

Newsletter

No.20 July, 2004

Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group

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A PROJECT OF THE BLUE MOUNTAINS FAMILY
SUPPORT SERVICE ABN 48 765 203 957

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• Education • Direct Help • Direct Action • Fund Raising

Direct Help

Visits to 'Hotel Villawood'

As one of a Blue Mountains group of regular visitors to the detention centre over the last couple of years, I've got used to the rolls of razor wire along the fences, the slow rigmarole of getting inside, and the chill wind that rips through the visiting area on winter afternoons.

What I've never got used to is the uncertainty and the ordeal of seemingly endless waiting that the long term detainees have to endure. Some of the inmates we first met two and a half years ago are still there. They are unfailingly friendly and courteous towards us, they serve us cardamom-flavoured tea while we chat with them, and they make heroic efforts to be cheerful and patient, but sometimes the heartache under the surface is all too visible as they contemplate the lost years of their lives while they wait for a hearing date, wait for a decision, or wait for a response from the Minister.

As well as the core of long term detainees who have become our friends, we try to meet new people, to find out what happened to them and if anyone is helping them, and if there is anything we can do for them. We're happy if we're able to give them some small thing, like warm clothing, or a jar of honey or a phone card; if we can perform some service for them, like contacting their friends and families by email.

Some of the regular visitors are awe-inspiring, devoting huge amounts of time, care and attention to the detainees, finding them lawyers or translators, preparing appeals to the Minister on their behalf, transcribing their hearings and attending the Refugee Review Tribunal or Federal Court to give them support, and helping them with accommodation and adjustment to the outside world if they're released. All without thought of recompense, other than the satisfaction of making a difference to the lives of these people who, in Australia under the present system, have fewer rights than convicted criminals. No work-release, no day-release, no parole, no probation, no sentence of a known or fixed length, and no conjugal rights: just

months and years of days and nights with the same faces week in and week out, the same loudspeaker announcements, and the same generators roaring away outside their windows at night.

Yet these are the lucky ones, detained in a centre in a major city, with access by visitors galore. Visiting the centre and getting to know some of the detainees has given us some tiny bit of insight into how it must be for those at Baxter or other places remote from help and with few friendly faces.

When I first visited Villawood, I never dreamt it would be the rewarding experience it has turned into. Some of the detainees have become true friends, and some of the visitors are people I feel privileged to know. I hope I live long enough to see the day when the fences are torn down, and this whole horrible era of punitive refugee policy is at an end.

Gaby Grammeno for the group

The Mountain families

All four family groups are quite settled in the mountains. They are finding the winter a little colder than they expected but all seem happy to be in a safe secure environment with case workers to help them if need be. However, they are very independent and have lots of initiative

Not so good

Every effort is being made to gain a Spouse visa for one of our refugees who has found love and marriage with an Australian.

Accommodation Register

We are still building up this register. If you have suitable accommodation for **respite holidays** please give your name, address, number/email the number who can be accommodated and when available - week, weekend, school holidays etc. Some financial assistance available.

Contact Therese Wachter, 475582065.

Education

World Refugee Day

A crowd of approximate 150 gathered in the square in front of the Carrington Hotel to celebrate **World Refugee Day** on Sunday 20th June. Fr. Eugene Stockton, the organiser, expressed the gratitude of the Refugee Support Group to the Blue Mountains City Council for its interest in refugees and gave Councillor Pippa McInnis a certificate to acknowledge our thanks.

Pippa McInnis welcomed Patrice as a sign of the BM City Council's policy of having the Blue Mountains as a Refugee Welcome Zone. Patrice responded in a short speech which was very moving. It has now been 5 years since he left his home country, the Congo, several of which he spent in detention.

The Trade Union Choir gave an edge to the program with some partisan political singing.

Jim Tulip drew attention to the BM Gazette and its five page spread where BM Refugee supporters publicized their feelings of anger at detention and their support for refugees. He noted Senator Kerry Nettle's description of visiting Baxter as a sign of political developments in Canberra.

A feature of the afternoon was the meeting of two young girls. Emma spoke movingly and embraced Zahra, one of the Afghani young people now supported by the BM Refugee Support Group. Zahra also spoke well.

Donations of \$461 were received for the work of the BMRS Group. The afternoon ended with a rousing rendition from everyone of *Solidarity Forever*.



Fundraising

Pat Drummond Concert

4 September, 2004 2.00 pm
Springwood Civic Centre

We still need help from our members to

- sell raffle tickets
- distribute flyers.

If you can help, please contact George on 47 827866

Direct Action

Please write to politicians and the media

As the election approaches, keep writing to the politicians and the papers especially the local papers and the Telegraph. Focus on one point at a time; keep it short and you will have more chance of success. Do not mention any one specific person or situation. Need help? contact Ken Goodlet 47586591.

For Your Diary

2 August monthly meeting

4 September Pat Drummond Concert

Next Monthly Meeting

Monday 2 August 7.00 pm Parish Meeting Room, Our Lady of the Nativity, Great Western Highway, Lawson. Ample off street parking. All Welcome.

Committee

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