

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 83 March 2017

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

Why oh why

How did we get to this situation where a lot of Australians say they are ashamed to be Australian?

A young woman stays each day, tearful and frightened. She has spent a long time on Nauru where she was assaulted and injured. She has spent a long time now in an Australian city detention centre. She wonders if her life will ever change and if she will ever be free. She writes:

MY UNBEARABLE LIFE IN AUSTRALIA DETENTION

*What got us in to trouble is that the Australia government took us to Nauru against our will.
If the government had not taken us to Nauru we would be fine and living in Australia like all
the lucky people who were not taken there.*

On this International Women's Day I can't separate being a refugee from being a woman.

*For me there is no hierarchy in oppression. I am discriminated against as both a refugee woman and as a human,
none of it feels good.*

*I get a negative feeling when other refugees are released. I feel good for them but also that I too deserve to get
freedom.*

*I am in agony and pain waiting. Every day I look at detention, the fences and gates and it makes my blood run
cold.*

My heart misses a beat when I hear that my roommate burnt herself.

I feel silenced. I am holding my breath until I get released.

This is but one of the real life stories of people for whom we beg change. Please come to the Palm Sunday Walk for Justice and talk to as many people as you can about joining you. This is a sign of solidarity with people like the young woman who wrote the words above. It is also a sign of solidarity with all of us who are working for a shift in public awareness of the cruelty being inflicted on innocent people.

Please also think about helping the Refugee Advocacy Network (RAN) with the fundraising event for Palm Sunday. Note that you need to register on Trybooking for this event—see the poster on page 6 of this newsletter. BASP is very involved with the Walk for Justice and part of this evening to get financial support to put the walk on. We have posters and leaflets about both events at our office, 54 Beaconsfield Pde which you could pick up and distribute in any of the places where you have connections.



Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

A visit to an Immigration Detention centre

I approach the gates of the detention centre with a mixture of discomfort (how sad will people be today? Who will come to the visits area?), resignation (Just listen, try to be positive) and anger (how dare some few people with power exert this untold cruelty on others who have done nothing to deserve it?)

I wait at the desk to be 'processed'. A family I haven't seen before are having trouble because their five year old daughter has not been registered as part of the visit. They are presumably visiting a relative. It looks as though the child cannot go in and then of course an adult has also to stay outside. I am wondering when to intervene and argue for them as I knew the officer behind the desk. Sanity prevails and the child is allowed in.

I meet the people I have come to see—one by one they arrive from different compounds. Others come over from designated tables where they are seeing other visitors.

All the men have been in detention for more than two years, some for over three years. Most have been in multiple centres—Curtin, Sherger, Yongah Hill, Darwin, Villawood and the list goes on.

One man brings a letter for me to see. He has a Directions hearing in the Federal Court in August. I explain this is only a hearing to set a date for the 'real' hearing. He is worried about not having a barrister to represent him. I go over the same explanation as last visit. A legal group is looking at his case to see if there are grounds to argue about his case. I may as well be talking a foreign language so I try to tell him not to worry—we will look for a barrister closer to the date.

Another man tells me Immigration won't accept his police clearance that his brother-in-law got for him from their country. He says he has no other way of getting such a police statement and that it is needed for his ID and that he has supplied a lot of other documents which have been accepted. He is clearly distressed and bemused by the authority's refusal to tell him clearly what else he can do.

I wince as a man tells me the small antennae I brought out for his TV doesn't work—he had told me last visit and I forgot.

I laugh with the man who tells me he had been volunteering around the centre because he was so bored and has been told he can't do this because he is not covered by insurance and Worksafe.

Then the conversation becomes more general: the few people who had been released; they know everyone who gets out from every detention centre around Australia. So and so came with me, he got out so why am I still here? In spite of their general hopelessness they remember to tell me that a very old man with no English had been released into the community and that they thought he had nowhere to go. I had met this old man and I make a mental note to try and find where he is.



Artwork done by a man in this same detention centre (report by Australian Human Rights Commission)

After two hours I leave reminding myself not to become so used to this situation that I begin to think of it as normal. These are people who have done nothing wrong—just had the nerve to flee places like Bangladesh, Iraq, Sudan and Sri Lanka. And they are asking only: When will I get out from here?

- Brigid Arthur

He says that healing is taking place as the woman searches for the coin until it is found, the lepers are cleansed and people can be encouraged to share loaves and fishes; over and beyond all this he says “Whenever you do this to the least of my people you do it to me – and whenever you refuse help to any of the least of my people you refuse to help me”.

Jesus was radical. In a tribal world he says there are no tribes. Boundaries then and now give us identity but Jesus preaches no boundaries. The alternative reality that Jesus points to is probably just as pertinent today as it was 2000 years ago. He was against power, privilege, luxury for some and deprivation, exclusion and isolation for others. He preached a dream – a community that is inclusive, without hierarchy, sharing of goods, wealth and food, filled with love, where we love our friends and enemies alike, practice compassion and peace making.

Palm Sunday is about this central conflict. The conflict persists – it is about power and conflict and maintaining privilege and often brute force to satisfy some ideology versus equality and respect for all and justice. Palm Sunday and the rest of the story of Jesus being put to death is also about this.

Palm Sunday comes straight after the meal Christians call the Last supper. I imagine that this meal was populated by the people Jesus got around with – outcasts, prostitutes, tax collectors.. and some worthy folk who had accepted this kind of community. Here, there were no hierarchies as Jesus washed their feet.

Many in Jesus’ time and since have literalised his message to support an imperial Christianity – prone to military violence (crusades), privilege, power of some over others. But Jesus presents a different way of being a leader and a person.

He identified with the suffering poor, the throw-away people, the powerless and the humiliated. We can over spiritualise the gospel – but Jesus was not advocating putting up with the status quo and ignoring the poor – rather that all people could have a life that is good, happy and creative.



Please come and support this walk.

We need thousands of people to give a message of hope to asylum

seekers and a message that there is a groundswell of opposition to the way the Government is treating refugees and asylum seekers.

You can also help by attending a fundraising event (details of the event are on the next page) being held to defray the costs of the Palm Sunday event. Or you could send an item to be auctioned at this event. Just contact BASP if you are willing to help in this way.



We have had donations from many schools—thank you. Mary Harmes from Star of the Sea College in Brighton brought in a generous cheque in December and some girls in both Star of the Sea and Kilbreda College in Mentone had projects where some senior students engaged in a social enterprise to make money for BASP.

A big thank you to Delia Bradshaw

Delia has been a part of BASP for most of its life. She has been the Chair of the BASP Council since its inception. At every part of our development she has been there to encourage and support. She has helped in the organisation and running of the discussion nights which BASP values as educative and supportive. Delia has decided to take a break and recuperate her strength after a very hard year.

Delia, we cannot thank you enough. Your wisdom has guided us at many crucial times. We know you are still there in the background and we know your heart is still with us.



And another huge thank you to Sue Wood

As some of you will know, Sue Wood is a volunteer who has shared the role of co-ordinating the Friendship through Learning English program with Phil Steel for the past 3+ years. Sue has decided she needs to follow other paths at this stage and is leaving us later in March. The program has expanded from a small group of volunteers in late 2013 to over 160 now and it has helped around 130 families over this time. Sue and Phil have developed systems for the program, established an induction format and introduced ongoing Professional Development opportunities throughout the year. Sue has clearly been a champion of people seeking asylum, endeavouring to reduce their isolation, enhance their English skills to get on in our community and to establish friendships with the broader Australian community. Sue has been a joy to work with and we thank her most sincerely for all she has done.



Sue Goonan stepped into the office in August to take over while Libby was on holiday in September. She has returned to work 2 days a week- Wednesday and Thursdays- as the Project Support Officer, assisting Brigid and Libby as needed. Sue has a nursing and social work background, has had extensive experience in the disability and health fields and most recently had a senior management role at Peninsula Health. We are delighted she is able to bring her skills to BASP. Sue wrote the piece below:

"I recently visited a woman who had fled Iran with her husband in 2013 and arrived in Australia by boat. They were placed in detention on Nauru for 2 years where she describes living in a tent and suffering daily hardship both physically and mentally, leading to significant medical and mental health issues. After 2 years she and her husband were moved to detention in Darwin where she gave birth to her first child. Whilst in Darwin she describes being constantly threatened with return to Nauru which was a terrifying, ever present prospect for her. She was then moved to Melbourne, again placed in detention until being moved out into community detention in an outer suburb of Melbourne.

This woman is the saddest person I think I have ever met. The depth of her sadness is unfathomable for most of us. She describes having no future and living in fear of being moved back to Nauru, which she describes as something that would kill her. With tears streaming down her face she describes to me the feeling she has of being in a coffin but being alive, at least a sort of half-life, half death. She closes her eyes at night and describes the feeling of having no reason to open them again. As the tears roll down her cheeks her 18month old son climbs on her knee and puts his head on her chest and his arms around her neck until she stops crying.

Each time I visit this woman I feel so distressed for her, often having to sit in my car to gather myself before I can drive away. But as I reflect on my visits to her it isn't only the immense sadness that leaves its mark. It's also a deep sense of her quiet dignity, the love she shows her son and her ability to survive without any vision for a future. She asks me if it is too much for her to want to feel secure and safe, to have a place to call home and to be able to contribute and to be productive in a society that will provide a future for her son. There is little reassurance I can offer her."

My name is Javid Mohammadi and I have just completed my VCE at Salesian College Chadstone. When I was a young boy growing up, I would never have imagined such a future. This is my story.

From an early age, the only reading and writing skills I had were passed on to me by my father, who had a very limited education himself. There was no formal schooling where we lived before coming to Australia, however from time to time, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) would set up classes for some of the refugee children, which I would attend. Whenever I had the opportunity, I asked NGO representatives to lend me Science and Maths textbooks to read. However, Salesian College Chadstone in Melbourne provided me with the opportunity that I never would have dreamed of.

From the very first day I started at the College at the age of 14 years old, I was welcomed wholeheartedly by the whole school community. The first person I met at the College was the Principal, Mr Robert Brennan, who believed in my potential and treated me equal to other students. Mr Brennan and staff at the College provided me with a unique environment that has been a pivotal influence in my life.

From the first day of school I was fortunate enough to be looked after academically by all of my teachers, who would regularly check in with me to make sure I was keeping up with the workload. As my English skills had improved, teachers motivated me to push myself to the limit, as they were acutely aware of my work ethic. The Wellbeing staff met with me on a regular basis, providing me with counselling and support. They built an environment in which I felt safe. My fellow students at the College were also supportive and instrumental to my success. Many of them implicitly understood me and made me feel

welcome, through friendship, banter and even with academic support, sharing with me resources that they had come across. Like many of the students at Salesian College Chadstone, I am not Catholic, but I really felt like part of the school, and I saw Mass as an opportunity to reflect on my own faith. The school values shared by all; love, tolerance and faith, really made an impact on me. They changed my life.

With all of this support, from Years 9 to 12, I worked as hard as I could. I had made a promise to my parents to really try my best and I had a personal dream of one day getting a job so that I could repay all of their kindness in some way, if not to the people that helped me, then to others who are in need. It was a very challenging time though, as in addition to my school work I had to help my parents with settlement responsibilities.



Despite these difficulties I was able to complete Year 12 in 2016, and I was able to achieve an ATAR of 93.85. This was only possible because of the love and compassion, support and trust that the Salesian College community offered me.

The support that our family received from the East Malvern Parish community, the Brigidine Order of Nuns and other friends in our neighbourhood who have become like our family members, was also crucial. My dream now is to become a doctor. The Salesian College motto is “Omnia Omnibus”, meaning “All Things to All Men.” Salesian College has inspired me to apply my learning to enhance human life in every way I can. I want to keep hope alive in the face of despair, and I look forward to a bright future, to benefit others, as others have helped me. I hope my current status as an asylum seeker will not be an obstacle to attend university and achieve my goal of becoming a doctor.

Printed on the Salesian website

PS. Javid has accepted an offer from Deakin University for Optometry and hopes to be able to do Medicine via this avenue. BASP congratulates Javid.

Accommodation—moves are almost like playing chess!

The need for housing continues to a range of people and individuals.

One of the houses BASP rents was 'home' to a family of 4 from Pakistan from September to December, until they moved to another property donated to BASP by a generous family of supporters.

A mother, baby and grandmother from South America were then housed there as they had no income and were about to become homeless. Additionally a young African woman moved into a room in this house. She was released from the Broadmeadows detention centre, only because BASP was able to guarantee she had a place to stay in the community. The 2 groups have co-habitated very successfully.

Another successful shared situation ended recently when one family from Ethiopia was able to move into their own rental housing. They had shared the house provided by the FCJ Community since July 2014. Both families had flown into Australia and sought protection. It takes time to lodge the protection application with all the required documentation and then to receive work rights and / income support from Centrelink through Red Cross. The Ethiopian man has now secured full time work as well as being supported by St Brigid's parish in North Fitzroy.

The other family who arrived in May 2016, have only received income support in February 2017. BASP and the house have supported them this far. They are now looking for rental housing and work.

We were fortunate to have a room available in a men's share house recently when a man was referred to us, facing homelessness. He was a journalist in his home country and had to flee immediately for his safety, leaving behind a wife and 2 very young children. He still seemed in shock when we met him 10 days later but we were pleased to be able to offer somewhere stable to live.

Extreme Modes of Restraint used in detention centres

Quite frequently, asylum seekers held in detention need to attend medical appointments of various kinds. Many are accompanied by two members of Serco, who are required to apply one or two physical restraints on the detainee. Of course, as they appear before the public eye they are immediately labelled as dangerous/criminal, and they feel humiliated and demeaned. Although this application is carried out by Serco, who are responsible for supervision in the Detention Centre, they are authorised to do so by Border Force.

To cite a few examples:

A frail young Iranian woman suffering from a high fever was handcuffed while being transported to Out Patients.

Another woman who was experiencing severe kidney pain was likewise handcuffed.

A young man rendered unconscious through a random violent attack, was handcuffed whilst travelling to the hospital.

A woman who was hospitalised had her hands held together with a leather belt and her legs were shackled as well.

We are experiencing an increasingly militarised regime in centres that are designated as places of administrative detention.

Other examples of prison-like scrutiny are evident within the Detention Centre. Members of the Emergency Response Team (dressed in a kind of military uniform) come in and stand in guard as visitors leave the room. A BASP person who was the only one visiting on a particular day had, in toto, six officers overseeing the visit!

Overall the supervision of detainees who have cause to travel anywhere beyond the Detention centre is so intense that some choose to refuse medical attention. Sitting handcuffed in a waiting room with two guards on either side is extremely humiliating, particularly when one is wholly innocent of any crime.

Another man who is suffering from pain in all his joints has had an MRI but he says he will not go back to the hospital to get the results while he is taken with uniformed officers on each side of him clearly guarding him.



Spirit of Christmas. This is a wonderful season at BASP when we witness the kindness and generosity of people to those who are seeking asylum.



This year St Finbars Parish Brighton East made a mammoth contribution to the usual hamper donations resulting in more hampers being distributed to individuals and families in the community. We estimate over 200 were delivered.



This is no mean feat. When food and Christmas specialties are donated,

Noelle, our weekly volunteer who manages the food pantry, harnesses her volunteers to prepare the hampers for distribution, we then require a band of volunteers to deliver them. A number of our regular volunteers were tapped for the job and they took this on willingly. We also had new volunteers such as a mother with primary school children whom she felt lived a pretty fortunate life. She took her 10 year son on a round of 6 deliveries in the northern suburbs; some of these areas were unknown to them. She sent an email thanking us for the opportunity to do this work and saying what a privilege it was to do so and to meet those seeking asylum.



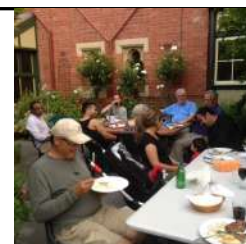
A group of ex pat women, living in Australia at present, mainly from Germany and Denmark, came to BASP with a donation of over \$6000 from their Christmas Market. They create unique craft and food products which they sell each year in line with the German Christmas market traditions. The photo shows one of their creations, a nativity mobile, which was for BASP as part of their gift. Their visit and donation coincided with the tragic episode at the Berlin Christmas market and we were greatly touched by their generosity to support people seeking asylum



MITA Christmas party

As BASP does each year, it worked with others, especially Geraldine Moore and her supporters from the Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association (BRASA), to hold a Christmas Party at MITA- for those who are still held in detention. Culturally appropriate food was delivered for those in the detention centre and was certainly enjoyed by those who attended. Unfortunately, the increasing restrictions at detention centres was in evidence, so the attendees were divided into 2 groups and the second group turned away to return later. Many were disheartened and chose not to return. There had also been a prior arrangement that those people in the detention centre could take a fruit pack back to their rooms. This was nearly forbidden by one officer but with persistence, the original agreement was respected and they were able to take this from the visitors room. One man, who had had four Christmases in detention, mainly in Darwin, said they had never had a special meal for Christmas. While he enjoyed what BASP had provided, he quipped he had been hoping for prawns and a beer!

The Columban Mission Society in Essendon have made a cottage available for 5 men and a neighbouring house for a family. This has been a wonderful support for those who have had the opportunity. Three of the Columbans, Gary, Peter and Ray hosted a dinner for the residents, key staff and Brigid and Libby prior to Christmas on a balmy evening. It was a very happy night where mutual goodwill was palpable.



Good News Stories



Amid all the negativity about race and immigration, a wonderful story of how the BASP - and the wider community - can and do make a positive difference.

In January a father and 3 sons, 10,7,4 from East Africa were referred for emergency housing. They had used up all crisis accommodation options in the previous 6 weeks since arrival, moving from motel to motel as different organisations could fund a few days here and there. BASP was able to pay for food, myki and a few more days in their existing motel, while planning the next step. This was possible through a designated parish donation.

Prior to Christmas, a couple of retired school teachers had offered respite with them at their beach holiday house for any asylum seekers in need of this. BASP contacted them and they willingly took in this family, on a day's notice, for the next 12 days, providing a wonderful experience and a break from motel living. While there, BASP was able to find and lease a unit in Thomastown, made possible through the Crisis Accommodation donations. They moved in one Tuesday. This involved a band of helpers.

An asylum seeker helped the removalist collect donated furniture which BASP stores in 2 locations. This covered the fridge, washing machine, 2 beds, linen, TV, 2 sofas, dining table and chairs and kitchen needs. Food from the BASP pantry, donated by parishes, schools and community members, helped stock the cupboards. Additional items were bought with vouchers, donated by a couple who asked for these in lieu of gifts at their 50th Anniversary.

Sr Helen collected the family from a motel in Dandenong and brought them to their new home and aided the settling in process. Within an hour, one neighbour in the group of 6 units was bringing in unused saucepans for their use. Another had offered DVDs to help entertain the kids. A third offered her son's clothing.

By 3.15, the father asked to visit the local state school, 250 metres down the road, to hasten the 2 older boys' start to school. School had finished but the principal met them with great warmth and agreed to do the enrolments then and there. Fees were waived, he was able to provide some uniform tops and the boys commenced school the next morning. The father's comment as this wonderful day was unfolding was 'I will never forget this welcome I have received in Australia.'

Since then, the school and neighbours have continued to be positive supports. A BASP volunteer has helped him orient himself to the area, find free child care for the youngest child and access free training in Aged Care at a local training facility. It is wonderful when the stars align!

Breaking down barriers: www.refugeetalent.com A unique recruitment servicefounded by a refugee ...for other refugees

Refugee Talent.com is a social enterprise and online platform matching refugees looking for work with companies offering work opportunities.

It provides a one-stop shop for Australian businesses to find and recruit highly skilled and experienced refugees. Two of our BASP people have secured excellent positions, through participating in a 'speed dating' event with Refugee Talent.

The two cofounders of Refugee talent are Nirary Dacho, a Syrian refugee who has a Masters in Web Science, was a lecturer at University in Syria and also worked as Manager for the Assyrian Human Rights Network. And Anna Robson who has worked in the Nauru detention centre for Save the Children. Thanks Nirary and Anna - Refugee Talent has already made a difference



We have had some very generous donations of food and our pantry is well stoked at present. We can always do with

Sugar , flour , tinned tomatoes, tins of fruit, Tuna (plain), Long life milk, tea and coffee, cheese, biscuits, honey, noodles.

We seemingly never have enough washing powder, cleaning products and toilet paper.

Cooking oil is always welcome.

Quite a number of families have small children, so **disposable nappies and wipes** are an ongoing need.

Vouchers are really appreciated eg. for Coles, Big W, Kmart or similar stores; this allows individuals and families the independence to buy something they really want and need.

We have an ample supply of rice, tins of lentils, burghal and chick peas, tinned soup and beetroot and packets of cereal.

We also need a whipper snipper if anyone has one.



The BASP Thank You Christmas Party was held at the Brigidine Ministry Centre and was enjoyed by all. It was a mixture of supporters, volunteers, people who are seeking asylum and those who are now recognised refugees.

We had a wonderful Afghani barbeque and a range of helpers. It is a small way we are able to thank so many who contribute to BASP's work.



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.

Thank you so much for all your donations and support.



We get almost overwhelmed by your generosity. It seems public opinion is shifting quite a bit as the polling showed 50% of people think Australia should bring the people detained on Nauru and Manus to Australia and the other 50%, who continue to support the Governments policy actually are afraid of job losses etc in Australia. So it is good to keep reminding everyone that we are only talking about two thousand people.

We will keep up our practical help to those in need and our advocacy for change for all those seeking protection.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)