

BLUE MOUNTAINS REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

13th September 2014

Welcome.

Over the last year the BMRSG has continued to provide weekly practical and emotional support to numerous refugees and asylum seekers in detention and in the community. To be able to do this we have maintained our fundraising activities and our collection and delivery of goods to the families and individuals we have been assisting. We have also been engaged in attempting to raise awareness within the wider community of the plight of refugees and asylum seekers both here and abroad.

It has been another busy year for the BMRSG. We are fortunate in having many very able and committed members willing to apply their time and their expertise to those we are supporting. The following is a summary of some of the work that has been done and what has been achieved.

Villawood

Our team of visitors attend Villawood Detention Centre weekly. The support our members provide includes the building of friendships, advocacy, English tuition and legal support. Over the last year there have been greater difficulties in obtaining access to the Centre. Despite this, our committed visitors have continued to attend on a regular basis and we have had requests from others to join the team. Of great concern was the transfer of 83 detainees to Curtin Detention Centre in northern Western Australia and, following the closure of Curtin, their dispersion to other centres in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. We could not help but think that this move was calculated to separate these detainees from their legal help, friendship and other support. Several of our members, at their own expense, arranged to visit these detainees and assure them that they have not been forgotten, and that we are continuing to do all we can for them.

Community work

Our members visit families and individuals who have been released into the community. They provide these asylum seekers with friendship and practical support. The practical support includes:

- (a) Food and household goods.** Our visitors find out what is needed and arrange for those needs to be met. We have supplied white goods, TVs, furniture, small electrical and kitchen items, clothing and shoes, standard packs of food staples and, from time to time, small cash allowances. We have supported children of asylum seekers with basic school items, school clothing and shoes.
- (b) Language manuals.** We are supporting a substantial number of asylum seekers from Sri Lanka and Iran. We have printed and distributed manuals to assist with day-to-day living in Tamil and Farsi.
- (c) Work experience.** We have arranged for asylum seekers to obtain some work experience in the Mamre House kitchen and the garden. We have able and enthusiastic **asylum seeker** workers available and are always looking for more work experience opportunities.
- (d) Employment.** We have found employment for over 20 men by collecting resumes plus letters for submission to prospective employers. We have targeted hospitality,

although this industry requires reasonably good English and full-time availability. Asylum seekers who are professionally trained in their countries of origin are considered on a case-by-case basis by Bright Employment. They seem to have good prospects. Two men were trained in forklift driving and there is the prospect of work in factories.

(e) **NILS scheme**

This is based on the \$5,000 donation from Judith Neilson of the White Rabbit Gallery. It provided the funding for work training such as forklift driving for asylum seekers. Those on bridging visas received up to \$500 while those with permanent residence were funded up to \$1,000.

- (f) **Medical and dental.** Many of our clients do not have basic medical and dental cover **and no right to Medicare**. We have been able at times to arrange for sympathetic doctors and dentists to assist where there is a significant need. A Tamil woman, for example, needed to visit a dental practice nine times. The estimated value of dental work, which was donated by the dental practice, was \$10,000.

Cricket as a social bond

One of our committed visitors and committee members, Noeline Nagle, was able to make up a cricket team of Tamil asylum seekers. This initiative has been a huge success. The team played throughout the last season. Its matches received media coverage and Noeline obtained a grant of \$10,000.00 from the Wentworth Leagues Club to continue the activities of the team over the coming year. The cricket team has been a wonderful morale booster for the players and their families and friends.

Raising community awareness

In addition to our work with specific individuals and their families we have engaged in attempts to raise community awareness of the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. This work has included:

(a) **Changing the conversation**

This is an ongoing initiative with the intention of developing a long-term set of strategies for developing community awareness, and includes:

- A group of writers, who produce articles, media releases and letters to the editor to local and general media.
- A panel of speakers who address local groups.
- Lobbying of politicians

(b) **Book launching**

The launch of a book of writings by and about asylum seekers, *A Country Too Far*, took place at Wentworth Falls School of Arts

(c) **Addressing the community**

Members in the Lower Mountains arranged for noted refugee advocate, Julian Burnside SC, to speak at a public forum in Blaxland. During Refugee Week members of our Group addressed public meetings in the Mountains and in Lithgow.

Bequest

Special mention must be made of a very generous bequest we received this year. Earlier this year we were presented with a cheque \$78,917.72 as a bequest from the estate of the late Judy Gaskin. Judy was an active visitor to Villawood IDC from 2003 to 2011. She had

been a teaching nun for 24 years and was passionate about social justice, aboriginal issues and children. Judy also loved working with refugees and left bequests to four charities, including BMRSG. Because of Judy's commitment to education we have committed some of the bequest to scholarships for senior secondary and early tertiary asylum seeker students in need of support.

On behalf of the committee I take this opportunity to thank all members for their continuing support of the work we are doing.

Dr Hal Ginges
Chairman