Muslims', who are heterogeneous and consistent in their behaviour. On the contrary, Muslims are an extremely diverse and eclectic mix of millions and millions of people and so there are all sorts of diversity amongst them which needs to be recognised for a balanced view.
- It implies that Muslims are exceptional from other people, and pose specific and unique problems. Among Muslims there are just as many opportunities and challenges as can be found with any other 'community', and so descriptors like this generate an unnecessary scrutiny of Muslims as though they are particularly problematic.

We seem to have lost sight of the fact that Australia was involved in the invasion of Iraq. More than anything else, this opened this Pandora’s Box of terrorism and violence in the Middle East.



Need a hair cut?

Eighteen months ago, this man and his wife and child came to Melbourne after they left detention in Brisbane. They had nowhere to live and the parish at Kilmore offered them housing in the large presbytery, with Grant O'Neill the parish priest. They were warmly welcomed and supported in their efforts to retrain and work locally. They have now moved into their own rental home and with the support and generosity of one of the parishioners, this business is underway.



Afghan mantu (dumplings) are delicious!

Brigid recently hosted a dinner for the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce and enlisted the aid of three women seeking asylum to prepare the meal,. What a feast was had! Beautiful mixture of tastes from Afghanistan, Egypt and Iran. Thanks Ezrah, Mojgan and Afaf.

Volunteer - networks and relationships

One of our volunteers drove an asylum seeker home from our last discussion night. Within a week or 2 she had arranged for a contact to give him 2 weeks work as a painter, and helping him with the finer points along the way. She also acquired some donated lawn mowers which we needed for the various BASP houses and she delivered them, describing her experience:

“ We met Ezra and Mojgan who are really delightful. Mojgan used the mower straight away! She also expressed an interest in getting a bike which I believe we can do. Ezra is looking for work experience so I will contact Mary from tomorrow and see if she can help, or put her in contact with someone who can.

We dropped off a mower to Burney and he also learnt to use it...so much fun for all. They are a lovey family too. This morning I visited the ‘boys’ at (one of the houses) and they seem very bright and chirpy, except for one who is very quiet and serious.

We had been given some Amani jackets and other good clothing which they went through and chose what they liked. Fortunately their tastes were different so just about everything was taken. After discussing with the ‘boys’ I also met the Minister who is in the Church of England over the road and he is happy to visit them and have John, the chap who runs the English conversation classes, visit them too.

How delightful all these refugees are, if only everyone saw this, especially our polliies.”



Community Education/Experience

At the end of the school year, BASP hosted 7 year 12 Xavier boys and 2 teachers for a community service day arranged by the school.

They were able to hear the stories and experiences of 4 people seeking asylum. One, a Somali man who had to leave his wife and child to flee; another, a Ugandan woman who also had to leave her family behind, when she became targeted because of her work as a health worker in an HIV clinic. Two other women who fled their homeland due to persecution also spoke. One is here with her husband and children, but her brother, aged 18 was sent to Manus Island 3 years ago and this weighs heavily on her. How fortunate these young people were to meet these folk first hand and to also hear of their experiences in Australia- the period of detention, the uncertainty of release, of visa determination etc. At lunch time the boys played with the football in the front, inviting the Somali man and the son of one of the women to join in- a wonderful way to connect.

Brigid reminded the boys that they will likely become people of influence and good fortune and it is up to them to be mindful of how we treat others who are vulnerable due to their place of birth.



The Colostomy Association of Victoria has taken on another 2 asylum seeker volunteers, making it 4 in total. This provides a wonderful opportunity to get work experience in Australia, meet new people, and feel that you are helping others through the distribution of much needed supplies. All are doing well and one of the original volunteers is obviously making such a good contribution, she has been called 'Gold'.

An email from a teacher

A child in Year 1 celebrated her birthday on the weekend and asked for her friends to donate to people who are refugees instead of asking for gifts. Are we able to send the money to you and you give/use it as you find appropriate. It is \$85. St James Brighton

Anglesea weekend

A long-time supporter of BASP has offered her holiday house at Anglesea to people seeking asylum, free of charge. Three families are taking advantage of this offer, giving them a break from the routine in Melbourne and taking their minds off what awaits them in the future. They are part of the group who have spent time on Nauru, have come to Detention then Community Detention in Melbourne for medical reasons and have no idea what the recent announcements mean for them.



Maree Tierney, a very active volunteer who visits at MITA and maintains contact with people on their release into the community, has assisted a couple of the men to get into gardening work. Originally, they

were working in the gardens of BASP managed houses, with Maree being driver and instructor. She then assisted them with managing public transport for other customers. She has been impressed by their stamina and interest in undertaking this work.

One of the customers let us know how delighted she was with the work. After the first visit, 2 of her neighbours have expressed interest in also having this young man. He seems a jack of all trades so when his gardening was hampered by rain, he helped another contact change a washer on their tap and helped stir the Christmas pudding! Company and engagement are such wonderful by products of work.

If anyone is interested in employing an asylum seeker to do some gardening, we have a few of our friends ready to go! Just let us know.



We have had very generous donations of food in the past month and most of this will go out in hampers in the next two or three weeks. We are beginning to make up the hampers (thanks to Noelle for the organising of this) so if there are any more contributions, we need them now.

Recently we received this lovely message:

My wife and I are both 91 and we attend St Joan of Arc Church Brighton

We are grateful that your organisation collects groceries and toiletries for the work you do. We have five children and nine grand children. We have emailed them to tell them that if they are considering Christmas gifts, for us we do not need anything and we don't want anymore things,"but it would please us if they bought Coles gift cards of moderate value we would send them on to you. We were delighted that they all responded most positively.

Could this idea be spread ?

God Bless Des and Barbara Randall

Any donations of vouchers for supermarkets or other stores—or tickets for the movies or some fun opportunities could be added to the hampers—or used over Christmas time.

From a teacher at St James, Brighton Catholic Primary School:

Leni was celebrating her 7th Birthday on Saturday. Instead of asking her friends for gifts, Leni asked her guests to donate money to children who are refugees.

When I asked Leni about why she had decided to do this she said "some refugee children don't get to celebrate their birthdays and they mightn't get presents". She expressed that she wanted to make these children's birthdays to be a happy celebration just like hers. Leni raised \$85 which will be sent to Sister Brigid who works closely with asylum seekers and refugees. What a socially just little person we have with us.

For anyone wishing to make a donation, the Project Bank details are: Brigidine Asylum Seekers Trust Account: bsb: 083-004; a/c: 56-924-6603; NAB.

Please put your name on the entry and if possible send us a message so that we can send you a receipt. This could be a text message on 0438 001 515 or an email to jcaldwell@basp.org.au.

As you can see from this newsletter there are many people who really want to help. And this is only the tip of the story of help that comes to us. People in the community are finding many and varied ways to reach out in friendship.



We thank the people who help us. We thank those who have done fundraising for us. We thank all our volunteers, we could not do without you. Thanks to Phil and Sue who coordinate the Supporting Families Program. We thank all those generous supporters who send us donations so that we can give help to the asylum seekers who are often in quite dire need. And thanks to the Asylum Seekers themselves who never cease to amaze us with their stoicism and courage and often enough fun in the midst of it all.

A very happy Christmas to all. May this be a time when we enjoy each other and the peaceful and prosperous part of the world we live in.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders (BASP Coordinators)