

STRENGTH AND KINDNESS
Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project (BASP)



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

Newsletter 118 December 2024

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

Christmas was historically important because it was the solstice (in the northern hemisphere) the shortest day of the year. It was a time of comparative darkness, staying still and reflecting and prioritizing what was important spiritually. This included being conscious of the fruits and produce needed for the following year. It was a time to recognize the resources one had and cherish them.

Many people dislike the commercialism that seems an inherent part of our current celebration of Christmas. However, it can be a time to recapture some of the quiet wonder of life. New life is part of the wonder. Baby Meklit was born to a mother who is an asylum seeker in Australia. Mother and baby are beautiful and both are vulnerable. A baby is surely one of the most vulnerable and dependent things that exists .



Baby Meklit (the name means 'gift from God').

Uncertainty is a part of life no matter who we are. Climate change and far right policies remind us how precarious our future is. More immediately, we face rising prices and threats to housing. The dangers of war is very present to us every day in Ukraine and Gaza and Syria and Yemen and other places.

However, for asylum seeker families this is not “vulnerability” as an abstraction, but often the real insecurity of not having a roof over one’s head or any food security let alone an assured future. Australia’s policies leave them uncertain, anxious and unable to plan for their lives in the future.

In the midst of huge uncertainty one thing stands as a beacon of hope—the goodness of people. We see this every day in those who support BASP in so many different ways. We appreciate all the help and the messages of encouragement and care so many of you send. We want at this time to pay tribute in some way to all of you.

As well, the courage and rich humanity that refugees and people seeking asylum show in the face of suffering and exclusion is amazing and heartening. Many are broken by the extraordinary trauma they have been through. At an official level, it seems as though people are being deterred from seeking protection rather than welcomed and offered safety. However most maintain some hope in spite of this. The hope that survives loss and trauma is both miraculous and inspirational. As Joan Baez reminded us

Deep in my heart I do believe some day We shall overcome.

We acknowledge and we thank

All those who walk with us, who send us messages of encouragement, who are so positive in their support, You will never really know how much all this means to us.



Volunteers—a wonderful group of people helping in so many ways - from pantry management, food deliveries, advocacy for individuals and for system change, social support and friendship, transport to and from appointments, from home maintenance to being a driving instructor!

All those who donate to BASP and allow us to give about \$1.2 million in direct assistance to asylum seekers each year. Many of you donate monthly, some give us a substantial amount at certain times of the year, some amounts are big, others small—and it all adds up to ensure this level of support to some of the most desperate people in Australia. (All money donated goes to asylum seekers—our other costs are paid for by the Brigidine sisters and the St John of God Sisters).

The groups—schools, parishes, many people of good will who organize fund raising activities (such as trivia nights, silent auctions, concerts) for BASP. We constantly marvel at the generosity of so many who organise such events—knowing that there is no doubt that you are busy people. Individuals, groups, schools and parishes who donate food and household items and arrange outings, not only raising funds but also awareness of the continuing injustice for so many.

Barabara and John (and Noelle still comes when needed) who spend hours every week packing these goods into the pantry and bags to be delivered. The volunteers who take the food and goods out to people who have no way to collect it themselves.

Home owners who have made properties available for us

Different local and regional groups from Grandmothers for Refugees and Rural Australians for Refugees and others.

Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association (BRASA) who have helped us in many ways

Advocacy groups allow us to lobby more effectively, in particular Refugee Advocacy Network (especially the leadership of Marie Hapke),

Help with legal matters and getting advice—a special thanks to Judy Dixon for years of representing people who had no other options. Organizations we refer asylum seekers for representation: Refugee Legal, Victorian Legal Aid (VLA), Asylum Seekers Resource Centre (ASRC),

The BASP Board for their unwavering support and guidance; Kildare Ministries for helping with governance and payroll and offering lots of support.

Patrick O'Connor for so much assistance with finance. Patrick is always there to answer questions, give advice and ensure auditing and such requirements are carried out.

The Brigidines- for their continuing generosity- Jude and Ged in admin, Marg as outreach worker; the Community support with making some housing, and office space available, financial support from individuals and for their commitment to seeking justice for people seeking asylum. Making four houses available to asylum seekers, many sisters making donations through the year and so many offering much appreciated practical and moral support for the work we do.

Other Religious Congregations for housing support : FCJ Sisters, Sisters of Charity, Little Company of Mary, Columban Fathers

Other home owners who have made properties available for us - giving accommodation on a long term or short term basis.

Those who have provided holidays or outings. Saltbush and the Mariana Community have been amazing as has Marisa and her band of helpers in the organization of yearly DOXA campa.

Other organisations and groups who continue to work with us to assist individuals as well as seeking change.

Tower of Song with singers, song writers Nick Charles, Justin Bernasconi, and Dave Miles entertained an audience at Holy Trinity Church in Port Melbourne. The proceeds were donated to BASP. The music was so beautiful and evocative.

A few weeks later David wrote in response to a note of thanks from us:

The sorry treatment of asylum seekers in this country puts a real fire under me.

My maternal grandfather came to this country from Croatia in the years before WWI; the Austro-Hungarian Empire was press-ganging young Croatian boys and putting them in the front lines of their ill-fated war against the Italians. His mother stowed him away on a boat to anywhere, not knowing where it was bound - and she never saw him again.

He was found after a week or so; the captain put him to work stoking the engines. They put him off at their first stop - Fremantle. He was 14 years old, had no money, no papers and no English. Now there are over 300 of us, his descendants.

These people come here and endure such dangers and hardships because it's safer than staying at home. How dare we treat them like criminals.

Anyway, rant over.

We'll be doing these performances every 3 months, the next will be on February 6th.



Augustine lived in our BASP house in Ardeer for about two years in 2011 –13. It would be good if the walls of that house could talk! Unfortunately it was burned down in 2013. Prior to that Brigidines lived in it for sixty years or so. A month or so ago Augustine came in with his mother Rosa (visiting from Uganda). Augustine and his wife are about to have their third child. Augustine is an Australian citizen, While he was living in Ardeer he did a welding course at RMIT. Sr Martin (a Brigidine who lived next door) helped him with the necessary maths knowledge.

Rose came in to say thanks to BASP for looking after Augustine when he came as an asylum seeker!

Labor passes migration bills after marathon Senate sitting

In a very rushed sitting, the government ended the parliamentary year by introducing legislation (three Migration Amendment Bills) that will enable

- (i) Australia to pay a third country to receive failed asylum seekers,
- (ii) the re-detention of people who were released due to the NZYQ High Court ruling, and
- (iii) the Minister to declare any item (e.g. a mobile phone) to be prohibited in detention.

This happened in spite of the many submissions and hundreds of phone calls to Members of Parliament, by advocacy groups and concerned individuals. Labor and the Coalition teamed to make this possible. As always, refugees – one of the most marginalised communities – are easy targets.

A Senate inquiry heard that up to 80,000 people could be affected by the proposed removal powers. A bipartisan Parliamentary committee found that the re-detention legislation could impact on people's human rights on multiple levels.

After the bills were passed, the Coalition asserted that they are basically running the government's immigration policy.

We are now very concerned about the fall-out from this legislation. It is extraordinarily frightening for those who fit the category of those who could be deported. There are 1106 people who were transferred offshore and currently in Australia. This includes 838 people who were part of the pre-19 July 2013 group (RCOA figures). The bills give the Government (and any new Australian Government) broad, unchecked powers in terms of these people.

We are particularly worried about the seeming lack of regard for the separation of powers and the harshness of the stipulations in the bills. There seems to be no built in review of the enacting of the bills. We have to conclude that the legislation is about winning votes rather than doing what is good. It will be seen by the international community as one more indication of Australia's flaunting of our international obligations to give asylum to those who fear persecution.

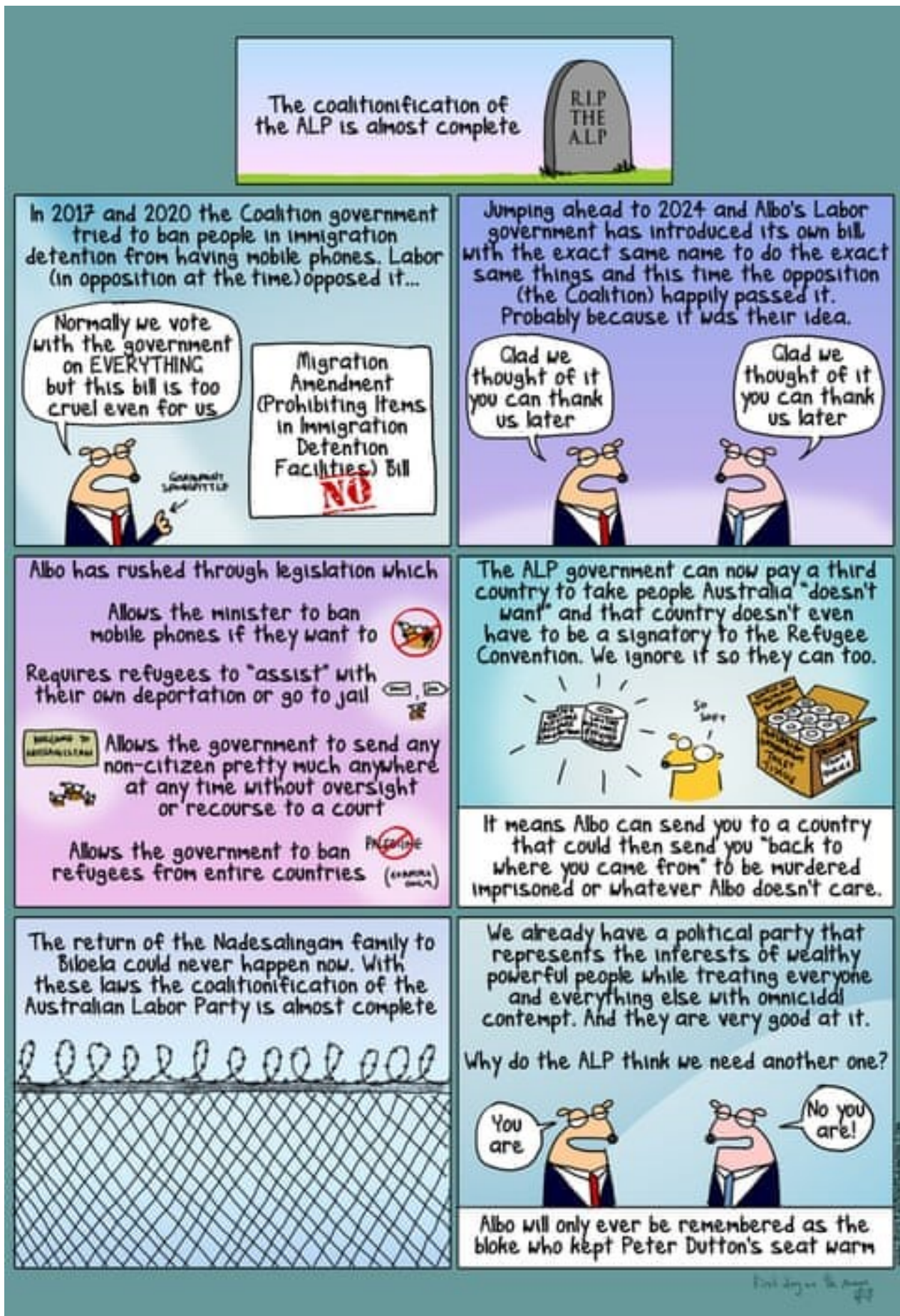
The narrative that has gained currency is that all this is about national security. The truth is that the government has used a few specific cases to justify creating a brutal law.

Mental health concerns

Recently Patrick McGorry spoke to a BASP gathering about the effect of being an asylum seeker on mental health—in particular the effects of detention. Soon after this day, a report on research into this issue was published. It justified all that Patrick had said.

The largest known study into the prevalence of mental health ill-health among people who spent time in Australian immigration detention found it was profound. On PTSD they were at 16-22 times more risk than the general population, the rate depended on whether their detention was onshore or offshore and whether it was above or below six months duration.

An interesting and sad statistic is that we have spent over \$12 billion on off-shore detention. So any country that wants to make some money by housing those rejected by Australia will presumably be attracted by the money Australia is prepared to spend. How dreadful!



When we contacted First Dog on the moon to ask if we could use this for our newsletter, he said Say hi (to our supporters).

Many asylum seekers have had their lives seriously impacted by the Fast Track system. These are people who arrived by boat from 13 August 2012 to 31 December 2013 and who weren't sent off-shore. Their legal options have been limited, some are without a visa, some don't have work rights. There are about 8000 of them still just waiting. Sara's story is about one of these.

Sara's story *

My daughter started at Victoria University, studying law, nearly two years ago. She had won a scholarship to cover university costs. We were thrilled and so proud of her as she had studied hard, often into the early hours of the morning, and had done so well at school.

After two weeks, a man from Immigration rang to ask, "How is this possible as she doesn't have study rights?". He said no more.

This was the first we heard of this, despite having had work and study rights since just after we came to Australia from Iran many years ago in 2013. I had completed many certificates, for example, in childcare, disability, accounting, business management and barista.

Soon after that phone call, our visa came saying we had no study rights even though we had had them for the previous nine years. No reason was given. We were all devastated and cried a lot. I am shocked that, in this free and democratic country, we cannot study.

Then, a month ago, and two years later, we got a new visa, stating my daughter now had study rights but that none of us had work rights. We had all been working hard for years, paying our taxes and contributing to society here. It was too late for my daughter to return to university as she had lost her scholarship and, as we had no income, we could not afford the very high fees for international students, the only option available.

Until this letter, my husband and I had worked hard to build our dream. I worked in many different jobs and, most recently, at Bunnings. My daughter worked there too. My husband ran a successful kebabs shop. We all had to stop working. I am a very active person and have worked hard all my life, in Iran and in Australia. I have paid taxes here. I have contributed to this society. How do I now afford anything – food, electricity, rent, clothing?

When I rang the Immigration Department, I was told: "Yes, this is a tough situation. Take care". I came to Australia with a lot of hope to make a good and safe future for our two children. We came by boat and were detained at Christmas Island for a month and then at MITA (Melbourne Immigration Detention Centre) for a month.

When we were in MITA, a Turkish man helped us a lot, bringing us food and then finding us a house. I remember when we arrived at the house looking in the mirror, in my second-hand dress, and asking my husband: "How will we be?" My husband replied: "God will look after us". Soon after, our Turkish friend brought us everything we needed for the house. He found work for me at a kebabs shop and my husband work at a butcher shop.

We all worked and studied very hard. My family and I have advocated for human and asylum seeker rights. I was inspired by the civil rights activist, Rosa Parks. My daughter is an ambassador for RCOA (Refugee Council of Australia) and gives presentations in schools. She too has been an advocate for many years. Our family has featured on "A Current Affair" twice and appeared in many articles but with no response. We have a photo of my daughter with our local MP, Andrew Giles, showing the many medals she has won as a taekwondo champion. Before he became Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, he made many

promises to us, but we are still waiting.

From the beginning, our application for a permanent visa was constantly rejected. We never knew the reason and what would happen next. We are victims of the Fast Track Processing system. This means we had to renew our Bridging Visa every six months to be sure of work and study rights.

And now, eleven years later, we are without work rights. I have not told my Turkish friend about losing my work rights as I am too ashamed. We came such a long way and now, nothing. We have lost our rights and our dignity.

In 2018, when the application system moved online, a migration agent, without our knowledge, failed to lodge our six-monthly visa renewal application which meant we were “illegal” for six months. He said he’d apply but he didn’t.

In 2022, my husband found out that this agent, who posed as a lawyer, was not registered here and is now missing, uncontactable, out of reach. He cheated us and many other people. We don’t know the court system here. Our priority has always been housing, education, a job. And now, six years after the migration agent deceived us, we have lost our work rights. We have been informed by reliable lawyers that the only way out of this desperate situation is to be granted a permanent visa.

Who made all these rules? They are not human. Just one minute of thinking would show how difficult it is to live like this. Machines have more emotions than those people. We are victims of a cruel system.

**Sara is not her real name which has been changed for privacy and protection reasons. She told her story to Delia Bradshaw, a BASP volunteer.*

Students at Marian College made a large number of these bags and wrote letters to go in each one for the people who get help from BASP.

These satisfied two goals. They sent a message of love and concern and because we are always short of bags they provided ways for us to pack more goods!

There are so many creative and beautiful ways to assure those who are sad and hopeless that we care. Often young people are the best at thinking of these.

This could serve as a reminder that we need bags—supermarket bags or any others we can use for food and other items.



The South Melbourne Community Chest is a non-profit organisation that raises funds to distribute to quite a large number of local community groups. They distribute grants annually from opportunity shop revenue, financial donations and bequests.

For several years they have given \$5000 to BASP to buy food vouchers. These are really appreciated by our asylum seeker friends.

Rosie Joyce, is a Brigidine who is a great cake maker. Every year at Christmas time she makes cakes to raffle for BASP. This year at the Brigidine Christmas gathering Rosie had made three Christmas cakes and two large jars of almond bread.



This year the raffle made \$615.
Thanks so much Rosie



Continuing beautiful gestures of help and hope

Recently the Bayside Refugee Advocacy and Support Association (BRASA) generously offered to help provide some happy experiences for families and children at Christmas and over the holidays. As well, Pam, one of their members, did some great research into what activities are available. This included addresses, prices, times of opening and all the information needed.

Holidays can be a long time for children— and especially so if there is no money available for any outings. And it can be hard when friends all have stories to tell about where they went and the fun they had.

This kindness from BRASA members and the advocacy efforts described below help to address some of the tortuous uncertainty for families just waiting, waiting ...

Amid Continuing Uncertainty—

We are perplexed by mixed experiences continuing to be reported to us by long term asylum seekers.

A few who had no visa at all for years are being offered new bridging visas with work rights.

Others who had an unlimited bridging visa with work rights are being notified that they now have a 3 month visa with no work rights.

The uncertainty and haphazard application of these changes adds to the accumulated stress of their 12 year wait to date.

We appreciate those of you who continue to raise concerns about Australia's treatment of people who fled persecution and sought Australia's protection.

A sad letter to relevant MPs (copy below) was sent by a friend of a young woman who had attempted suicide, saying

'Sorry, I didn't want to make everyone sad but I felt that the world had no place for me'.

Dear Minister Thistlethwaite and Dr Ananda-Rajah,

My friend and I are of a similar age, both educated women with families who love us. There, the similarities end.

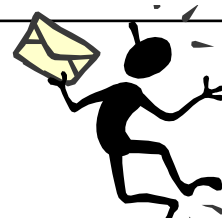
By an accident of birth I was born in Australia, she was born in Iran. My grandfather was not a religious extremist. I did not live in fear of being forced to marry my cousin and live a life dominated by men. I did not have to pay people smugglers to get me to Australia. I did not experience the fear or witness the atrocities she did on the boat journey and at Christmas Island, Nauru and Broadmeadows Detention Centre. I had my children at Cabrini Hospital in Malvern without guards in attendance. I have been able to pursue my career.

As a family, we have had the support of Government services like Medicare and the knowledge of the safety net of Centrelink. My husband, children and I are supported emotionally and practically by our families. We have had a fair go.

After 12 years in limbo, people like my friend are feeling hopeless and defeated - this is not the way we should treat people. My friend has recently attempted suicide - her 10 year old daughter had to call the ambulance. Her Australian born daughters have never met their grandparents. How is this a fair go?

Seeking asylum is a human right - Australia has failed this family. This is not an isolated story - please urgently review the cases of those like my friend and her family who are left in limbo with no visa, no rights, no hope.

We believe these advocacy letters/ emails can gradually change the narrative around justice towards refugees. If we can follow up with some ongoing communication it is even better.



This email from a BASP volunteer is a wonderful example of letting our MPs know of the cruelty continuing to occur and what so many Australians feel about it.

To: Matt Thistlethwaite <Matt.Thistlethwaite.MP@aph.gov.au>

Subject: A request for your help in expediting the process of providing permanent visas to asylum seekers

Dear Mr Thistlethwaite

I am an ordinary Australian writing to ask for your help in expediting the process of providing permanent visas to asylum seekers whose only need is to want a life for their families and themselves that most Australians take for granted.

I have got to know three asylum seekers all with different stories of devastated lives with one common goal – to live and work and give back to Australia.

Until I met these three men I knew nothing of what living with ongoing uncertainty and declining mental health due to the devastating limbo they are experiencing, is like.

I can't believe that we as a society can't share the freedoms and benefits of a country as lucky as Australia with a small number of people seeking a life without threats and fear.

I'm sure where there's a will there's a way and ask that you and your MP colleagues from across the political spectrum, work to find that way.

I'd be pleased to discuss my plea or work with you on this or provide more information if required.

Thanks for taking the time to read my email.

Employment

Carolyn has continued to work in the office each Tuesday and help people with CVs and seeking employment. Finding something suitable is quite challenging and we see that success comes in many forms, for example a mother of 4 with a sick husband came in having no work, no money, no confidence. Carolyn arranged for her to attend weekly English classes as well as discussing possible work. 2 months later, the mother is continuing with her English classes, is doing casual work in packing and is more confident. She has also arranged for her 18 yo to do work experience after year 12 exams as preparation for paid work.

We are always delighted when we can assist one of our supporters with an asylum seeker to undertake a job they need. This can be gardening, painting, handyman work.

One supporter linked us to a contact in aged care for possible work for one of the asylum seeker women we support and another found a market cash-in-hand job for a man at a market. Contacts like this can make the difference in getting a job and becoming self-sufficient.

Housing.

It is such a good feeling to be able to offer a house or room to someone in need. However, to have such places to offer, we must work with existing tenants who have secured some income- through work or benefits- to move on to housing in the general market, independent of us.

The following email is such a gracious acceptance of that need- to move out of what has become comfortable to make way for others.

"I hope this message finds you well. As I prepare to leave the warm and welcoming space you've provided, I want to take a moment to express my deepest gratitude for the kindness and generosity you've shown me during my stay.

The accommodation you offered was more than just a place to sleep—it truly became a home where I could feel settled and at ease. Your thoughtfulness and support made a world of difference to me. I felt uplifted by the sense of security and comfort, and it has allowed me to focus fully on my journey without worry.

Thank you for extending your help and opening your doors. Your compassion and commitment to helping those in need is truly inspiring. I leave with a full heart, and I am forever grateful for everything you've done for me.

Wishing you all the best in your continued work and hoping that you touch as many lives as you have mine.

With warmest regards and sincere thanks, B

Recently a family of 4 arrived at the office, having fled Colombia quickly, with few resources and no English. They had one more day of accommodation and had not eaten that day.

BASP had no available housing. We gave them food and had to do some quick thinking.

How fortunate we are to have such goodwill amongst our supporters. One family agreed to the newly arrived family living in their house for a week while they themselves did not need it.

The Mariana Community, which had agreed to host a weekend experience in 10 days at their house in Millgrove, agreed to the family going early and having a roof over their heads for that period. Following this, the Brigidine Community offered us a unit till the end of January. Gail Ryan (also a Brigidine who lives next door) has helped with all manner of practical things. . The family sent us a message:

Hello, good afternoon, Libby. The Bonbeach house is beautiful. We will take care of it as if it were ours. Thank you. Today sister Gail Ryan took us for a walk near the house to see the train station, supermarket, and the beach I thank you for all the support, thank you very much, happy afternoon.

Marg Fyfe (another Brigidine) who speaks Spanish was able to ferry them to these various locations. This gives us breathing space to find something longer. It also gives them time to learn some English and be ready to seek work in January when their bridging visas take effect.

A series of small miracles!

Alice is one of our BASP supporters and she sent this message: I'm not trying to start a BASP Book Club but this one may be worth a mention in the next newsletter: 'Unknown' by Akuch Kuol Anyieth <http://www.textpublishing.com.au/books/unknown-a-refugee-s-story>. It gives an in depth insight into adjustment problems, for youth especially but young males in particular, and the additional burden this places on their female family members.

We can learn so much from these stories.



Leesa Horrigan, director of the Cabrini Choir in collaboration with St Joseph's Music Ministry held a Soiree in Cabrini Chapel Malvern. Leesa wrote the following reflection: The soiree raised an incredible \$2400 to support the wonderful outreach work of the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project who assist those seeking asylum in our community.



The Music Ministry team at St Joseph's Malvern have supported BASP with 8 Soirees over the past 10 years, with a break during COVID. After COVID we needed to change the approach and collaborated with Cabrini Choir, as many of our music ministry also sing with Cabrini Choir. This year was the first time we have held the Soiree in the Chapel at Cabrini with great success.

Our Cabrini Chapel is the spiritual centre of Cabrini Malvern and offers a space where the human spirit can be nurtured, and all may find comfort, encouragement and inspiration. It was fitting that our Soiree supported the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Program, a program which nurtures the human spirit of those seeking asylum, and in turn - very much in the spirit of St Frances Cabrini who is the patron saint of refugees who dedicated her life and mission to serving those fleeing their home countries in search of refuge and peace.

We had a full Chapel with 180 very generous people in the audience, including parishioners from all local parishes, Cabrini staff and volunteers, patients were able to view from their rooms and some attended in person accompanied by family..

Sr Brigid Arthur (BASP) in thanking the audience and the musicians said 'it is the arts that will lead us to a better world' and we as musicians and singers feel so blest to be able to contribute in this small way.

A ray of hope

Reza and Zahra married some few months ago. Reza has been without a visa for many years. Lately, due to the painstaking efforts of migration agent, Judy, he was given a Bridging visa. Ian, a BASP supporter, with his wife, Susan, hosted a celebratory lunch for the group.

These are the things that leave wonderful memories.



On October 27th the Higgins Grandmothers for Refugees held a very successful concert to raise funds for BASP. at the Stonnington Uniting Church.

Alan Kogosowski, was the guest performer. Alan has intimate knowledge and sympathy for refugees as his own family were forced to flee Poland during the Second World War and ultimately found themselves in Australia. The other guest artists were Soprano Elizabeth Finkel and Clarinetist Lily Tamir-Regev.

The compere for the event made the comment: *I love the idea that the son of Jewish refugees is the artist of a concert held in a Uniting Church to raise money for a Catholic organisation to help refugees of other faiths. What a model for the world!*

We are grateful for any of the following food (or vouchers to buy food and household necessities).



We currently have enough tinned food except for cans of fruit, peas, carrots, corn.

The following are still very much appreciated:

1 kg Sugar, oil (olive and vegetable), salt, pepper, tea, coffee

Herbs and spices especially coriander, cinnamon,

Blocks or individual wrapped cheese.

Eggs are really appreciated

Long life milk, **honey is a most appreciated food**, noodles, tuna, basmati rice, dates, jam (especially any red jam)

Gladwrap, tinfoil,

We would like to try Flat bread in sealed wrapping as people often ask for bread.

Sweet and Savoury Biscuits, Snacks for school lunches (even when home!),

Shampoo, Shaving Cream and shavers, Toothpaste and toothbrushes. Soap, deodorants

Garbage bags and bin liners (small and large)



We seemingly never have enough washing powder, dish washing detergents and household cleaning products.

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 please email us at contact@basp.org.au after making a donation so we can send you a tax deductible receipt. We will send a newsletter but feel free to tell us that you don't want one.

Pictured opposite are some of the more than 60 hampers donated by St Finbar's East Brighton to be distributed by BASP volunteers in the days before Christmas.



Many thanks to this wonderful parish.

Blessings on all who have contributed in so many ways to allow us to bring joy to individuals and families at this time.

May we all experience peace, happiness and love as we try to urge our country to be more generous in finding a 'room at the inn' for all who come knocking.

Brigid Arthur

Libby Saunders

(BASP Coordinators)