

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS

Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 85 September 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

How much more must one group of people endure?

Last week the government announced that it will cut the income support of approximately 410 refugees and asylum seekers living in the Australian community and provide them with 3 weeks to leave Government-supported accommodation under a 'Final Departure Bridging Visa E.' The announcement is targeted at people who were transferred from Manus Island and Nauru for urgent medical care and have since remained in Australia following the #LetThemStay campaign in early 2016. On the Monday following the announcement, 65 people had already had their income support cut and have been told that they have 3 weeks to leave their homes. These are predominantly single people, mostly men. BASP is currently in contact with most of those in Melbourne to see what we can do to help them.

As Libby Saunders (BASP Coordinator) wrote in the Sunday Age:

The crackdown on asylum seekers (The Sunday Age, 26/8) is a cruelty we, as a community, must resist.

I meet many asylum seekers traumatised by the circumstances which have caused them to flee their homeland. The group now having to find housing and work in Australia are in an even worse situation. They sought refuge in Australia in 2013 but, by arriving after an arbitrary date, found themselves in Manus Island or Nauru subjected to appalling conditions.

After a couple of years there, these men, women and children were among those found to be in serious need of medical help for physical or mental health reasons. Thus they were sent to Australia for this help, housed in government sponsored housing and not allowed to work, or participate fully in the community without permission. Many of these people are the most broken of people. Now the government is cynically and cruelly expecting them to cope without money in our community before being returned to Manus, Nauru, or return to their homeland.

Let us be better than this. Let them stay and be supported to become fully functioning members of our community.

**I am a refugee imprisoned and tortured
by the Australian Government**



I am peaceful.

Artist: an asylum seeker on
Manus

Donations to the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project are tax deductible

What is terrorism and how has a religious garb come to symbolise a security risk?

We have all been either amused or confronted by various ‘fancy dress’ that people at various events, parties or entertainment have worn. Pirates, fairies and then more sinister vampire types. Some of these affect different people in different ways.

Some of us in BASP once wore a nun’s dress and the sight of drunken men in a caricature of a nun’s habit is somewhat offensive to us. To add to the feeling of unease, we are expected to pretend that the spectacle is funny! So we can’t take a joke? Most of us don’t have any nostalgia for a dress that we wore nearly fifty years ago. But it meant something at the time and we like to think it was symbolic of a commitment. It certainly had no lewd or coarse connotations that seem to be part of the fancy dress at Melbourne Cups or Mardi Gras marches.

Most of us don’t know any women who wear the burka (covering the whole of a person’s face) but many of us would argue that if they want to and it is a meaningful thing for them to do they should be free to dress as they wish. Pauline Hansen’s tasteless wearing of a dress that to some Muslim women is an important part of their identity must have been distressing and disturbing (even if only a few Muslim women wear the actual burka). For a politician to claim that this is a way to ensure greater security is ludicrous. It is even more ludicrous to claim that the reason for banning particular dress is to save women from oppression. The issue of women’s dress is much more complex. Historically, many women wear certain apparel to assert their right to decide what to wear. Originally the dress worn by Brigidines reflected a desire to blend in among the people they served. Some years ago a woman was given permanent protection in Australia and her claim for protection in Australia was that she was forced to wear secular dress to work in France.

As well, the whole word ‘terrorism’ is a worry in itself. It is a word thrown around in conversation as though we all know what it means and we all mean the same thing. The truth is that most thinking people aren’t really sure what a terrorist is. And the language just keeps getting more confused by the day. And the stakes are high—wars are being fought and people killed because we know we are fighting ‘terrorism’! What, after all, is the discernible difference between a “terrorist,” an “insurgent,” a “freedom fighter,” an “enemy combatant”? How do we name a person who commits an act of violence? The language will always assume a ‘good’ person and a ‘bad’ one.

Terrorism is a vivid political act. In a way it is propaganda. And the propaganda needs media for it to be effective. While most acts of terrorism occur in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, India, Egypt and Libya, the western world would have us believe most terrorism is in countries such as England, France and Germany—and Australia!

In our current situation in Australia there is no substitute for a serious debate about this issue. Not a lampooning of another religion or a denigration of a group but a serious examination of serious questions. And this needs to be rigorous in that we should all be asked to explain what we mean. Pauline Hansen says she has nothing against any religion but she objects to political ideology! What does she mean? Why isn’t she, as a public figure, asked to explain. What do her quite vicious statements about the risks of not banning the burqa do to public consciousness? What is being suggested by this parody? Something about terrorism?

We need political leadership that engenders understanding and welcoming of differences and does not allow the cultivation and festering of the conditions that is giving birth to Ms Hanson and her supporters. We must deal with the reasons why hate, bias and racism have been empowered. Our leaders must come to terms with the fact that the parliament



Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project

Discussion Night 3 -2017

Thursday, October 12th, 2017

Marie Hapke, chair of Refugee Advocacy Network and a member of the Australian Refugee Advocacy Network will outline where advocacy efforts are being targeted

Plus: A presentation of photos by Rohingya artist Ali Mc (and some members of the Rohingya community)



BRING THEM HERE!

- * Brutal attacks on refugees on Manus Is and Nauru
- * Manus Is. refugees being forced to move with no safe place to go
- * Living conditions on Manus Is. deliberately made worse
- * The U.S. "deal" a shambles

CALL ON YOUR LOCAL MP TO SPEAK UP

8th—14th October is a National action week for change in Australian policies to asylum seekers. We hope to get as much publicity and action as we can .

Time: 7.30 – 9.30p.m

Venue:

St Joseph's Hall

(beside the bluestone church)

274 Rouse St , Port Melbourne



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

So much was revealed in the ‘Trump/Turnbull’ conversation



Along with many other people, we are outraged by the transcript of the conversation between our Prime Minister and the President of the United States concerning Australia’s deal with the US to take refugees from offshore processing centres on Nauru and Manus Island.

This extraordinary conversation (if it could be called that) seems to evidence moral bankruptcy on the part of both leaders.

These are persons

From our point of view the worst thing about the conversation is that both leaders could have been speaking about sacks of wheat or boxes of clothes. There is nothing about the human beings who are the subject of this ‘deal’. For each of them it is the question of their own ‘image’ rather than the fate of these people that is concerning them.

Trump says the agreement will make him look dumb. Turnbull pleads with the President not to back down and leave him with this problem. Turnbull admits that these are people who have done no wrong except arrive by boat.

The off-shore detention centres are Australia's responsibility (the Australian government continues to be less than honest about this)

The transcript reveals as well that Australia maintains control and power over the centres – essentially highlighting that Manus Island and Nauru are Australia’s responsibility.

As Turnbull said: They have been under our supervision for over three years now and we know ‘exactly’ everything about them.

America does not have to take anyone from Manus or Nauru

Turnbull repeatedly stresses to Trump during the exchange that the vetting process could mean that the US doesn’t have to accept any of the 1250 refugees from Manus Island and Nauru. Throughout the call, Turnbull reiterates that the only obligation on the US under this deal is to consider taking refugees. Turnbull: ‘You can decide to take them or to not take them after vetting. You can decide to take 1,000 or 100. It is entirely up to you.’

When President Trump asks: Suppose I vet them closely and I do not take any?

Prime Minister Turnbull responds: That is the point I have been trying to make.

Interesting (and false) claims about who is in the Nauru and Manus centres

Turnbull admits that Australia imprisons people who are innocent. We wouldn’t take even a Nobel Peace Prize winner if they came by boat. Turnbull claims: ‘The people – none of these people are from the conflict zone. They are basically economic refugees from Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.’ This statement highlights either wilful ignorance or blatant deceitfulness by Turnbull in an attempt to sell our responsibility to the US.

The Department of Immigration and Border Protection’s own figures show that of the 2,235 people on Manus Island and Nauru who have been assessed, almost 80% have been found to be persecuted refugees.

The term “economic refugee” is therefore a misnomer. Those found to be refugees are people fleeing persecution, based on who they are or what they believe. By telling Trump these people are “basically economic refugees”, Turnbull misrepresents the ongoing persecution and conflict that people from these countries are experiencing daily.

Even Trump wonders about Australia’s policy:

Trump asks: ‘What is the thing with boats? Why do you discriminate against boats?’

Only ‘bad’ people are locked up

‘I hate taking these people. I guarantee you they are bad. That is why they are in prison right now.’ Trump’s insistence that the people detained by Australia on Manus Island and Nauru “are bad” – which Turnbull did not contest – demonstrates the disdain and lack of understanding common to both the Australian and US governments with respect to forced displacement and cruelty.

The notion of immigration detention being akin to “prison” underscores the punitive nature of the Turnbull government’s approach to people desperately seeking asylum – a description Turnbull fails to rebut. Indeed, throughout the conversation there is a subtle acceptance of the link between asylum seekers and terrorism and this is deeply troubling because there is ample evidence to prove that no such link exists.

There is no indication that the Rule of Law has any importance whatsoever.

The Refugee Convention that Australia originally signed expressly notes refugees are entitled to asylum regardless of their modes of transport.

Although it has been strenuously denied that this was a ‘swap deal’, the conversation clearly indicates that it was. Turnbull: ‘We will then hold up our end of the bargain’. We will then hold up our end of the bargain by taking into our country 31 [believed to be South American refugees from a camp in Costa Rica] that you need to move on from. An interesting aspect of this conversation is that Turnbull made it clear Australia would take anyone to ensure the deal progressed! Drug dealers? Criminals?

It is clear from this conversation that the Australian government made the deal so that it can publicly maintain its unwavering commitment to an offshore detention policy that is no longer sustainable. **The irony of all this is that Trump and Turnbull reveal themselves as human traffickers on a global scale.**

BASP received this email recently from Dr. Christine Hill, who, as a BASP volunteer, took her perinatal psychotherapy expertise into the Broadmeadows detention centre three years ago to assist the new mothers and their babies. Christine has written an article which will be published in October and, as Christine says, ‘will hopefully get publicity and help our advocacy’ for these asylum seekers.

["Writers Victoria is thrilled to announce the finalists of the 2017 Grace Marion Wilson Emerging Writers Competitions..."](#)

[The **winner** of the Non-Fiction category was **Christine Hill** with the entry '**How could you do this to us?**'. "It's an essay written by a perinatal psychotherapist visiting asylum-seekers in a detention centre, trying to help detained parents engage their babies in play. The author describes the Kafkaesque environment in which these refugee parents spend interminable days, months and years, and the damaging long term consequences of their despair for their children's' development. The voice is restrained, authoritative and quietly enraged. This is a story that needs to be told and, once read, it will not easily be forgotten."](#)

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A very softly spoken person rang BASP last week asking for help. She had only been in Australia for a few days having come from an African country for a work related conference. In her own country she worked for the Government and had seen how careful individuals had to be to avoid ‘disappearance’. The father of her three small children had had to leave to go to the US. While here, she was told officials were looking for her. Olive (not her real name) arrived at Tullamarine with nowhere to go and no-one to help her. This woman is totally traumatised—she has children who are being looked after temporarily but she is terrified about their future and her own.

If she had known of the threat when arriving and told officials she needed protection she would have been put in detention pending her application being processed—or she may have been subject to a ‘turn-around’, that is put on a plane and returned to her country.

In the meantime BASP is, of course, able to provide Olive with accommodation and support.

Housing update

The demand for housing continues, mainly from 3 groups.

One group involves those people flying into Australia seeking housing support pending income support. A number of these requests are from women with children who have fled domestic violence situations in cultures where they have no protection from the perpetrators- often someone in a powerful position.

Given this demand, one of the BASP houses, usually used for single women only, has taken in 2 women with a young child each.

The second group includes individuals and families who have been living here for some years, are in the appeal process and have had income and / work rights stopped. People who had jobs and rental premises and then have to abandon these while waiting for a Federal Court hearing in possibly a year or 2.

The third group now involves the people who are in Australia from Manus and Nauru and are adversely affected by the recent government decision to cease housing and income support to them 3 weeks from their interview with Immigration. BASP has been able to assist a number of these people. The initial group targeted by the government are single people, a number of whom are still very vulnerable due to their experiences and for whom this government decision will likely mean a set back in any progress made.

The offers from the community to assist the people being threatened with return to these offshore places have been heart-warming. We have had offers of spare rooms, money, employment and support in whatever form.

What has been positive is the willingness across the sector to work collaboratively to a) campaign against this directive and b) provide whatever material aid each organisation is able to give.

BASP is fortunate in its total independence of any government funding. It is able to operate through the generosity of community donations- of funds and of time.



BASP has recently rented another house for people with no income. It also works with people in our houses, to help them find private rental when their financial position allows this. Those who have been assisted when they were at risk of homelessness are conscientious about moving on when they can do so, thus allowing accommodation for new requests for help.

BASP is currently responsible for housing 120 people at any one time. Over time it has been many hundreds. Additionally we have paid the cost of motel and hostel accommodation while other alternatives are sought by BASP or other organisations.

The goodwill of those in BASP housing was never more evident than the welcome given to a woman and her 2 children recently. 2 women with children already shared this large house, made available by the FCJ community. The new woman and her 2 children were facing homelessness and possible Child Protection intervention because of this.

Even though the new residents would be a squeeze for a week or two until another house was ready, the existing women helped set up their room, shared food and friendship on arrival and made the situation work well.



A moment that nearly made us cry

A phone call to BASP a while ago was from a man who obviously had English as a second language. He was speaking about wanting to give something. We almost made the mistake of thinking he was telling us of a need. Instead he was saying that he had a job and because BASP had helped him with rent he wanted to make a donation to help others.

We can be sure that this man and his family are still short of money but they have a huge generous spirit.

From Phil Steele: This is a photo of Morteza and Roya who were married recently at the Templestowe Baptist Church. Morteza and Roya are both seeking asylum in Australia. Anne Leyland and I helped Morteza with his English in 2014 for about 12 months when he was sharing a house in West Sunshine with some other Iranian men shortly after being released from detention.



My wife, Maureen and I have kept up the friendship with them and I was very honoured when Morteza kindly asked me to be a witness at their wedding ceremony. We have been truly blessed by our ongoing friendship with Morteza and Roya and their family. They are a great example of love finding a way through all sorts of challenges and difficulties. We continue to be inspired by them and their love for each other. May God bless them and walk with them throughout their lives together.

We have two young Year 12 students who both came to Australia by boat by themselves. The young man was fourteen and the young woman fifteen at the time. They do not know each other but we at BASP know them both very well. They are both extraordinarily good students. They are both doing a Maths/Science course and one wants to do Theoretical Science and the other Medicine at University. Because they are both on Bridging Visas there is no certainty that they will be able to go to University as they will be relying on getting a scholarship.



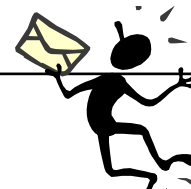
Such students are regarded as overseas students and charged accordingly—many thousands of dollars a year. We are expecting both will do well. Those of us who have been teachers would have loved to have had them in our class!

The Sisters in The Little Company of Mary Congregation have offered to help one or both of these students if they secure a University place next year.

Ahmed Ahmadi is a young Afghan man we have known at BASP for many years. He helped us with interpreting and with practical assistance when we had other Afghani men in accommodation.

Ahmed has been in Australia for years with a Permanent Residence Visa and been desperate for citizenship and the opportunity to bring his wife here. About a month ago Ahmed was able to bring his wife to meet us. She had not only arrived but found her way around Dandenong to the market and plaza and all places she needed to visit. A week after she arrived she enrolled in TAFE to learn English. The instructors there could not believe she had only been in Australia for a week.

So many men are in the same situation—except with no news that their families can join them. They are so stoic in their pain.



Trivia Night

Another successful Trivia Night was held at St. Mary's, Hampton on Friday 11th. August. \$4,100.00 was raised for the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project. People came from Brighton, Sandringham, Highett, Brighton East, Cheltenham, Ormond and St. Mary's, Hampton.

We were interested to hear, from Sr. Brigid, about the current situation of Asylum Seekers at home and off-shore. We were especially thrilled to hear about young people who are overcoming many difficulties and succeeding in their studies and families who are settling well.

It was good to have a full hall buzzing with excited trivia enthusiasts. A chance to support a worthy cause and have a good night out at the same time. We look forward to another great night next year.

- Collette Foxworthy (one of the main organisers of the night)

Every letter counts!

Many thanks to the people who have been involved with our letter writing campaign. Meeting people who have come into BASP to do this has been enriching and our thanks also to those who have been doing it from home or at other gatherings around the country. Hearing about this (see our photo) gives us all heart to keep up the struggle for justice. Writing letters, emailing and/or phoning are such an important aspect of how we can make known our wishes in a democracy and a major way in which we can call our elected politicians to account. Let us not underestimate the value of exercising this right.



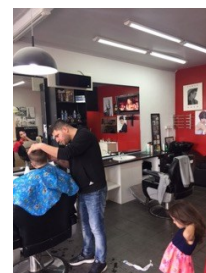
Students from Brigidine College, Indooroopilly writing letters



Eshmael's barber shop

Want a haircut?

One young couple who needed some support on release from detention, have also made great strides in establishing themselves in the community. The husband has established a Barber shop in Avondale Heights and they sought and found a private rental market without assistance.



The family continue to wait for their visa interview and determination.

Thanks to Bunnings

A sincere thank you to Bunnings Port Melbourne who have recently donated a lawnmower to BASP.

This has enabled one of our asylum seekers to establish and add gardening business to his cleaning business in the Northern suburbs.

So if you need lawns mowed or help with your garden or cleaning call Farhoud on 0466 905 600





Three young and very traumatised men recently had regular income - one from work, 2 from Centrelink, so needed help to move from a BASP house into their own rental property. They have all been sheltered due to their vulnerable states and no-one was clear how well they would cope. It has been wonderful. On moving in, there were issues with the gas and the water which they managed well. They are getting on well, enjoying their independence and have been delighted to have a couple who visit them as friends and mentors if they need them. Recently, the volunteer couple were invited for an Afghani lunch to celebrate Eid.

Volunteers can make such a difference to the lives of people, still in limbo. This is from a volunteer family who visited a family in Australia from Nauru.

'We visited the couple & their kids a few days ago. It went really well - they are the most lovely family and we really enjoyed spending some time with them. The kids got on like a house on fire. Within about 2 minutes they were running around, playing together as if they were long lost cousins! They had so much fun they didn't want to leave and are looking forward to go back. We will meet up with them again in about 2 weeks. I felt like we really got along well and had plenty to talk about. It is beyond my comprehension that the Australian government is not begging such a great family to remain here permanently.... '

The adult son in another family, also here from Nauru, asked if there was any way he could arrange for his mother and sister to attend a Circus Oz performance. BASP made enquiries and free tickets were immediately provided. This gave such a lift to this family, who are in community detention, with little income, no right to work and for whom each day and week is long and bleak.

Hamid, an Afghani man, was one of the first people Brigid took out for the day from MITA - the detention centre in Broadmeadows in 2012. He recalls this act as life saving- giving him a glimpse of hope and humanity when all looked bleak. He has retained close links with BASP over the intervening years, as he was released into the community, eventually securing a permanent visa, waiting a further 4, then 5 years for citizenship which has still not been granted by the government. In this time, he has retrained as a tiler, established his own business and employs a number of employees. He has also said that he dreads his daily phone call to his wife and children living in Pakistan because his wife always asks when they can join him and he has no answer. Well at the end of August his prayers were answered. The visas for his wife and children were approved and they are arriving here mid September.

St Bernard's Essendon Parents Association contacted BASP to ascertain how they could help enhance the lives of people seeking asylum. As many of the parents work during the week, they were looking at weekend activities.

As it happened, one of the families in a house rented by BASP was due for the annual inspection by the agent. The resident had amassed a huge amount of green waste which needed to go before the agent arrived! A working bee of parents with their children and their trailers was arranged and they managed to remove the waste and



make the outdoors acceptable to the agent. This enabled the family to remain in the house, which was a huge relief to all concerned.



Things we need

Sugar , flour , tinned tomatoes, tins of fruit, Tuna (plain), Long life milk, tea and coffee, cheese, biscuits, honey, noodles, Toilet paper, Gladwrap, tinfoil, Tuna – large and small cans, Cans of tomatoes, Cans - Corn kernels, peas, Cans – Red kidney beans, Cans – fruit
Long life milk, Tea and Coffee, Sugar, Cooking oil, Dates, Noodles and spaghetti, Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches, Lollies, Salt and pepper, Pegs for hanging out washing, Spices: coriander, cinnamon, ginger, Shampoo and Conditioner, Shaving Cream and shavers, Toothpaste.

We seemingly never have enough washing powder, dish washing detergents and household cleaning products. A very generous person is keeping us supplied with toilet paper.

Cooking oil is also always welcome. And vouchers are always welcome—they give people an opportunity to get a few things they need.

Other needs

Over time we have had a few second hand cars donated to us and these have been wonderful for people in terms of getting a job that could only be accessed with a car or just getting people a little less isolated. Right now some of the men who have just been told to get a job might be in a better position if they had transport.

When one does become available we go from one needy person or family to another wondering which one to offer it to.

So if anyone has a car they could donate we would be very pleased to hear from them.



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.

We are indeed so blessed by the generosity of many people. We feel humbled at times when those we can help thank us. We know that much of what we can offer is due to our supporters. We would like to share something of the relief and gratitude that those we assist have. When people don't have money for the electricity bill, or no money for the last rent or basic living allowance when they have had all income ceased, we are able in most cases to help—with your contributions.



Please keep asking the Government (with letters, emails or phone calls) not to be so harsh and bring those on Nauru and Manus to Australia and not send anyone else back there.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders